

When Numbers Meet Letters

When I explain the ways an index can be organized, there are three common possibilities: (1) alphabetical, the one most readers expect; (2) numerical, when you have items like First Amendment, Second Amendment, Third Amendment, Fourth Amendment, etc.; and (3) chronological when you want to follow the development of a law or someone's life progression. In fact, the ANSI standard that defines an index recognizes these three approaches. Within an alphabetical index, then, you want sometimes to have the numbers come before letters, sometimes mixed in with the letters as if the numbers are spelled out, and you need to control the sorting to make these presentations happen.

Your indexing software can help you accomplish all these display goals. It is just a question of knowing how to manipulate it. I use CINDEXTM so my examples will tell how I force these special sorts in that software, but for those who use a different indexing software, I am sure you can extrapolate how to get the same effect with yours.

Numbers/Symbols at the Top

First, let's look at instances where I want to let the numbers sort before all the alphabetical entries. I understand that in technical books where indexers must deal with lots of symbols and numbers, they sort them to rise to the top of the index as the very first entries before the letter A. Sometimes people create a rubric to give these entries a label, especially if they are inserting the "alpha breaks" of A, B, C, etc. above the letter segments. So you will see:

Symbols

** , 34, 36

@ , 121

Numbered Terms

40th Parallel, 46

1218 Rule, 34, 38

A

Algorithms, 49

And sometimes they are presented without any rubrics.

** , 34, 36

@ , 121

40th Parallel, 46

1218 Rule, 34, 38

Algorithms, 49

This type of sorting of numbers and symbols above letters can be handled in CINDEK by going to Sort under the Tools drop-down. Look there at what is called: Character Priority. It shows Symbols, Numbers, Letters. You can choose to change this order, but the order in the software default (s/b t) (as I have just listed it) is the one most commonly used in indexes, and it would work for the example above.

In legal indexing, the indexer often has to deal with case names, and these can have numbers as the first word of a party name. For example, 123 Main Street vs. Copiers Allied, Inc. The question is how will a user look up this case – will the user think “One twenty-three” or “Hundred and twenty-three” or “One two three”? Or will the user think I have no idea how to look up a number other than numbers should be before letters? Not surprisingly legal publishers take different approaches to answering this question. The “belt-and-suspenders” answer requires placing the case name in two locations. First above the letter A, create a list of cases that start with numbers:

2WP Co. v. XYZ Abstractors, Inc.
123 Main Street v. Copiers Allied, Inc.
14,001 Widgets Seized, In re

Albert v. Lyle

Notice how the numbers group is sorted by the number from smaller to larger – 2, 123, 14,001. There is no attempt to translate the numbers into words.

The second part (the “suspenders”) requires the same entries to appear again within the alphabetical part of the index. This time you treat the numbers as words and force their sort amid the letters. Unlike a common phrase in our vocabulary like 401(k) plans that we all agree is said as “four-o-one k plans,” these little known cases do not have a universally accepted articulation. I would translate them as follows (but I recognize that others may not agree in all instances). These sorts have to be forced in CINDEK by employing the device of curly braces. Whatever you put within the curly braces, CINDEK will rely on for sorting but will not display in the final output. Now I have included the information in two places and have facilitated its retrieval as much as I can:

Albert v. Lyle
{fourteen} 14,001 Widgets Seized, In re
{one } 123 Main Street v. Copiers Allied, Inc.
{two} 2WP Co. v. XYZ Abstractors, Inc.

Notice that in the curly brackets to force the sort in CINDEK, I have not used the fully spelled-out form of all the numbers. I have intentionally made that choice, not because I am a lazy typist, but because I want to allow numbers within a clump to still sort numerically. Otherwise the sorting becomes very jarring to the user who is skimming on through looking for a particular case name.

Albert v. Lyle
{fourteen} 14,001 Widgets Seized, In re
{one} 123 Main Street v. Copiers Allied, Inc.
{one} 145 North Road v. Leasing Materials, Inc.
{two} 2WP Co. v. XYZ Abstractors, Inc.

In the above example if I spelled out “145,” it would mean that “one forty-five” would be moved alphabetically above “123” (“one twenty-three”) and that sense of numbers out of

order within a letter group is what I want to avoid. It goes along with my policy of an alpha violation that still makes sense to the reader. When I go outside of the alphabetical order within the index, the scheme still has to be comprehensible at first glance – readers will not even blink twice when they see numbers as long as the numbers follow regular numerical rules. Since preschool they have understood the order of numbers, and only when confronted with seemingly random sequencing of numbers are they puzzled.

