
What did you do before you became an indexer?

Some respondents had done more than one thing in their careers before becoming indexers, and while many had worked in the fields of either librarianship or publishing, some came from entirely different backgrounds.

There were six former **librarians/cataloguers**, one of which was a **scientific librarian**, and two who described themselves as **information managers**. There was also a **classifier**, a **taxonomy manager**, an **archivist**, and an **information scientist**.

Many had worked in some aspect of publishing in the past – among the respondents there was a **copy-editor** and **proofreader**, an **editor** and a **commissioning editor**, an **abstract writer**, someone who worked in **journal publishing**, a **journalist**, and a **book publicist**.

There were a few with a background in education – a **university lecturer**, a **primary school teacher**, a **TEFL teacher**, and a **college administrator**. One had worked as a **school governor**, while also being a **full-time parent**.

The remaining responses covered a variety of fields, such as **archaeology**, **catering**, **medicine** (**hospital medical practice**, **optometry**, and **nursing**), **travel agency**, **corporate law**, **theatre publicity** and **customer service**.

How did you find out about indexing, and then decide to get into it?

Quite a few respondents came into indexing by creating an index first before realising that it was a career option itself.

“I was asked by a university professor I had just finished working for to index his latest book which I did (with hindsight not very well). After that it just sort of grew as people found that I had done some indexing. At the same time, I researched indexing, joined the society, and learned how to do it properly.”

“I was asked to write the index to the botany book I had worked on, followed by another book by a member of the academic staff in the same department.”

“I worked for a federal body in the co-operative movement, which produced a gazette of useful information for its members. The gazette had been indexed since first published in the 1930s and the person who did it left. My boss approached me and said, ‘librarians know about indexes’, and I got started.”

“An editor, who assumed I was an indexer, asked me to index a book very urgently, and I was too hard up to argue! When he offered me another indexing assignment, I decided it was time to train to learn how to index properly.”

“When working as a casual assistant for the Education Library Service, doing very simple indexing. I wrote to the SI and the rest, as they say, is history.”

Two respondents heard about indexing on a 'Woman's Hour' feature on Radio 4 in the 1980s. Two others read about it in the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*. Two heard about indexing from other people:

"A colleague at the BBC mentioned the SI, so I googled them and decided to try the training course."

"My husband had done some and we wanted to raise the deposit for a house."

Those who already worked in the publishing or libraries sector knew about indexing before deciding it was a route they wanted to take.

"I had engaged freelance indexers as part of my job as a journals production editor, so I knew that with appropriate training I would be able to offer it as a service."

"Through my job as an information manager, and my Masters in Information Science, I always knew it was a thing. I was a member of CILIP through my work and [...] I saw an advert for the Society of Indexers' training course."

"I knew about the role through my time in publishing."

"The only 'proper' job I'd ever had was in publishing."

It was quite common for respondents to come into indexing while raising children.

"At this time, I became pregnant with my first child (who is now 35) and realised I could become a professional indexer. This suited me as I could work it around motherhood a lot easier than a 'proper job'."

"This also fitted in with my life at the time as I had three children in quick succession."

"I was trying to work out what to do next career-wise as I'd realised that I didn't want to go back to working in London leaving my baby at home."

"I was looking to find something I could do while children were in school, but which was compatible with frequent moves. As it turned out, I found I could also do it between feeds with newborn twins!"

Do you do any other work apart from indexing? Do you find that indexing goes well with anything else that you do?

Four indexers also do copy-editing, editing or proofreading work alongside their indexing.

"The skills I've developed as an editor are useful in ensuring that indexes are consistent and error-free. A bit of industry knowledge has been useful."

Some reported doing complementary paid work in other fields.

"I do some research work too, in fact that's what I first did as a freelancer and still occasionally do a little now. I mainly do qualitative research which involves taking large quantities of narrative data and analysing it, looking for themes and recurring topics – which is VERY similar to indexing. I'm also a school governor for which the ability to read and absorb texts really fast is a massive advantage!"

