

The First Cut Is Not Deep Enough

On occasion a customer will tell me a space limit for an index and when I am done indexing, I find that I need to cutback the index to fit the space. Or a customer will send back an index to say that they find it too long and ask me if I can remove entries to make it shorter. Sometimes I wonder if editors cut the indexes on their own and do not even involve the indexers. In any of these scenarios, whether it is the indexer or the editor who is doing the cutting, the best approach means having a strategy.

When I started in publishing in the 1970s, I worked as an editor at a small law publisher in Ohio. One day they received a complaint from a subscriber that he could not find a topic he was looking for in the Rs, and in fact, there were no Rs at all in the index. Further study found the letters P through S totally missing from the index. When the index-editor was asked what happened here, she said the index had turned out too long and had to be cut so she simply removed these letters as the fastest method! Of course, she was right as it shortened that index right up, but this is NOT a strategy I recommend. (And it was the end of her indexing career at the company, I might add.)

So how should you go about shortening up an index? The answer depends on certain factors.

First, is the index too long by just a few lines? In that instance a bit of tightening up should do the trick. Maybe there are instances where a main head has one subentry and those can be eliminated by adding the page number to the main heading entry. For example:

Bucer, Martin, 110
differences from Calvin, 114

can be combined into:

Bucer, Martin, 110, 114

and save a line. This type of editing is required by many publishers anyway who believe you should not allow a solitary detailed subentry under a main heading. It does not place much of a burden on the user to look at two page numbers for information about Bucer if he only appears in two places in the book. So an edit like this does not impinge on usefulness of the index at the same time as it saves space.

But what if the index is too long by a page or more? Then both the indexer and editor face a serious problem. Sometimes the editor or author may insist on so much detail that the publisher will allow the index to run over the specified length and will add another folio to the book. I have even had editors tighten up the prelims to give the index another

page. Such generosity on behalf of the index though is the exception. More often comes the demand to truncate the indexing in some way. This is where it helps to have a strategy since shortening an index by even a page when it is layed out in two columns with smaller than nine point type means eliminating more than 100 entries. Sometimes even an hour or two of the most diligent reading will only identify a handful of references to delete. If the index contains 1500-2000 entries, you need to cut a substantial percent and you need to avoid willy-nilly decisions. When I discuss length issues, I like to offer the client some choices. That way they participate in deciding on the approach and are less critical at the end when they see the result.

First, I discuss a strategy that involves just names. Many indexes tend to be full of people's names. I know from personal experience that authors love to see their own names and the names of their professional colleagues in the index. In addition, there are names of historical figures, commentators, researchers, and research subjects that each demand a place in the index. In the fields of psychology, sociology, history, political science, and education in which I index extensively, it is not unusual to receive a request from the client to pick up "all the names." However, when the index exceeds the page limit, revisiting the criteria for inclusion of names becomes valid. Sometimes the editor or author and I will agree that I can cross off any name with just one page number. That sounds arbitrary, and while I agree it is not foolproof, since in the span of one page, the author can offer an extended discussion of a person and what he stands for. But if the author/editor will agree to this approach, it is fast and easy to implement and may frequently result in an index of the right length.

Another option lets names of people, companies, and places be main headings with strings of undifferentiated page numbers attached to them but keeps subject topics in analyzed form with sublevels. This tactic works well for certain types of books.

Other approaches require more thought on the part of the indexer. As i mentioned above, join up the straggler lines. Then look for over-analyzed topics. Over-analysis is something to consider cutting any time to make the index smaller and more user friendly. It goes with the saying "Keep it simple, stupid," or the KISS principle as it is commonly known. When you insert sublines, you are asking your user to spend time reading and digesting them. The reward for this work should justify the time spent – so if all the user finds is that he is going to the same pages over and over, that becomes an irritation. Sometimes as an indexer it is hard to keep from putting in more detail as it makes the index more interesting to create and to read, but most users are not going to read the index A to Z. They will dip into the spot where they have a research need and leave the index as soon as they can. Speed and simplicity are the most desirable access traits for most index users.

Over-analysis occurs in instances where the subtopics all occur on page numbers within a small range. Consider this example from a run-in index:

Calvin, John, 111–14; background of, 111–12; on Catholic Church, 112; comparison with Erasmus, 114; conversion of, 113, 114; on German Lutheranism, 111–12;

In this instance you can simplify by removing all the detail and just provide Calvin's name with the range. My personal criteria is that a range of 4 or 5 pages or less does not need to be broken down with subtopics. I know that legal indexing style favors such

detail in sublevels but most back-of-the-book indexing does not require it. The user can handle a chunk of 4 or 5 pages to read all there is on a topic in a book.

Also it may work to tighten up a string of page numbers even when the discussion is not continuous, but the page numbers are contiguous. Although information may be scattered on the pages, a user who turns to 111 for Calvin and just continues reading for 3 more pages during which time they again encounter Calvin several more times has not been inconvenienced. Consider that approach versus the user who has to flip back to the index once done with

111 to find "Oh, I need to go to the next page," and then flips back again to learn, "And the next page," etc. So in an edit requiring a great deal of tightening for space, it is possible to collapse strings of page numbers into a range, making 111, 112, 113, 114 into 111-14, probably saving a line from wrapping.

There are instances where you find a main topic without a page range but all the entries below it fall within a small range. Then you can eliminate that sublevel detail and just add the range to the main heading.

In keeping with the philosophy of keeping the index simple, I will cut the wording of long entries. For example, in the entry

Russia, collection of sales taxes in, 615, 699,
705-6

I will take off the phrase "collection of sale taxes in" to make sure the entry won't wrap to another line:

Russia, 615, 699, 705-6

One practice I follow when indexing is to create cross-references from acronyms to spelled-out forms. To save space, a fast approach is to agree with the author/editor to eliminate all such cross-references. After all, most of these acronyms are in the same letter as the spelled-out version, and someone who wants to find ERISA can look through the E's to find Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA). If the subject matter is loaded with acronyms, you can save a good many lines this way, making the index smaller so the user has less to look through to find the full term anyway.

The choices you make to cut after you have finished require a lot of "brain" work and can be exhausting. You have already invested so much energy to get the lines into the index, it becomes hard to part with them. In the instances where I know I am likely to have a size issue, and the index will contain a lot of names, I start indexing by inputting just the names and their page numbers. Every name takes a line even if it has only one page number. Then I do a sizing of the index to see how much room I have left for the substantive entries, and discuss this with the editor/author. That can save me a lot of work at the end; I have been told on occasion that since all those names have to stay, I should condense the subject indexing to a bare minimum (knowing I need to take this approach can make the project much more profitable for me since I won't spend time to create entries that I will later spend time to discard). Sometimes this information provides the fuel the editor needs to argue for an increased page allowance for the index (and I have seen that work so the index can cover everything fairly).

After years of experience, I will say that when I have to cut an index, I have found the first cut usually does not get me the desired result. It is never deep enough (I treasure each entry too much – after all, I wrote it and formed an attachment to it at birth!) unless I have a strategy that the editor/author and I have agreed to. Although the shortened index may not be able to compete for ASI's Wilson Award, think of the trade-offs in light of utility (as well as your client's needs) and you will come up with an equitable strategy.

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