



[www.IndexingPartners.com](http://www.IndexingPartners.com)

## Cleansing Articles

When I think of terms to describe index entries, the words that come to mind are succinct, easy to read, and full of meaning. Clean, crisp phrases. And among the words to strip away from your entries one of the major offenders comes from the unnecessary use of articles. "A" and "an" are called indefinite articles, while "the" has its own class as a definite article. Those articles are almost never essential and should be removed from the entry. While good English would require a writer to say "the Nile" when referring to the river, in the index you do not include "the" but instead write "Nile (river)." If the author has started his sentence in the text with The White House, that does not mean the indexer needs the word "The" at the front of the entry. You put White House in the W's and remove "The" entirely.

Like any good rule, there are exceptions, of course. When "the" belongs in the phrase as in "on-the-job training," you cannot get rid of it. Another instance is a term of art like "tenancy by the entireties" which is never called "tenancy by entireties." Or when "the" is part of a title to a book or movie like "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly." Not only then do you need to keep it, but you have to do more work to keep it by typing it into the record of your indexing software in a way that ignores it for sorting or setting your sorting preferences to ignore it. For example, in Cindex I would enter:

"<The >Good, the Bad, and the Ugly"

If you follow the Chicago manual, you may type it in as:

"Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, The"

This looks so odd to me that it only strengthens the case for leaving "The" at the front of the entry and suppressing it for sorting purposes. Likewise I have seen this phrasing in an index as the main heading and then as a sublevel:

People, the

If you cannot find a way to rephrase this (perhaps as "Public opinion"), then again I prefer to put <The >People and let it be read as a phrase that cannot be inverted although it is alphabetized in the P's. Examples of other phrases that we would not invert are "Yellow Pages" or "Bowling alleys." My point is that "The People" belongs to this category of qualifier and noun phrases.

Geographic designations like referring to the "the South" in the Civil War period may look too strange or be confusing if the heading just said "South" so to be clear, you may want then to include The and use The South (sorting in the S's, of course). While the correct

name of the country is The Netherlands, most of us index it simply as Netherlands and drop the lead word.

Sometimes a name has “the” as part of it like “Ivan the Terrible,” and in those instances you have to include it in the entry. What about official documents like “The Charter of the United Nations”? Most often in an index you will see this cited as “Charter, UN” in a parallel manner to “Constitution, U.S.” By comparison, if I need to refer to the Fourth Geneva Convention by its official name, I will enter it as “Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.” In that instance I will keep all the words including “relative to the” but if I thought that a more colloquial version of the name would suffice, I would shorten it to Geneva Convention on Treatment of Prisoners of War and I would replace “relative to the” with the preposition “on.” An act has an official name so if it includes “the” like “Trading with the Enemy Act,” then I will transcribe it that way and not mess with it. In the area of customs law there is a phrase used to describe a certain type of item that can enter duty-free:

Visual and Auditory Material of an Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Character

Since I will match the capitalization and the wording of the phrase to the document that I am indexing, I will keep “an” in this entry.

In each instance where I opt to keep the article, there is a compelling argument that it is within the phrase in such a way that it cannot be eliminated. It is a title or a legal name of a treaty or law.

Quite to the contrary then are the arbitrary appearances of articles in the entry phrase. Why is it necessary to include “the” in entries like:

Hamburger  
the antiaging recipe

or

Crime analysis  
the tools for

These instances stand out with “the” at the start of the sublevel requiring the reader to skip over them as noise words. When they lurk deeper in the entry, they are harder to spot and eliminate:

Social sector  
adjustment programs' effect on the poor

The use of “the” in front of poor does not improve the entry. It reads just as well without the article.

Reagan, Ronald  
appointments to the courts

While this example really deserves rephrasing as “court appointments by” to get the stronger word to the front of the entry, it can still be streamlined by removing “the.”

I did not have to look very hard to find the examples I have used here since these articles creep into indexes probably more often than we realize. During the edit, watch out for them and clean up your entries when you can.

©Enid L. Zafran  
April 2009