“I have a small part-time job opening a local museum to visitors. It’s just a couple of hours once or twice a week. I find it goes perfectly with indexing, getting me away from the desk and into a very different environment for a little while.”

“I offer legal tabling services. This is similar to indexing, but focuses on citing every reference to a statute, case or arbitration decision that appears in a manuscript.”

“I also translate (mainly non-fiction) from German into English. Yes, I find that indexing and translation go well together.”

Eight indexers report that they do not have any other paid employment aside from indexing, although some are currently also raising children.

“I’m a mum, which works well in term time but less so in holidays. You would think that it would get easier as the child gets older, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. Son is 16, I seem to be the taxi service!”

What are your specialist subjects, and have you become a specialist in anything new since becoming an indexer, because of the books you’ve done?

The most popular specialist subjects that people begin with are: **history** (including **local history**, **history of art**, **natural history**, and the **history of the co-operative movement**); **art** (including **visual and performing arts**); **archaeology**; and the **sciences** (including **medicine and health sciences** and **veterinary sciences**). **Biography and memoirs**, **architecture**, and **linguistics** are also popular subjects, and two people occasionally index in other languages (**Welsh** and **Spanish**).

The other specialist subjects mentioned are: **classics**, **coaching**, **cookery**, **current affairs**, **economics**, **education**, **law**, **politics**, **sport**, and **travel guides**.

Several indexers have found themselves becoming specialists in other fields as a result of indexing so many books that they have developed a level of expertise, or at least competence.

“My subject is life sciences, which has led me sideways into medical and veterinary indexing, general science and psychology.”

“I ended up with a specialisation in Middle Eastern studies. Not having an academic degree in a specialist subject, much depends on what is offered to you at the start of your career. Somehow, at the beginning of mine I got several books on Islam, Judaism, and the Middle East. This meant I had to educate myself if my knowledge of a subject was not adequate for delivering a good index. I did this mainly by reading other academic books on the subjects offered to me or by listening to audiobooks that highlighted certain themes in the books I was working on. This is a strategy I still follow today. Finding a niche that is shunned by others in your profession, because of its challenges, is particularly good for a steady income. I had to find ways to overcome the problems posed by Middle Eastern studies or just take them in my stride.”

“I have learnt a lot about art and art history from indexing books in this area.”

“As an amateur basketmaker I took on indexing the *Basketmakers’ Newsletter* which has greatly increased my knowledge of basketmaking.”

“In spite of having no previous knowledge of archaeology, I indexed a book on the subject and was nominated for the Wheatley Medal. I’ve now done so many archaeology books that I could reasonably call it a specialist subject.”

“[I’ve done] two works of literary criticism. I’m hoping to get more work in this area because it’s a particular interest of mine.”

“Early in my career I indexed many psychology books so that became a specialist subject, but I do not do so much of this work nowadays.”

“I’ve developed a specialism in books about parenting through one of my clients and I take on a lot of education books too.”

“[My work] has expanded to include politics, economics, and almost any ‘arts’ subjects.”

“In practice, as well as [my specialist subjects], I get a lot of work in the social sciences, education, and related areas.”

What’s the most interesting thing you’ve learnt from a book you’ve indexed?

“Charles Darwin really liked bananas, and a friend would send him them from Kew Gardens.”

“The ‘uncanny valley’ refers to a valley-shaped graph which shows a comparison between how human-like an object is, and the feeling of unease experienced by the observer. It explains why clowns, androids and realistic dolls can make people feel uneasy, but teddy bears are more acceptable.”

“Just recently I’ve been fascinated to learn that the area in London just west of Southwark Cathedral was the site of the medieval palace of the Bishops of Winchester (complete with extensive gardens and parkland).”

“That the Renaissance painter Piero di Cosimo did not, as legend has it, end his days as a recluse living on hard-boiled eggs.”

“One memorable experience was when indexing on a train journey. It was a book about the history of insurance, and I came across a snippet about a country where, when insurance became more common, it became usual practice to have an ‘accident’ with new year fireworks so that you could claim a new house and contents. The government response was to make insurance fraud a capital offence. My reaction attracted the attention of neighbouring travellers and we ended up having a long discussion about the importance of indexes and how indexes are made. A fascinating journey.”

