

# How to Evaluate an Index: A Guide for Authors

## Introduction

The goal of this guide is to provide enough information for the author to evaluate an index draft for their book without having to dive into the complexities and nuances of indexing. It is based on international indexing standards, acknowledged best-practices, and my own professional indexing experience (which at the time of this writing consists of over one hundred indexes written over a span of four years).

As the author it is important that you take a look at the draft index that I have sent you. You are the subject matter expert, and so will have insights into your field's expectations, norms, and politics that I simply do not have access to. Your feedback will be invaluable in making the index the best it can be.

## What an Index Is and Is Not

It is important to clarify up-front what an index is precisely; this is not as self-evident as it may seem.

Put simply, an index is a user interface: it exists to help your readers (users) find information in your book as quickly and as accurately as possible. It points readers to *substantial and informative discussions* of the indicated topic.

This functionalist, user-centric approach to indexes differentiates them from concordances, which are simple lists of the words or terms in a text (and typically generated automatically).

The emphasis on substantial and informative discussions is crucial, and distinguishes them from what are known as *passing mentions*. A passing mention is when the text refers to a person, place, idea, etc., in an offhand or oblique manner. Passing mentions are a common feature of all kinds of writing, but are only informative to people who are already familiar with what is being referred to, and are easily ignored by everyone else without a loss in meaning. A concordance does not distinguish between substantial discussion and passing mention, and this is why books have indexes, not concordances.

Sometimes evaluating whether a statement or sentence is a passing mention can be difficult, and this is often where indexing becomes more of an art than a science. One simple test to ask whether the text in question can be removed without a significant loss of meaning; if so, it is probably a passing mention. Another good tool is the "happiness test," (as coined by noted indexer Fred Liese). To conduct the test, ask yourself: "If I, as a reader, looked up this term in the index and were pointed to this passage, would I be happy with the result? Would I find something useful for my own research?" If the answer is "no," then it is probably a passing mention.

Passing mentions are *not indexed*. This is the most common reason that terms are left out of the index, or their index entry only covers some of the pages on which the term appears: they are mentioned, but not discussed.

Indexes are also not information hierarchies: they do not replicate the structure of the book (although they will reflect it), nor will all of the entries be sorted into neat categories. Quick and accurate access to information is the goal: the reader's needs come first.

## Names and Citations

Any academic work is naturally full of citations to other research, and so will be replete with the names of other scholars. The rule for indexing these names is simple: if it appears in the body of the text, then it will be indexed. If the name is just a citation, be it parenthetical, endnote, or footnote, it will *not* be indexed.

Example 1: "Jason Begy distinguishes indexes from concordances on the basis of passing mentions" (this document, 2021). "Jason Begy" will be indexed.

Example 2: "Indexes are distinguished from concordances on the basis of passing mentions" (Begy, this document, 2021). "Jason Begy" will *not* be indexed.

This is a standard convention. Some feel strongly that Example 2 *should* be indexed, and there are good arguments for this, but at the moment most Presses discourage this practice.

## Cross References

Cross-references are an essential aspect of any index, but they have very specific uses.

A *See* cross-reference points the reader from one entry to another, while simultaneously indicating that the second term is the one used throughout the index.

Example 1: "cars. *See* automobiles." The word "automobiles" is used in lieu of "cars" throughout the index. This entry is useful because the reader may not know this and look up "cars" first.

A *See also* cross-reference indicates that more information about the topic can be found elsewhere. These references are *not* used to merely indicate that terms or concepts are related.

Example 2: "transportation. *See also* automobiles." This tells the reader that more information about transportation can be found under the entry for automobiles. *See also* cross-references often point from a larger category to a smaller one, but (almost) never in the other direction.

Example 3: "automobiles. *See also* transportation." This entry makes some sense conceptually, but it is highly probable that some topics under "transportation" will not apply to automobiles (such as railroad timetables or air traffic control systems); this reference should be deleted.

Example 4: "Pynchon, Thomas. *See also* *Mason & Dixon*." *See also* references are often used to connect a person and their work. This usage should be considered a special case distinct from the principles discussed in examples 2 and 3 above.

## Limitations of Search

When most people set out to evaluate an index, their first instinct is to open the index, search the page proofs for the first term, compare the results, and then proceed through the entire index adding missed page numbers and deleting page numbers that don't match the results.

Please, do not do this. You can easily waste an afternoon this way, for many reasons.

First, your search will give you a lot of false positives: it cannot distinguish passing mentions from substantial discussions. (This is why indexing is still done by humans.) It will also return names in citations that should not be indexed, as well as names in your acknowledgments and bibliography.

Secondly, the search will give a lot of false negatives: index entries very often have page numbers that the search does not return. There are numerous reasons for this, but the three most common are reading comprehension, synonyms, and pronouns.

Reading comprehension: Books will inevitably discuss an idea or topic without actually naming them directly. Many authors will introduce a section with a phrase like, "In this section I discuss the concept of remediation," but then the word "remediation" does not appear on every page of that section. From reading the section the indexer will realize that all of the pages should be indexed under the "remediation" entry, and does so accordingly. The search results will only return the first page number, as the search function has no reading comprehension abilities.

Synonyms: A good index features a handful of synonyms to help the reader find what they are looking for as quickly as possible. These terms may not appear in the text, but a good indexer realizes that readers are likely to look for them in the index anyway, and so includes them. Such entries often take the form of *see* cross references, as discussed above.

Pronouns: A common pattern is for a text to introduce a person (or topic) on one page, and for the discussion of that person to follow onto the next page without using the person's name again; they are referred to via pronouns. A good index entry for that person will include both pages, because the person is actually discussed on both, but search will not return a result for the second page.

Search *can* be a useful tool in evaluating indexes, but it is not sufficient to simply rely on it. You must be aware of its limitations.

## Press Guidelines

Before you sit down to evaluate the index, take a moment to familiarize yourself with any indexing guidelines you received from your editor. Nearly all academic presses provide authors with some guidelines and it is important to be familiar with them. They are often a mix of what I have already said above, and formatting / layout guidelines. I will have taken care to be sure the index matches the formatting, so you do not have to worry about that.

## The Evaluation Process

Now that you know what to look for, the process itself is fairly straightforward.

1. Try using the index as you would if you were a reader who just picked up this book. Think of some terms that you would expect to find in the index. Are they there? If they are not present verbatim, are you able to find synonyms, or get to the relevant discussions in some other way? Make a note of anything that you expected to find and could not, or anything else that just seems missing.
2. Now try looking for terms as the author of this book: Is there anything you expected to see that you did not?
3. Think about the terminology. Should it be changed? Are there better terms or synonyms that you would prefer to see? Is there more accurate, technical jargon that should be used? Does anything strike you as problematic? (For example, some authors feel strongly about the inclusion or exclusion of certain names in the index.)
4. Now read over the entire index. The goal is to get an idea of the structure: how entries are phrased and how they relate to each other. Pay special attention to “See” and “See also” references. Are you now able to find anything that you could not before? (If it took you this long to find it that is still a problem that I will be happy to correct.)
5. Is anything unnecessary? Editors are often concerned about length, so if there is anything that you feel could, or should, be deleted, please make a note.
6. Don't panic! When the author is not able to find something they expected to it is almost always a problem with terminology or structure, both of which are simple fixes for the indexer to make.
7. Get in touch! Please reach out and let me know what you think, and I will be happy to make changes and improvements based on your feedback. I will also be happy to answer any questions you may have.