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Power Wording or How to Get Umph into Your Keywords

You've seen folks out power walking – they are passing by the other folks who dawdle along and take longer to reach their destination. The power walker is fitter, faster, and stronger. Likewise the keyword that starts the entry should stand out for its purpose of aiding users. It should not be vague or slow up the reader – it has to do its job in a robust fashion and truly take on its leadership role.

We all agree that one of the main purposes of the index is to provide a speedy method of research. For that, the index has to present itself in an accessible manner: easy to read and understand, accurate (spelling and page numbers), and well organized. Part of that precision and alacrity comes from the choice of the keyword that starts the subentry.

In an indent-style index, the keyword has to stand up to the tyranny of the index finger. The index reader often times places this finger on the column of type and moves it down while scanning the words at the front of the entry. The finger should not have to move to the right to find out the point of the index entry. The “telling” words or phrases should appear one right under the other as the finger glides down the page.

Look at this array for the topic of Parents:

Example A:

Parents

- children, aspirations for, 24
- children, generational differences on how to raise, 233
- family life, balancing with work, 232
- style of disciplining, 390–392
- educational attainment of, 234-236
- effect of divorce and separation on children, 159–160

Now compare that to:

Example B:

Parents

- aspirations for children, 24
- balance of work and family life by, 232
- disciplining style, 390–392
- educational attainment of, 234-236
- divorce and separation of, effect on children, 159–160
- generational differences and views on childraising, 233

In Example A, you see examples of redundant first words like “children” or weak ones like “style” or “effect of.” Look how those lines were rewritten in Example B to distinguish them from one another as well as to improve their meaningfulness. The point of the line about family life and work lies in the “balancing” of them so the rephrasing moves the word “balance” to the front, quickly making the point to the user.

When you have acronyms pervading a subject area, it sharpens up the index to use them in the sublevels. First, you have to make sure that the acronym is either very well known or that it appears elsewhere in the index with a cross-reference to what it stands for or appears as a main heading with the spelled-out form beside it as part of a double post. In other words, you need to have either:

ADA. *See* Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

or

ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990), 333

Then you can use ADA in the sublevel. If the book is about people with disabilities or equal opportunity in employment or housing, etc., it is likely your audience already knows this acronym, but just in case you have the cross-reference or the double post to explain it. The eye scans ADA much quicker than Americans with Disabilities Act so it acts more effectively as the keyword for a sublevel than its spelled-out counterpart.

Parking
ADA requirements, 334, 336
near retail establishments, 337
university lots, 90

compared to

Parking
Americans with Disabilities Act requirements, 334, 336
near retail establishments, 337
university lots, 90

Adjectives can make weak keywords for the start of entries. It is important to distinguish a term of art like “national parks” from an author’s use of a descriptive adjective like “large parks.” Likewise numbers assigned by an author make poor choices for the start of an entry.

stage 1: basic trust versus basic mistrust, 177
stage 2: autonomy versus shame and doubt, 177
stage 3: initiative versus guilt, 177
stage 4: industry versus inferiority, 8, 177
stage 5: identity versus role confusion, 8, 177, 275
stage 6: intimacy versus isolation, 177
stage 7: generativity versus stagnation, 177–178
stage 8: integrity versus despair, 177–178

First, the indexer is failing to deal with the subject matter here; this arrangement interferes with the user's quickly finding "despair" and in fact, that is just what the user might as well do—"despair" since the indexer is forcing him to do all this extra work. Second, the indexer is forcing the reader to keep scanning over this introductory language of "stage" that has no place in the index. Just because an author or researcher assigns numbers to stages or procedures does not mean that those numbers have meaning to an index user who may never have read the book and is trying to look up an idea like "isolation." By forcing the real keywords to follow these blockers, the indexer actually frustrates the user. I recognize that there are times that a number can take on special meaning like the Alcoholics Anonymous well-known "twelve-step program," and then an entry starting with a number makes good sense. The instances where numbers are weak lead words occur when an author creates for his discussion purposes a scheme of four elements and the indexer creates a sublevel "four elements" instead of the more direct "elements of."

Failure to place the keyword at the beginning of the subentry can result in other problems, such as overlooking double postings. I recently reviewed an index illustrating this point as the indexer missed making entries when she placed important concepts at the end of the lines. For example:

Roe's theory of personality development
groups of occupational activity and, 462–463

The indexer missed making a main heading to cover the idea of "occupations"; most likely she thought to herself, "I don't need to double post 'groups' so I am done here. If instead her attention was on the phrase "occupational activity," she would more likely have made the needed double posting.