“All about the life cycle of the carpet beetle (in a book about textile conservation).”

“The anatomy of the horse, perhaps.”

“I did index a history of food recently that had all manner of interesting facts about how and why our dietary habits have evolved ... for instance, why we eat white bread made from wheat flour and not brown bread made from rye...”

“Recently I enjoyed learning about something called ‘smart shipping’ (pilot-less container boats).”

“I indexed a book on recycling and how we use it to justify or excuse consumption without considering the realities of what happens after the materials are collected from the kerb. We need to refuse, reduce, and reuse before even considering recycling!”

“I have been privileged enough to work on a lot of books about women artists and artists of colour, which have been exceptionally well written and produced.”

“Ideas about consciousness, the work of Jung on synchronicity – and the shamanism book was fascinating!”

“The economics books are surprisingly interesting. It really is true that the economy is at the back of everything – history, social change, environmental policy, and, of course, politics.”

Everyone agreed that indexing gives you an opportunity to learn a great many interesting facts in a diversity of subjects. If only we were able to retain all those facts...

“I once indexed a book that talked about the amount of beer given to field workers in the Middle Ages. I was astounded at the amount but of course, I can't remember what it was!”

“Most books I index teach me something interesting. I feel very fortunate to be able to spend so much time reading about subjects which make me happy.”

“I think I learn something interesting from just about every book I index, because I get to index books I would otherwise never have read.”

Have you ever included a funny heading, or indexed a humorous book and incorporated the style into your index?

Some respondents had not used humour in their indexes, either because the books they did were too serious and didn't lend themselves to humour, or because they were not confident about doing so. However, plenty had taken the opportunities where they presented themselves.

“One of my first jobs was a book on law that had informal allusions to Star Wars running through it. Although of no academic merit at all, I thought I would pull the various references together in the form of an index entry and I presented this rather tentatively to the authors, assuming they would perhaps say best take it out.

But they didn't. One wrote that I had absolutely caught the spirit of the book. Another wrote: 'The Star Wars reference stays, the Force was clearly with you on this!'. Which pleased me.”

“I did once slip an entry for our cat (who'd recently died) into a very large historical index; no-one noticed...”

“I once made the entry 'stagnation of lungs' when I was indexing a history of medicine book as a bit of a personal indulgence. Anyone who knows the James Herriot *All Creatures Great and Small* books will recognise the reference.”

“Never done a particularly humorous book but my favourite funny heading was 'housework, as foreplay' (in a book called *Men and Birth*).”

“I recently did an index of cultural references for Nick Grimshaw's autobiography. I kept the main headings straightforward, but I had a play around with some of the

subheadings, adding ones like: 'David Attenborough: safe to watch'; 'Glastonbury festival: more fragrant than school'; 'KitKats: deranged'; and 'toast: hands mistaken for'."

"I did enjoy creating one heading for a book on urban legends, one of the legends being about weather so hot that an egg could be fried on the bonnet of a car. My heading was 'eggs, fried, bogus'."

"As I usually index very strait-laced academic books, there has been little scope for whimsical entries. But at the moment, I am indexing my first fiction book, a satire. So now I can make entries like: 'guests, preventing them from eating'; 'old physician, insincere modesty of'; 'wine, expert pouring of'. I find it quite liberating."

"I've not had the opportunity to deliberately make a humorous index entry, but I have laughed out loud occasionally at some of the things I've worked on. One instance was finding an unintentional double-entendre in a book on US secondary education; modesty forbids me from repeating it."

"Yes, once, to match a very funny story in a book of anecdotes."

"Yes, but only once, and it was in response to a humorous aside by the author in an otherwise serious book."

"I do sometimes include things in an index just because the passage made me smile or because it reminds me of something else. I have not worded something in a way that would make someone else think it was funny and if I know the book's author well, I mention what I am doing – it often makes them laugh too."

Have you ever had an issue with ethics in your indexing work?

