The Numbers Game

Of all the checks that you perform prior to submitting your finished index, one of the most challenging is ensuring the accuracy and proper presentation of page numbers. Spellcheck offers no assistance here, and while automation provides some aids (which I will discuss), you need to come up with strategies that work for you.

Most likely you use indexing software; I use CINDEX so the capabilities that I discuss in terms of what I know the software can do apply to that program specifically but probably can be extrapolated to other software programs. The simplest safeguard that CINDEX provides is to let you set the page number that is the highest in the book as a default parameter. You do this by using a dialog box called "Reference Syntax" and put the last page number of the book in the field "Maximum value." There is a second step to making this check operational; you have to go into the Preferences settings and pick the box for "warn" to alert you to a malformed locator. Then if you enter a larger number (for example, if the book has 323 pages and you enter 424), you are unable to leave the record until you fix the error. Obviously you want to avoid gross level mistakes of this nature so I recommend taking this easy precaution. But you can still make plenty of errors between page 1 and the last page number of the book!

The malformed locator feature will also warn you of other types of page number mistakes. For example, when you enter a range that makes no sense like 35-32 where you are going from a larger to a smaller number, or when you make a range like 152-152, it will call your attention to the error. Such miskeyings happen quite easily so it helps to take advantage of the software's capability to circumvent them.

Another way to capitalize on the software capability looks at the book chapter by chapter. So instead of using 323 as the highest permissible page number, use the last page of the chapter you are working on. For example, if you have finished chapter 1, then set the highest page number as the final page of chapter 2 as you work on chapter 2. Let's say chapter 2 ends with page 35; then this safeguard will stop you from entering any number higher than 35 like a transposed number like 52 instead of an intended 25. You would keep raising the permitted number as you go from chapter to chapter. While not totally foolproof, this methodology would prevent more numeric typos than the full-book number.

Some indexers like to review their page numbers for a chapter right after they finish inputting entries for the chapter. They do this by sorting the chapter back into record order (the order in which they made the entries) and scan the page numbers. If they are doing a chapter with a range of 125 to 155, they will see entries starting with 125 brought together in a group and then follow along page by page. If they see an entry with a number like 44 or 162 within the work they just completed, it will jump out as an anomaly. They can also see where they were in terms of the text when they made the

likely mistake. For example, they can tell they were on page 144 since the entries preceding were 143 and after 145, but they made a typo of 44 (instead of 144) and then proceeded to copy that number over several times so they generated multiple bad page errors. As a side note here, you can also wait and do this same record order check at the end of the project, but your memory of what you were doing might not be as fresh, so I can see the appeal of doing it chapter by chapter as you go along. This manual number review enhances your chances of removing more errors than just the safeguard of your software. For example, the software will accept digits within its range so 44 would be allowed if the highest permitted number were 155.

In any case when you finish an index, you should do some manual number checks. First, you need to take the step of making sure that each page number is in its own record. While you were working, you may have added page numbers to existing records. In CINDEX under the Tools menu, you use the command "Expand" to break these multiple page references into individual records. At that point you should compress your file to be sure to remove duplicate records. Duplicates present a significant danger during editing. You make a change and think you have taken care of a problem, only to find out that a duplicate lurked unknown to you and it did not get changed. When you have duplicates in an index, your file lacks integrity, and you will make more work for yourself as well as have dumb errors. So before you start editing in earnest, you need to clean out the duplicates.

Now you are ready to sort the index into page order and see what rises to the top or sinks to the bottom. For instance, entries with blank page fields will come first. In most jobs you do not want any empty page fields so you need to review these entries to see what happened to cause this situation. Maybe you started a record and never finished it. Maybe you have the same entry once with a page number and once without a page number. Because each CINDEX record has an ID number, you can use that record number as a clue to where this entry occurred in terms of book placement. If its record number is 256, then look at records 255 and 257 to determine where you were (for example, if records 255 and 257 point to page 68, then it is likely the problematic record 256 was written to point to something on the same page). Once you have fixed these anomalies at the top of the index, go to the highest entry and evaluate that.

If you did not set the maximum value or if in someway in editing later you were able to override it, you may see a page number too high for the book. Again an easy typo to make is to leave out the hyphen in the range so instead of 233-245 you get 233245 as a bad number. For this type of mistake to end up in a published index is inexcusable since the safeguards against it are so quick and easy to implement.

But there are other types of page number errors that are trickier to catch. Look at the following set of page numbers:

Universities and colleges, funding for, 112, 112-114, 134-138, 137

It turns out that CINDEX will suppress such errors from displaying; however, they still exist in your index and again present problems in the integrity of the data. Think of how often you work on a project that comes back again because the author has reworked or updated a chapter and you need to reindex some of the material. Then if you have these extraneous numbers in your data, you will cause confusion and extra work for yourself in trying to deal with them. I use a program available from Leverage

Technologies (www.levtechinc.com), called IndexCheck, that reports these page error overlaps as well as many other technical errors that it diagnoses. I then clean up the file and research which entry is correct – for example, did I type a range 112-114 but then found out the discussion did not actually extend that long but ended on 112? I do not automatically assume that the single number is wrong and the range is right. Each such error requires investigation.

Yes, these checks create more work, but bad page numbers generate serious complaints. It will be difficult to keep clients who find many of these in your work as they will lose confidence in you. Nothing infuriates an author more than to see his name in the index with a typo in it. After that, the most likely cause for complaint comes from page number errors. When I ran in-house indexing departments from 1978 to 2002, we almost never heard from our subscribers about the indexes, but when we did, it was almost always due to a bad page reference. The user wanted the information, felt the index promised it to him, and then wasted his time by sending him on a wild goose-chase. Taking the time to make sure the numbers tally with the material adds quality assurance and protects your reputation.