

## Cross-references That Make Me Cross

I was recently asked to update a large index by adding entries for new material. The existing index covered the years 1965 to 1999, and my job was to index years 2000 to the present. As happens in this type of project, you have to revise existing entries because you need to adjust wording or make sublevels when the number of locators becomes excessive. All of that I expected to do. But then I came to the cross-references.

They appeared to be in an old-fashioned style of indexing where all the cross-references had to be attached to the main level. That means the main heading was followed by sometimes a block of 10 cross-references like this:

**Crime.** *See also* Evidence; Felonies; Homicide; Law Enforcement; Misdemeanors;  
Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO); Sentencing;  
Sexual offenses; Theft; Trials; Victims of crime  
anti-crime platforms, 45, 62, 121  
legislation proposed, 123, 328, 330  
...

I have tried to rationalize why this style was mandated. Primarily, I assume publishers like it because it makes the index shorter. My approach is to move these cross-references off of the main heading and make them sublevel cross-references. That way they become like a checklist of topics related to Crime and can be read down and scanned more easily by users. But that does add more lines to the index. It mirrors the argument of why use a run-in style in back-of-the-book indexes when it is harder for users to follow. And the answer is that it saves on space and therefore, saves on printing costs.

In small indexes, I suppose it does not affect the level of difficulty or ease in using the index to have it all scrunched together. On the other hand, in big indexes and by “big” I mean over 5000 entries, the run-in approach creates jumbo stream-of-consciousness paragraphs. A few years ago I did an index for a multi-volume encyclopedia on various cultures, and each culture’s array spanned 6 or more pages in a two-column run-in. To find something, you had to be one determined searcher! No matter how excellent the intellectual quality is of an index its display on the page or screen can render it almost unusable – or as we say in a kinder way, “render it unfriendly.”

By the same token, I find these lists of cross-references to be like a fence stopping the reader at the border. It simply does not scan as easily to read across a list. When you make up your grocery list, I bet you do not write across the page. You put each item on

its own line. You may check them off in the left margin as you pick up an item or you may cross them off. That would not be as easy to do if they spanned across the paper one after another and even wrapped to the next line so “lunch” ends one line and “meat” starts the next line. If your shopping list gets better treatment than your cross-references, it is time to re-examine the approach!

Sometimes this style of attaching the cross-references to the main heading produces nonsensical looking entries.

**Adolescents.** *See* Religion

When I flip to the heading “Religion,” I find the following:

**Religion**

...

teen prayer groups, 24, 28, 31-35

...

Cross-references should be used for synonyms, antonyms, broader or narrower terms of the original term, or related terms. By related terms, I mean terms like Pensions and Retirement where you look at them and say to yourself, “Of course, they are related; good suggestion there.” But when I look at the Adolescents *see* Religion cross-reference, I think “Really, how does that work? Are all adolescents now religious? Guess I missed that news story.”

What needs to be added here is a sublevel that explains the link to the user.

**Adolescents**

religious participation of. *See* Religion

This would explain what type of information I will find when I turn to the heading Religion.

If the index is small, then this cross-reference will suffice. When I get to the heading Religion, I can skim the few entries there and figure out that “teen prayer groups” was the one I was intended to find. But what if this is a very large index of over 80,000 entries, and the array at Religion extends over a couple of pages?

Here I suggest the cross-reference include additional information to point out where I should specifically go when I turn to Religion. My rule in this regard states that if the term where I was originally would be the keyword of the sublevel, then I do not need to add more information. So, for example, if the original entry reads:

**Adolescents**

religious participation of. *See* Religion

and if when I turn to Religion, the entry there starts with “adolescents,” then I keep the simple phrasing that I have above. But if the sublevel under Religion starts with a different keyword like “teen,” I change the cross-reference to read:

**Adolescents**

religious participation of. *See* Religion, *subhead*: teen prayer groups

My style is to use either the word “*subhead*” or “*subheading*,” but I have seen the word “*at*” used for the same purpose. The *Chicago Manual* says that the indexer should put the main head followed by a comma and then the phrase of the subheading. According to their style the cross-reference would look like this:

**Adolescents**

religious participation of. *See* Religion, teen prayer groups

I dislike that style since main headings may have a comma in them and then confuse the user by being used for multiple purposes in the same line. For example:

**Appeals.** *See* Supreme Court, U.S., grants of certiorari

The insertion of a directional cue like “*at*” or “*subhead*” just makes it clearer how to parse the cross-reference and how to follow it to the proper target. So I would write it as:

**Appeals.** *See* Supreme Court, U.S., *subhead*: grants of certiorari

If the index has the potential to end up in electronic form, the use of these directionals will make the linking of the cross-references work much more smoothly. It is much easier for a programmer to follow a rule created by the use of such a phrase as opposed to guess each time a comma comes up in a cross-reference whether it is a valid main heading that happens to include a comma or represents a combination of a main heading/subheading cross-reference. When the *Chicago Manual* originally crafted its rule, electronic indexes did not exist, and they did not have to worry about creating programmatic problems for links. Its rules were driven by the publishers’ desire to save on typesetting and printing costs. Thus, like its rule to elide numbers to save on characters, this rule probably came about at the time publishers were charged for hot-lead typesetting by the character. Certainly it was cheaper to put in a comma than spell out another word.

We make lots of assumptions about how people use indexes and what they understand when they do use them. It is difficult for me after 30 years of indexing to remember what it was like not to know how an index worked. But I don’t think our decisions today should be dictated by policies developed at the time of the invention of movable type.