"Yes, a psychoanalytic biography (or psychobiography). I didn't know what to expect before I started, but I will keep clear of them for the rest of my career. In this specific psychoanalytic biography, the author dissected the life of the main character applying Freudian concepts. For instance, assuming the main character was abused by his father while still a boy, without any evidence to support this claim. It was merely based on the main character displaying a certain trait in manhood. I completed the index, but the author wasn't happy with my handling of certain things. In the end I withdrew my index, wasn't paid and the author had to find another indexer."

"I can be quite subversive and try to omit names of hate-mongering politicians, where possible."

"I have quite a low tolerance level for books that I don't like the look of for whatever reason, and I will just decline them. Very occasionally I have come across isolated passages in a book that I felt to be problematic in some way – normally a reference to a person in a pejorative sense that doesn't seem entirely justified by the facts. I have always flagged these issues to the author/publisher, whilst at the same time ensuring that the index doesn't repeat the wording in question."

"As a pacifist I turn down books on warfare."

"I was indexing a pseudo-scientific book full of outlandish claims about the health benefits of a particular food. I was content to overlook the dubious opinions as I

thought they were mostly harmless, but one paragraph stated (at the end of 2020, shortly before the first COVID vaccines were available) that vaccinations did more harm than good and should be refused. I will always regret not sending the book back without an index, but I was up against the deadline and didn't want to lose one of my best clients."

"There are definitely subjects that I would be uncomfortable dealing with and would refuse. My position is very fortunate as indexing is not a major part of my income, so I am free to decline anything."

"No. Until recently textbooks on health sciences have if anything expressed straightforward views on ethics. I think this is about to change, as health sciences have become politicised. I would prefer not to refuse a job, on the grounds of 'Know the enemy'. However, weeks of, as it were, living with a wrong-headed author could be more than I could take."

"I turn down books on Brexit because I know they will depress me."

"I was asked to index a biography of Joseph Goebbels. The person on the phone did not identify herself and at first seemed reluctant to tell me the name of the author, who turned out to be David Irving, the notorious Holocaust denier and anti-Semite. My response was along the lines of 'boy, have you got the wrong indexer!'"

"I don't believe in censorship so in general I think most books have an audience even if I don't agree with it. I often read books by authors I disagree with."

Which books in your indexing career stand out for you, and why?

"Biographies such as those of Gandhi (2 vols) and Margaret Thatcher (vols 2 and 3) – not that I'm a Thatcher fan, far from it, but these stories were fascinating."

"I have indexed a series of volumes about the Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588–1657) for the Royal Collections. Dal Pozzo was a member of the Accademia dei Lincei in Italy and he set out to record 'everything' in paper form so there were volumes on plants, fungi, rocks and fossils, birds, sculpture, the classical world, etc. Interesting to get a glimpse into the mind of a post-renaissance Italian aristocrat. It also inspired me to learn Italian – an ongoing task."

"Tony Benn's memoirs, being the only biography I have indexed."

"I thoroughly enjoyed working on the Society of Antiquaries report on the Staffordshire hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold. I think it was the careful analysis of all the pieces and the conclusions that could be drawn from them that I found most interesting."

"A history of medicine book because I submitted the index for the Institute of Certified Indexers' Purple Pen competition and won!"

"I indexed a beautiful two volume set on the mosaics in Westminster Abbey on the Abbey's 1000-year anniversary. The books were presented to the Queen in the Abbey. It was an honour to be asked to index this amazing work."

“I worked on *My Dearest Enemy; My Dangerous Friend* by Dorothy Rowe which merited a double page spread in *The Guardian* (though the index wasn’t mentioned in the review) – it was a long while ago though, I think my indexing has improved a lot since then.”

“*Get Started in Stand-up Comedy* by Logan Murray (who had previously taught the likes of Greg Davies, Rhod Gilbert, and Diane Morgan) inspired me to attend one of his stand-up comedy workshops.”

“*There is No Planet B* by Mike Berners-Lee – Mike made a point of telling me how much he liked the index.”

“The only one that comes to mind is Jonathan Dimbleby’s biography of the Prince of Wales, when I had to make the entries before the Prince had seen it, and then revise them to accommodate his extensive cuts.”

