

It's an e-book. Can't readers just use the search function?

A search function is a useful additional tool but it's no substitute for a well-constructed index.

- Indexes provide access to **subjects**, not just words. They will include relevant discussions of the concept even where the actual search term is not used.
- An indexer knows, for example, that tigers aren't always tigers – they may also be referred to as 'big cats', 'endangered species', 'man-eaters', 'top predators', etc.
- Full-text searching cannot think like the reader, whereas indexers are experts at anticipating how readers may approach the subject and providing relevant entry points.
- Full-text searches tend to miss important discussions of the topic; they cannot cope with inferences or synonyms.
- Full-text searches often provide readers with an unrealistic number of 'hits'; they are bloated by passing, duplicate and negative mentions. They waste readers' time and often present them with an unrealistic or impossible task.

Indexes make the reader's task much more manageable by eliminating irrelevant or duplicate mentions, using subentries to organize topics into subcategories of a reasonable size, and providing cross-references and alternative entry points that cater for readers' varied approaches. Make sure your publisher engages a professional indexer to provide an 'active' index with hyperlinks that lead the reader back into the text.

The book bears all the hallmarks of a rushed job – the omission of an index being the giveaway.

Reviewer's comment on a recent book about the financial crisis

How do I find a professional indexer?

The Society of Indexers' online directory (*Indexers Available*) at www.indexers.org.uk contains full details of qualified and experienced professional indexers, whose specialist subjects range from accountancy and agriculture to yoga and zoology. Its updated interface now makes it much easier for you to find an indexer with the right skills for *your* particular book.

You will also find plenty of guidance on the website about the whole process of commissioning an indexer.

What does it cost?

Indexing fees will vary, depending on such factors as the length and complexity of the book and the publisher's deadline. The hourly, page and word rates on the Society of Indexers' website can be used as a basis for negotiation between indexer and client.

Could I become an indexer?

If you think you might have the right skills to become an indexer, visit the Society of Indexers' website to find out more about the distance-learning course.

For more information about indexing, visit the website at:

www.indexers.org.uk

or contact the office: admin@indexers.org.uk

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AUTHORS AND INDEXES

DIY or hire a professional?

society of
indexers
information from A to Z

An index is much more than an alphabetical list of topics with page numbers attached . . .

At least, it should be. It's like a road map, leading both experts and novices in your field to every pertinent sentence you've written, regardless of their point of departure and without dead ends or annoying detours.

Indexing is as necessary to (non-fiction) books as oxygen is to lungs.

John Sutherland in The Guardian (26 September 2012)

An index is a tool that helps readers locate information

Users of indexes also include:

- **Potential readers**, who may well look at the index (in a bookshop or online) before deciding whether or not to buy your book.
- **Librarians and teachers/lecturers**, who are known to value a good index and may decide against acquiring a badly indexed book.
- **Book reviewers**, who frequently comment on the existence and quality of indexes, and may use the index as the deciding point on whether or not to recommend your book rather than one of its rivals.
- **Your peers**, who will judge your professionalism and how complete your book is by whether it includes a good index.

It has a wonderfully informative index, always a good indication of a really well-conceived companion.

Reviewer's comment on a recent 'companion' to Charles Dickens

A good indexer understands the readers' needs as well as the subject

Indexing is rarely a popular task for authors. It takes objectivity, perspective, a sense of proportion and priority, patience, speed, technical training and experience. If you have *all* these qualities, if you can apply them under the pressure of tight deadlines, and if you would rather index your current book than start writing your next one, you are the best person for the job. If not, you should hire a professional indexer.

I would rather be dead than do it again.

Bernard Levin after indexing his first book, quoted in The Indexer 14(2), 1984

But I'm the expert on this subject

Although you are the ultimate expert on the topic of your book, professional indexers generally have a high level of expertise in particular subject areas. You should be able to find one with the right knowledge and experience for your book.

A professional indexer will also look at your book from the readers' perspective, anticipating how they will approach the subject. The indexer will analyse the text and, using synonyms, main headings and subheadings, double entry and cross-references ('see' and 'see also'), provide a carefully structured index to guide readers efficiently back into the main text of the book.

Though it rewards cover-to-cover reading, an excellent index permits its use as a tool of ready-reference.

Reviewer's comment on a recent book about academic librarianship

Surely there are programs that can produce indexes automatically?

Despite advances in artificial intelligence, there really isn't yet a satisfactory automatic system that can replicate the intelligence and judgement of the human brain in creating a proper analytical index that will satisfy readers' needs.

A professional indexer ...

- applies the principles outlined in the relevant British Standards
- knows and understands the many established principles of information retrieval
- knows and follows the publisher's index style guidelines
- uses fast, efficient, specialized indexing software to provide the index in whatever print or electronic format is required
- meets strict deadlines to fit in with the publisher's schedule

Think of an index as a collaboration

Some of the most useful and accessible indexes may be produced by a professional indexer working closely with the author. The author brings to the relationship in-depth subject knowledge, while the qualified indexer not only has a broad level of subject knowledge but also professional indexing skills, objectivity and a fresh approach to the topic – the potential reader/learner's point of view.

This is yet another elegant, immaculate, scrupulously indexed volume.

Reviewer's comment on a recent work of literary biography