Numbers Sorted as Numbers under Main Headings

Sometimes under a main heading I find it advantageous to place a numeric grouping first. For example, in a book dealing with the history of U.S. government I commonly have a main heading “Elections.” Some of the text centers on the presidential election of a specific year, and some discussion deals with concepts linked to elections like suffrage and third-party candidates. My approach organizes the array like this:

Elections. *See also* Primaries
1996, 104, 157–158, 196, 235, 400, 423, 500
2000, 14, 53–54, 57–59, 83, 184–185, 235, 410, 423, 499, 500
2004, 56, 69, 70–71, 74, 75, 84, 320, 321, 423
2008, 74, 75, 84, 322
financial holdings disclosure, 197
mid-term elections, 363–364, 555
presidential nomination process, 171–173
third-party candidates, 500, 539–545

Sometimes I see indexes where the indexer has created two separate headings: “Elections” and “Elections by year” so they put the numeric entries under one and the alpha entries under the other. Personally I don’t see what they gain by creating that split. I prefer the one heading approach as it allows for a simpler structure and generally simpler means easier to use.

I also will at times put numbered items like constitutional amendments in numeric order instead of alphabetical order even though they are spelled-out numbers. For example:

Constitution, U.S.
First Amendment
Second Amendment
Fourth Amendment
Fourteenth Amendment

Again, I will place these before the true alphabetical entries so I will have an array like this:

Constitution, U.S.
First Amendment
Second Amendment
Fourth Amendment
Fourteenth Amendment
executive agreements
executive orders
Federalist Papers and
foreign affairs
law enforcement
legislative powers

I still think that users understand at a glance that the amendments appear first and then the subjective entries. No extra explanation is needed to make clear why the indexer introduced this variance in order. To make this happen in CINDEX, I have used {1},{2},{4},and {14} in front of the spelled-out form, and I have my sort set to display numbers before letters.

Sometimes a year ends up as the keyword for a subheading. Here I intersperse them with the other alpha sublevels. Perhaps the author has divided up the text into time-based segments and used years for some of them. There is no better way to capture the author's intent than to use the years as the lead words. For example:

- International Criminal Court (ICC)
 - early years of
 - founding of
 - 2001–2004
 - 2005 and after
 - withdrawal of plea, effect of

In this example, I have sorted the years as if they were spelled out to start with “two” for the phrase “two thousand and one” and “two thousand and five”; again I am not going beyond the first word “two” and after that, I apply number order so the years scan in order. On the other hand, if I have a mix of years where some will start with 18, some with 19, and some with 20, then I like to let them rise to the top of the array. That way I won't have some interspersed at “eighteen,” some at “nineteen,” and some at “two.” That would look like this:

- Europe
 - 1880–1920
 - 1930–1946
 - 2001–2004
 - 2005 and after
 - civil wars
 - land rights
 - taxes

But if I can avoid the year as the first word, I will rephrase the entry to move the year to the end of the subentry.

- Campaign finance
 - presidential election spending (1912–1968)

This phrasing is distinguishable from the above example where I started the line with the year because that information was all I had to work with. Here in addition to the year range, the author has provided the indexer with other descriptive information – “presidential election spending.” The text may say in the 1912 to 1968 presidential elections, but that does not mean you need to keep the years at the front of the entry. (By the way, note how I put the years in parentheses after the phrase as opposed to setting it off with a comma; that is because I dislike having the number part of the subentry meet up with the page numbers when only a comma is used between them. But this is a topic for another article, another time.)

Likewise if the author says the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, I will not use that structure in the index. The year of the act will move to the end of the phrase: Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). If a conference or convention is referred to as the 1971

Conference on Aging, I will transform it into: Conference on Aging (1971). In a way it resembles how you would treat the information if the author were to say, “In the First World War ...,” you would create the entry World War I and alphabetize it in the Ws – not in the Fs for First.

Numbers Treated as Words for Main Headings

Context makes all the difference. In legal or financial planning materials, how would someone look up 401(k) plans? Generally, we expect them to look in the F’s for the word “Four” so we place it there and treat it as if it were spelled out. Sometimes the author may refer to them as Section 401(k) plans and in keeping with literary warrant, the indexer makes “Section 401(k) plans” the postable heading. Since some people expect it to be called 401(k) plans, you will need a cross-reference to point from “401(k) plans” to “Section 401(k) plans.” So no matter how the author discusses this retirement planning option, you still need to deal with a main heading that starts with a number. And in this context, people say “four-o-one k” and that is how they will try to look it up.

Likewise for the phrase 9/11 in the name of the commission, we all say as the “Nine-eleven” Commission, so it has to be alphabetized in the Ns. So I will type in {nine}9/11 Commission and the characters in the curly braces will control the proper placement. Remember to check how it will look in the final format in case you have made a mistake in what you chose to encapsulate in the curly braces.

Just as in the indexing of names, there is always more to say about the indexing of numbers in entries. Here I have offered suggestions on how to deal with certain situations that come up commonly in indexing. Sometimes the letters yield to the numbers, and sometimes the numbers yield to the letters – the winner should be the user who can locate the information.

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