“A book on sex, for obvious reasons.”

“I find almost all books I index interesting. There’s not a single book that stands out. When working on a book I can get very enthusiastic about it, but then the next assignment comes along and my focus shifts. I usually forget the previous one very quickly. If a book stands out it is because of its huge volume, which means working on the same text for weeks on end.”

“I have indexed the last 4 volumes of the correspondence of Charles Darwin. The letters are fascinating, about all kinds of things not just science, and it’s like travelling back in time.”

“I like books which are surprising – two that fit that bill would be *Ending Campus Violence* which I assumed would be about security cameras, etc, but absolutely was not. It was all about relationships and watching out for people who were slipping into trouble. Another would be *Language Contact and Language Planning* by Einar Haugen which was the history of Norwegian and so well written it read like a novel.”

“Lots of the books I have indexed over the years, I have ended up using and recommending to researchers in the archive where I worked. It can be very strange revisiting an index decades later as a user.”

“*I Wish I’d Known* by Fiona Spargo-Mabbs was a heart-wrenching account of the death of the author’s teenage son to a drugs overdose. There were sections that I really struggled to get through, but it was a compelling and valuable book, which I would recommend to anyone with children and teenagers.”

“The first book I indexed (as a job) – it proved to me that I could do it. And the second (from the same publisher) proved that I did ok on the first.”

“My first one. And the most recent one!”

Have you ever indexed a book you found so boring, you vowed never to index a book on that subject again?

Encouragingly, most respondents have not yet found a book so offputtingly boring, but we have all had times when we are glad to come to the end of a particular project.

“Yes, on economic law. I do law, but mainly humanitarian and environmental law. The only two branches of law that I find really interesting. So, no more economic law for me, if I can avoid it.”

“A history of economics.”

“The only time I’ve ever done a book on Economics, I was less than a year into my indexing career and still taking anything that was offered to me. Not only was the subject intensely boring, but I was suffering from flu while trying to concentrate on a subject I had no hope of understanding.”

“I have had tedious books yes, but these have been more down to the author’s treatment rather than the subject matter itself. In fact, some of the most enjoyable work I have done to date has been on books with distinctly unpromising subject matters – purely because I have liked the style of the text, and the order and structure of it.”

“One of Claude Lévi-Strauss’s books on structuralism.”

“Not too keen on some of the very ‘waffly’ social science titles, a sweeping generalisation I’m sure but some I have indexed seem to just repeat the same idea over and over again, backed by vast numbers of citations – almost as though the author was trying to disguise the fact that they really didn’t seem to have anything profound to say (did I just write that?). These days I tend to avoid philosophy, social sciences, politics, and anything remotely historical.”

“A sociology book, and I was never very sure how I ended up doing it anyway.”

“Too many contenders: most books on sociology and anything with ‘global/ization’ in the title!”

“It depends on whether I’m at the beginning or the end of the indexing process. I find most topics interesting, to be honest, but I find obtuse writing styles a pain to deal with and the word ‘slippage’ drives me up the wall.”

“I would have to be absolutely desperate for work to take on a Philosophy book again, I find them interminably dull. I might be tempted by a popular easy-read Philosophy text because I actually quite like philosophical debate but academic – no way.”

“No, but I have said on a few occasions that the best bit of some books is that they end. Because I do a lot of academic work I figure sometimes the only people reading them will be their poor students—but they still need an index! Perhaps even more than usual!”

“A linguistics title in which the entire book was about the difference between the two Dutch words for ‘himself’.”

“I indexed a book on the philosophy of language which was indescribably boring. And then the index got rejected because the author decided he just wanted a list of words populated by locators. One of those words was ‘language’, and in the published version of the index, every single page of the book is listed, separately, under this heading.”

“The East Sussex Land Tax of 1785, with endless personal and place names, was pretty boring at the time – but I have since used the index for my own genealogical research, as it includes ancestors I didn’t then know I had.”

What is your pet peeve?

The most common complaint from indexers is having to repaginate or make other changes to the index because the pagination of the book was not finalised.

