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Scattered References

It is a shame that the majority of the population no longer has studied Latin. There are useful phrases that we cannot use because of this loss. Some terms like “caveat” were used so frequently that people don’t even think of them as Latin. It is just another good ole English word. But unfortunately the word “*passim*”¹ did not catch on; it just did not get the heavy play enjoyed by “caveat.”

So that brings me to the dilemma faced by the indexer of what to do with scattered references. The topic appears on all these pages but the discussion is not continuous. The author has managed to chop it up by going off in many different directions.

Australia
gun violence in, 129, 130, 131–33, 135

When I see this long string, I wonder what would be the harm of collapsing it into

Australia
gun violence in, 129-35

The user actually finds that simple piece of data easier to remember as they flip over to 129. And s/he knows to keep going from page 129 and stop looking by page 135. Now some will object that the user will think, “Oh my, here is the motherload of information on this topic, 6 solid pages!” But when s/he turns there, disappointment will fall. I understand that point of view that the consolidated form is a bit misleading. That notion has to be balanced against the usability of so many page numbers.

It is possible that there will be more references yet to the Australian gun violence so another several can be added.

Australia
gun violence in, 11, 129, 130, 131–33, 135, 189, 192

Now we have a list of 7 page numbers and we cannot have a sublevel to break them down further because the index is limited to two levels. It is a run-in index. There are other topics under Australia so we are loath to break them up into finer pieces as that also makes the work of the reader harder. So we want to keep it all together and yet we find the number of page cites unwieldy. I then advocate that we consolidate the clump that falls almost page after page.

Yet even when I do this for a topical reference, I find I cannot do this for a reference to a person or a place. Those pinpoint references scattered on the pages I pristinely keep separate.

Ayres, Ian, 293, 295, 296, 297

I cannot bring myself to collapse that into a range of 293-97. My rationale here is that when a user goes to a page for a specific name, s/he must see that person referred to on the page. It is a much more exacting standard than coverage of a concept. Gun violence can be discussed without using the terminology so precisely. It is a concept and although placing it in Australia narrows the concept, I find it acceptable to still deal with it more broadly.

Again, I lament the lack of Latin usage because *et seq.* which is still used in legal indexing could help out here as well. If indexers were allowed to write

Australia
gun violence in, 129 *et seq.*

then that would tell users that gun violence is discussed on 3 or more pages starting with page 129. Those Romans were clever in handling this sort of problem with multiple references! Unfortunately, centuries later we are all still scratching our heads about the best approach.

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¹ *Passim* is Latin for “here and there.” It would be used to tell the reader that references are scattered. For instance:

Australia
gun buyback program, 129-35 *passim*

For more on the definition and use of *passim*, see www.bartleby.com/59/7/passim.html.