Making an Index

The main purpose of the index is to help the readers find their way round the book. Only key concepts and names should be indexed; a book which is over-indexed is not helpful and may even put a potential reader off the book.

Authors will be asked to create their index using a formatted typescript of the whole content of the book, supplied to them whilst copy-editing is taking place. You will be asked to construct your index using our new unique number system, fully explained in the indexing guide provided.

Most books need only one index, although some specialised books may have an index of names as well as an index of subjects. If you wish to provide more than one index for your book, please consult your editor.

Content

Keep the index simple. You should include topics as well as proper names; but do not index passing mentions which give no information about the topic or person. It is useful to put yourself in the position of your potential readers. A book on economics, for instance, might quote Mr Micawber’s well-known dictum on the importance of balancing annual expenditure with annual income, but readers would be unlikely to look for Micawber in the index.

It is, however, better to start by over-indexing than by under-indexing. Superfluous entries can (and indeed must) be discarded later on, but it may be difficult to recover some name or topic passed over many pages earlier.

There is no need to index the foreword or preface unless it gives information pertinent to the subject of the book. Footnotes should be indexed only if they give additional information about a topic or person not mentioned elsewhere on that page. Endnotes should be indexed only if they contain substantive information. A reference to an endnote requires the note number as well as the assigned unique number, thus:

(unique number)n.5,

Bibliographies and general lists of references are not indexed, though a list of references can double as an author index. Illustrations should usually be indexed, with their unique numbers printed in italic.

Choice of heading

Main headings should normally be nouns (qualified or unqualified) rather than adjectives or verbs on their own:

agriculture, decline of, not decline of agriculture
novels, Victorian, not Victorian novels

How specific an entry should be depends very much on the subject of the book. In a book on nineteenth-century London it would be unhelpful to have an entry under ‘London’ because the entry would have to be so long and complicated that it would become unwieldy. It would be more practical to have entries on the topics about London which are discussed in the book: ‘gardens’, ‘sanitation’, ‘streets’, etc.
Where there are two or more possible synonyms, use the one the reader is most likely to look up, and put all the relevant page numbers in that entry. Under the synonym put a cross-reference ‘see so and so’. Be careful not to have too many cross-references – your reader will be able to work out where most things are likely to indexed.

Treat similar items in a similar fashion. In a book which discusses countries, for example, be consistent:

France
  industry
  trade
Spain
  not  Spanish industry
   industry  Spanish trade
   trade

When to combine entries

If a word is used in both singular and plural forms in the text, only one form should be used in the index:

bishops  not  bishop, duties of
   duties  bishops, income of
   income

This rule does not apply, of course, if the two forms have different meanings, e.g. damage, damages.

When a word has more than one meaning, there should be a separate entry for each meaning, with an explanatory phrase to show which meaning is intended.

Proper names which merely share the same first word should each have their own entry:

Booth, John Wilkes  not  Booth
Booth, William  John Wilkes  William

Proper names

References to a peer should be collected under either the title or the family name, whichever is the more familiar to the reader; if both forms are used in the book, or the peerage is a recent one, provide a cross-reference from the other form. This principle applies to any person or place known by more than one name.

Saints, kings and popes are indexed under their forenames, but places, institutions, acts of Parliament, book and play titles, etc. are placed under the first word after the article:

William IV, king of England (but King William Street)
Lewis, John (but John Lewis Partnership Ltd)
Abortion Act, The
Importance of Being Earnest, The

(No entry should begin with ‘a’ or ‘the’ except in an index of first lines.)

Compound personal names, whether hyphenated or not, should be indexed under the first element of the surname:

Vaughan Williams, Ralph

In French, Italian and German names a preposition follows the name, but an article or compound of preposition and article (La, Du, Des) precedes the name. Names naturalised in Britain or the United States are usually indexed under the prefix:
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von but De Quincey, Thomas

Sub-entries

Any entry containing more than about six indexed item, should be subdivided, though you should not make an entry for every indexed item number. A single reference covering a span of more than about ten pages should probably be subdivided.

Sub-entries and sub-sub entries should be arranged alphabetically (prepositions don’t count in this respect) rather than in a ‘logical’ or ‘chronological’ order. Cross-references should be the final sub-entry in a group of sub-entries:

cigar makers, 11, 67
  labour of, 73
  machinery of, 114
  unions of, 20
  see also cigarettes; outwork

Page numbers

Avoid passim unless there are a large number of general references to a person or topic in one section of a book. Distinguish between a span (a continuous discussion of the topic) and a point (two separate mentions). Try to avoid indexing a whole chapter, but if it is unavoidable, as a span. Before you submit the index, check that it is the length agreed between you and your editor. If the style and form of the index do not reach the standard required by the Press, we may have to return it to you for amendment. For a general view on the design and layout of your index, consult other recent books in your subject area published by Cambridge.