“On a recent book, I was working on the proofs, then a decision was made that each chapter should start on a right-hand page, changing the pagination throughout the book. That was not popular with me. . .”

“Repagination when the author has rewritten large chunks.”

“Repagination. I really hate it if weeks after I have delivered an index, I get it back with the request to do a repagination, because the author changed certain passages. I don't mind if it is a few pages, but sometimes you have to check the complete book. It is time consuming, boring and plays havoc with the planning of your current assignment.”

“[Clients who] add or revise sections of their text at a late stage, causing chaos and headaches over changed pagination.”

“Authors who send you the text with the assurance that the pagination won't change then tell you a week later that there have been some changes.”

“I loathe clients who come back post-submission with ‘We have moved all the page boundaries by changing font/removing images/whatever please adjust index by tomorrow morning’. I have said an outright ‘no’ to those requests on occasion but usually do it and never accept work from that client again.”

Several similar dislikes are also to do with clients' lack of understanding of the process of indexing, or unrealistic expectations.

“Lists of terms from authors that they insist should be included in the index.”

“Being given a list of keywords and told to ‘add the page numbers’ (I always turn down these jobs).”

“Authors who try to show that they know about indexing by suggesting ridiculous cross-references and subheadings. Luckily this doesn't happen very often, but I resent the time spent explaining this in an email reply.”

“Being asked to index a 300-page book in 4 days. It happens a lot.”

“Unprofessional clients. Many authors are lovely to work with as clients, but some are hopelessly vague about schedules and the difference between a manuscript and a final proof.”

“Authors who do not read my index properly before firing off comments, e.g. claiming headings are not in the index when if they had actually bothered to look they would find them.”

“Badly edited books which give rise to many queries. One was so bad that when I pointed out all the errors to the editor, he sent it back to the author for revision – I got it again for indexing about a year later.”

“Clients who think all you do is sit with fingers poised over a keyboard waiting for them to drop the next book onto your desk—although, I do like to give the

impression that I have nothing more to do than their book and they are my only and most valued client. . . sitting with my fingers poised. . .”

“Authors who cite lots of authors and then only by surname.”

“I’m not sure there is anything about this job that I hate, but lack of communication does frustrate me. If index proofs are going to be delayed, which does of course happen sometimes in publishing, it helps to know about it in advance.”

“Although I find psychology titles interesting, I have found books written by therapists from the Anna Freud Centre very hard and impenetrable to cope with and encountered highly critical authors from there more than once (whereas authors from other backgrounds usually love my indexes).”

Two people cited a dislike for multi-author texts,

“[. . .] each author having a go at explaining almost, but not quite, the same thing.”

while another two were irked by moral issues.

“Nameless wives.”

“Books on warfare.”

Only one complaint was about something that was not the fault of the client or the author:

“I work with Sky so my pet hate, which is irrational and unreasonable, and I know there are several workarounds I can use but still drives me potty, is names with a diacritic on the second letter which means the autocomplete doesn’t pick it up.”

Do you have any tips for good working practices?

Several people gave advice on pace of work, time management, and maintaining a work–life balance.

“Find out if you are the sort of person who works best in the mornings, afternoons, or evenings, and plan your working day accordingly.”

“I guess it’s about finding what works best for you personally. The beauty of being a self-employed freelancer is that you don’t have to conform to anyone else’s ideas of what makes for a good working day.”

“Take plenty of screen breaks. I often find if I am stuck on an indexing problem, the solution will pop into my head when I am doing something else.”

“Take a break – load the dishwasher, go and post a letter, even clean the bathroom. Or, if really desperate and running out of time, go and look for some chocolate.”

“Take frequent brief breaks from work during the day, to prevent brain fog.”

“There is a need to pace oneself in order to keep going.”

“I’ve learnt to slow down – read the chapter first, then go back and make the entries, rather than rushing ahead blindly.”

“Learn how to best manage your time effectively, and really take the time to plan your indexing schedule for each book, updating it every day depending on how the work is progressing. Every book is different and will bring its own challenges.”

