



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

## Compounding for Simplicity

When you hear the term “compound,” your mind leaps to ideas in the realm of the “complicated.” You may associate it with adding on by compounding a pharmaceutical formula or compounding a problem by introducing another variable, inevitably making that problem even worse than it was already. For indexing, though, compounding can have the opposite effect; it offers a solution to problems and can help the indexer out of a sticky spot.

My background for indexing comes from the world of legal publishing, and in that world indexes showcase some classic compound headings. For example, “Landlords and tenants” or “Husband and wife” are well-known topics to even first-year law students. A compound heading typically combines two terms in one main heading. It makes research easier for the user who does not have to look in two places for closely allied subjects. In the example of “Landlords and tenants,” think of the possibility of the extra work for a researcher to find information on security deposits. Does that sublevel more properly belong to the landlord or the tenant? If the indexer created two separate headings, one for landlords and one for tenants, then the indexer is going to have to double post the topic—extra work for the indexer and as a result a longer index too. By using the compound heading, you eliminate the need to duplicate the topic under both actors in the property rental scenario. Remember that it is one of the cardinal rules of indexing to create a cross-reference from the second term in the compound heading. If users turn to “Tenants,” they find the cross-reference: Tenants. See Landlords and tenants.

It is easy to forget that creating your own original compound headings can help you out of a quandry. Recently an indexer whom I am mentoring asked me what she should do in a book on home design to handle multiple headings that seemed to overlap for stairs, stairways, and staircases. This situation presented a perfect opportunity for a compound heading. First, all of these would fall in the index one after another. This reminded me of one of my favorite compound headings: “Banks and banking.” Since the two terms come right next to each other, you don’t even need to make the cross-reference for the second term as it would be redundant.

When I advised my mentee to insert the heading “Stairs and stairways” to handle all of these terms, she realized the beauty of the simplicity in compounding.

It overcomplicates matters for users when the indexer splits apart overlapping concepts like “farms,” “farming,” and “farmers.” Furthermore, this division should be a headscratcher for the indexer too since slotting an item by the activity or the person who performs the activity or the place where the activity occurs has to be confusing. Thus, the clarity of the one heading— “Farms, farmers, and farming”— brings order to a potentially muddled set of three individual arrays

In books that bring up the topics of race and ethnicity as a side issue, the compound offers a streamlined way to handle this thorny nest of diversity, minorities, ethnic groups, racial groups, cultural groups, etc., which can cause a headache in even the most experienced indexers. By relying on the main heading “Race and ethnicity,” you can often avoid a messy edit. Add in cross-references from “ethnicity,” “minorities,” and other entry points to see this joint main heading. Of course, I don’t recommend this approach when the metatopic of the book focuses on diversity issues; however, when these topics are tangential, yet come up repeatedly through the book, the compound heading simplifies the postings.

I frequently index in the area of international public policy and have found compound headings of great use in that context. Some books will talk about Europe and then the European Union. I find myself unsure sometimes if they mean the same thing or if the author wants to distinguish between them. Rather than use two separate headings, I combine them in one main heading: Europe and European Union. Again, they would have occurred next to one another, and I prefer to streamline the process for researchers. By my limiting the two topics to one array, the look-up goes much faster to locate information.

When I create a compound heading, the conjunction I favor is “and.” I rarely use “or” and it seems to me that the convention of compound headings has traditionally preferred the construction with “and.” Of late, I have noticed a trend among newer indexers to introduce a slash character instead of a conjunction. If they do so to match the author’s text, then I will bow to that as a ruling from a higher authority, but if the indexer has inserted this character on her own, I want to stop that practice immediately. It has several negative aspects to it.

First, an index should be as easily readable as any other English text. These strange word combos are difficult for readers to parse and comprehend when quickly scanning. Look at these entries:

Labels/categorization of children, 114

Metalanguage/metalinguistic awareness, 59–60, 65, 183

Midsagittal plane. *See* Two-handed, reflexive symmetry/midsagittal plane signs

Segregation/desegregation in schools, 32

As if the concepts combined here were not complicated enough, the indexer has complicated the comprehensibility by the slash.

Another drawback to the slash construction is that spellcheck will question every single one of these terms. Running through spellcheck numbs your mind and as the words flash before you, you have to determine their correctness and since all the slashed words come up, you are less likely to analyze them for typos within the actual words. In two recent jobs where I used subcontractors who created their own slash compounds, both missed typos because of this. When the compound consists of real words connected by the conjunction “and,” you can avoid this pitfall.

Here is a handy list of some compound headings I have used time and again:

Accounts and accounting  
Adolescents and youths  
Agriculture and farming  
Aiding and abetting  
Alcohol use and abuse  
Appraisals and appraisers  
Arts and crafts  
Banks and banking  
Boats and boating  
Books and records  
Brands and branding  
Bribery and corruption  
Camps and camping  
Coercion and duress  
Columns and pillars  
Courts and judicial system  
Crimes and offenses  
Death and dying  
Diviners and divination  
Drug abuse and addiction

Employers and employees  
Enemy combatants and detainees  
Equipment and tools  
Festivals and celebrations  
Fish and fishing  
Floods and flood control  
Food and food safety  
Fraud and false statements  
Fruits and vegetables  
Funerals and burials  
Gardens and gardening  
Guns and gun control  
Highways and roads  
Husband and wife  
Labeling and packaging  
Landlords and tenants  
Livestock and ranching  
Lobbyists and lobbying  
Mergers and acquisitions  
Milk and dairy products

Mines and mining  
Monitoring and surveillance  
Motion pictures and movie industry  
National parks and monuments  
Nominations and confirmations  
Nurses and nursing  
Oaths and affirmations  
Oil and gas  
Parent and child  
Pensions and retirement income  
Physicians and surgeons  
Plumbers and plumbing  
Police and law enforcement  
Prisons and prisoners  
Profit and loss  
Race and ethnicity  
Religion and beliefs  
Representations and warranties  
Schools and schooling

Search and seizure  
Sewers and sewage systems  
Shares and shareholders  
Ships and shipping  
Signs and signals  
Smoking and tobacco  
Statues and sculptures  
Sureties and surety bonds  
Surveyors and surveying  
Teachers and teaching  
Travel and tourism  
Trucks and trucking  
Universities and colleges  
Voters and voting  
Wages and salaries  
Wars and conflicts  
Weights and measures  
Witnesses and testimony