

Indexing children's books

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What is an index?

An index is 'a systematic arrangement of entries designed to enable users to locate information in a document' (British Standard BS ISO 999: 1996). Unlike the general contents page, it is a key to far more specific detail. There are two basic categories of reader: those who have not read the book and those who have. A good index will help the former to decide whether the book suits his or her needs. It will help the latter to revisit any part of it without having to riffle through all the pages. These statements apply equally to publications for children as well as for adults; the benefits can be enjoyed by both, especially if the skill of using an index is learned in the early years.

Why index children's books?

The vital importance of indexing information books for children has been highlighted over many years, at least since the mid-1930s. This was confirmed in a survey sponsored by the British Library Research and Innovation Centre (Williams and Bakewell 1997). All 16 publishers participating in this investigation rated this importance very highly. Yet, fewer than one-third said that they always included an index in publications for children, with reasons for exclusion given chiefly as restrictions on budget, time and space. Sometimes the contents page is considered sufficient, even though this lacks essential details.

Advantages of indexes

Firstly, the National Curriculum (2000) requires that children should be taught sound information retrieval practice, using organisational features and systems to locate texts. Secondly, the Primary National Strategy includes in its non-fiction objectives: understanding the purpose of contents pages and indexes; finding information by page numbers and initial letters of words. Later, the aim includes finding parts of text that give particular information. Children should also use dictionaries to find words by using initial letters, and the teacher is advised to demonstrate scanning the index for information, asking the children to familiarise themselves with the contents pages, indexes and glossaries of the information books. Thirdly, using an index is one of the earliest tools of independent research as well as helping to promote analytical skills. Despite increasing use of the internet, books will be with us for a long time yet, and children are being encouraged more and more to read them, not only for enjoyment but in preparation for future studies. Finally, skill in using indexes can help when searching for information on the internet.

Disadvantages of a book that lacks an index

The Williams and Bakewell survey found a number of negative effects, chiefly that children lose patience and interest if they have to spend time looking through a whole book for specific information. Younger ones often find scanning difficult, and can therefore fail to develop independent searching methods, remaining reliant on the teacher or librarian. The survey also found that primary school children viewed the index as a highly important feature and assumed that every non-fiction book would have one. An 11 year-old asked how they were supposed to find anything in a book without an index. Workshops conducted by an indexer in a secondary school confirmed children's intelligent interest in the use of indexes. They were quick to grasp the importance of choosing relevant terms and of keeping the number of page references to a minimum. In fact, by the end of each session, the participants were able to criticise a selection of books from the school library, rejecting those without an index and rating the rest according to the quality of the index while taking into account the overall layout and appropriateness of the entries. Another indexer worked with groups of 10–11 year-olds who examined a selection of books and decided which were the key topics on each page before checking in the index. They gave points for inclusion and accuracy, becoming ever more discriminating as they progressed.

Quality of the indexes

Indexes for children's books should be just as high quality as for adults' books, perhaps even more so as children need to be taught with the best examples against which future use can be measured. A clear, accurate and well-presented index can encourage their use, just as a disappointing one can reduce their interest. It follows, therefore, that the index should be carefully planned, not tacked on as an afterthought or made by a computer without any consideration for the particular needs of the young user.

- **Terminology** should be appropriate for the age group, using words that children would be expected to know. Most will be taken from the text, but sometimes thought has to be given to the choice between additional entries or cross-referencing which can be a problem for younger users. For example, the text might mention 'currency' but it would be helpful to also include 'money' in the index or to cross-reference it with '*see also* money', according to the age group.
- **Subheadings** should be avoided if possible as they can confuse younger children. However, they might be necessary to avoid using too many locators (i.e. page or paragraph numbers).
- **Indexing names** needs careful consideration as there are many options. Should rulers be indexed individually or be listed as subheadings under the main entries 'kings' and 'queens'? Should titles or surnames be inverted as in indexes to adult books? The most suitable form of the name should be chosen for the particular index (e.g. 'Geldof, Bob' as opposed to 'Geldof, Sir Robert'). Correct spelling is essential, of course.
- **Consistency** is also important: should singular or plural terms be used for countable nouns? The British Standard already quoted recommends the use of the plural form for 'countables' and singular for 'non-countables'. For example, the countables 'chairs', 'cars' not 'chair' and 'car'. The plural is unlikely to arise for non-countable nouns, e.g. 'furniture', 'traffic', 'coffee'. The British Standard recommends lower case initial letters except for proper nouns.

- **Omission** of key topics is a major fault as, if children cannot find the item in the index, they will often assume it is not dealt with in the text and will give up. The index needs to be attractive and reliable, to appeal to the eye yet remain an invaluable tool.

Presentation of indexes

Presentation is particularly important to children.

- **Length** is determined by length of text and space available but, ideally, the index should adequately reflect the book.
- If the **font size** is small in proportion to the text, this can make the index seem relatively unimportant and sometimes more difficult to read, another reason for giving up.
- **Alphabetical order** can be used in two ways: word by word or letter by letter, but the chosen style must be used consistently. Many children's books print the entire alphabet on the first or each index page to help them locate the initial letters. Space between each section beginning with the same letter can be helpful, especially if the section is headed with the appropriate large upper case letter.
- **Illustrations** should be indexed but the difference between references to text and references to illustrations needs to be distinguished, perhaps by use of bold or italic type for the latter. If illustrations are also used purely for decoration, confusion should be avoided; the index pages should be as clear as possible. Another source of confusion could be a combined index and glossary; keeping them separate emphasises the different functions of each.
- **Locators (page or paragraph numbers)** can be shown with each page listed individually (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, i.e. a separate reference to the topic on each page) or in ranges indicated by hyphens or en-rules (4–8, 10–12, i.e. a continuous reference over more than one page). This practice can be explained to children early on in their study of indexes so that they become familiar with it as soon as possible.
- **Passing mention** of a topic should be ignored as it is frustrating for children who find it is mentioned only in connection with something entirely different. Again, here is another reason for children giving up using an index. A further source of frustration is a long string of page numbers; children in the index workshop mentioned above were quick to notice them, announcing that they would certainly give up checking each one. Here then, is a sound reason for making more main entries or using subheadings.
- **Cross-references.** Using '*see*' and '*see also*' is often a problem, especially to younger children for whom additional entries might be more straightforward. The Williams and Bakewell survey found that the majority of respondents were in favour of keeping these traditional terms so that children could become accustomed to them in preparation for using adult books. Others suggested using double or additional entries or introducing different phrases such as 'try the word . . .' or 'also look up . . .' but the latter solution means the children will still have to learn the traditional phrases later on.

In view of all the foregoing, it might not be surprising that one of the 21 recommendations in the Williams and Bakewell report on indexes to children's information books is that such indexes should be compiled by a professional indexer who should have some knowledge of the subject matter. These recommendations appear in the Society of Indexers 'Occasional Paper No. 5' which is derived largely from that investigation.

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Further reading

Bakewell, K.G.B. and Williams, Paula L., with contributions from Elizabeth Wallis MBE and Valerie A. Elliston, *Indexing Children's Books*, Occasional Paper on Indexing No. 5, Society of Indexers, 2000.

British Standards Institution, *Information and documentation: guidelines for the content, organization and presentation of indexes*, BS ISO 999: 1996, 1997.

Department for Educational Standards, *Key Stages 1 & 2 of the National Curriculum*, DfES, 2000.

Williams P.L. and Bakewell K.G.B., *Indexes to children's information books: a study of the provision and quality of book indexes for children at National Curriculum Key Stage 2*. Final Report on Project RIC/G/330 (British Library Research and Innovation Report 129), 1997.