“My only tip would be to find your own way but be flexible and go with what you feel like on any particular day.”

“At times I have found indexing a lonely profession so have always made time (mostly in the evenings) to do things where I get to interact with other people.”

Some advice was about client relations.

“Keep to deadlines so never over-promise.”

“Be meticulous about accuracy and meeting deadlines.”

“I try to build good relationships with my clients and always deliver on time or, very occasionally renegotiate a deadline but that’s not something I would ever do lightly. I think in 15 years I’ve only done it about twice and one of those was to ask for a 1-day extension so that I could go into school (as a governor) and support the teachers on that horrible last day before the Covid closure which my client was more than happy to allow.”

“Be polite but firm with desk editors and authors.”

“Answer emails promptly – I am constantly thanked for replying quickly to job offers.”

Others had suggestions about helpful approaches to tackling the index.

“When considering whether to take a new job, ask for the latest proofs (or the latest draft typescript) so you can assess the whole thing before agreeing to take it on. Having the full document gives the extra benefit of being able to do some initial work if the index proofs turn out to be delayed, or if you have spare time before the job is due to start. I have found this very useful on two or three occasions.”

“Find out how other people organise their indexing but don't think this is how you should work. I still print off proofs and use highlighter pens and I know many in my subject areas do the same. Others would regard this as old-fashioned, but it works for me, and I am not stuck in front of a screen all the time.”

“I tend to keep my index terms very fluid until the end these days, I find it quicker to review the exact terms I am going to use once I get to the end of the text. I find that this way, I can concentrate better on reading the text as I go through, without worrying too much about exact terminology, then stand back and construct an efficient index which links all the concepts in the book and uses the most appropriate terminology at the end.”

One piece of advice highlights the importance of record-keeping.

“To keep track of jobs booked in, invoices—who has paid and who hasn’t—quotes and basically everything, I bullet journal. It’s not fancy but everything is there at my fingertips. It has been a major revelation, and I have been doing it for years now.”

Finally, some advice about your working environment.

“A comfortable chair and a good light. An eye for detail and a good memory.”

“Invest in a good chair, and I like to use a computer with a wide screen so that documents are comfortable to read.”

“I have two screens, one vertically oriented for the index, and the other horizontal for the text I am indexing. I also have an adjustable desk so I can alternate between sitting and standing.”

What is most likely to distract you from your work, and do you have any tactics for ignoring distractions?

Distractions are a problem for almost everyone.

“My cat telling me it’s his lunchtime! I’m not good at avoiding distractions – I have to exercise as much self-control as I can.”

“Set targets/a timetable for yourself and build in some time for distractions. This doesn’t always work if you are working on a ‘rush job’.”

“The Society of Indexers’ forums are a real distraction, but I take the view that it’s work, and so justified. I always allow myself a few minutes of distraction every hour because it helps my brain to relax.”

“Wimbledon, Olympics, January 6 hearings just to start. Tactics for ignoring? I am able to tune stuff out most of the time. I like background noise when I’m working. If I find I am distracted I will turn it off. I promise! Then I might put in some earbuds and turn on some music.”

“I’m very focused and good at getting my head down and doing the amount of work I allocate for each day – the cat likes to interrupt me though!”

“Email. But I think it is just a question of postponing reading it until an opportune time.”

“I don’t usually get distracted from work.”

“Everything is a distraction and I struggle daily. My goal is to have four good hours of indexing work each working day and I use every means possible to achieve that goal – alarm clocks, count-down timers, different sitting positions, font sizes, wearing sunglasses, small rewards on the hour. . . whatever it takes.”

“I am not easily distracted but I find working in short spurts with breaks can help keep my concentration on tedious jobs.”

“I am dreadful with distractions. For me it works best just to stop the clock and give in to them, and then make up the time later.”

“My husband and I haven’t found a way around this. I sometimes put on headphones, but then he taps me on the shoulder and mimes if I want another cuppa.”

“Indexing is very absorbing; it’s a bit like a computer game where you’re thinking ‘just one more’, so I’m less distractible when working on an index. Working from home can be challenging when there are others around because of interruptions and noise, but then a very quiet house can be distracting too. I use headphones to cut out background noise (the ‘Public Museum’ soundscape on the Calm app).

Co-working spaces are great for keeping focused, whether you're paying for a desk for the day or using a library."

"Son, tennis on the TV, sunny weather."

"I'm easily distracted by emails or Twitter so if I want to work solidly, I need to turn them off. I'm used to working in small bursts because I work around my family life, but I know that if I need to get a lot of work done in a day making sure I have a long stretch of 4–5 hours to work is best. Within that I will still get up and do other stuff (put a wash on, start dinner etc, all the benefits of WFH). I aim to do the most cerebrally challenging parts of indexing while the house is quiet and the easier stuff and admin when the children are at home."

"I can find anything distracting, the best way of ignoring distractions is to get stuck in and fascinated by what you are doing – often easier said than done."

What do you look forward to most about finishing a long or difficult project? Do you treat yourself to anything?

Some people relish being able to relax and have a bit of time off.

"I love that feeling – I love getting up the next morning and realising I don't have to spend any time thinking about that project. As long as I don't have another project to get into straight away, I'll usually have a morning pottering around doing other stuff and admin, catching up on housework etc."

"Finishing an index is the hardest part for me and I'm usually very stressed the day I send an index. I treat myself to a day where I don't touch my computer or look at a screen."

"I try to take the rest of the day off or even one whole day off, but it isn't always possible. You do need to have things to look forward to when you are self-employed. A holiday you can work around, a lunch with friends, a local group meeting. You need to break and recharge. Always have something to look forward to if you can even if it is something small."

"Sending my invoice! Actually, just putting my feet up, reading for pleasure and watching my favourite tv programmes."

Some give themselves a more tangible reward.

"Cake and chocolate work for me."

"Wine."

"Glass of wine, or a day off if I'm lucky."

"I usually plan to dine out when finishing a long or difficult project."

"I think it is important to mark the end of a job in some way, even if just with a quick trip to the pub."

Others take the opportunity to get some fresh air and exercise.

"A walk."

“Going in the garden, reading for pleasure, going out for an e-bike ride.”

“A very long walk. I live in the country, and I walk or cycle every day, but after a taxing index I like to go on a hike.”

“I have been known to take a day off and go and see an exhibition or have a day out with a friend.”

“A short trip out, or a long walk.”

For the rest, the completion of a long project is a reward in itself.

“I think just finishing. I don't know that I would reward myself.”

“Pressing the send button when off it goes, I hope to never have to look at the index or the proofs again. No real treats just a break from work.”

“Just it being over!”

“Just finishing the job is treat enough! Though I usually vow never to repeat the experience.”

What advice could you give to newly qualified indexers?

Several indexers stressed the importance of networking.

“Join your local indexing group. It's good to meet other indexers, and they are always happy to help.”

“I'd say to get to know other indexers – through attending your local group, conferences, training courses/workshops, anything you can find. Indexers are, in my experience, some of the loveliest people you could ever meet and much more likely to share tips and even pass on work to you than fight you for jobs (which is the impression you get in some professions). As we work alone, there is a lot of value in getting together with other people doing the same job and realising that you all face the same issues – only with other indexers will you enjoy nerding out over alphabetical orders.”

“Get to know your indexing colleagues.”

“It's a good idea to take advantage of the networking opportunities and other support offered by the Society. Indexing can be a lonely pursuit, and it's good to feel part of a community of colleagues.”

“Go to conference! The Society is full of friendly, wise, helpful people who were all newly qualified at one time. There are always good sessions to help develop your practice, and it will refresh your enthusiasm.”

“If you aren't already involved in your local group or any local group—with Zoom it's possible—it is one of the best things you can do. This is your local support system. These are the people who might think of you when they can't take a job if you give them a chance to get to know you. Do not be shy. They were all beginners once and most are happy to 'be there' for you. Go to meetings or conferences. Get to know indexing colleagues. (I am still the Groups Coordinator, but I wouldn't do it if I didn't believe in it).”

“It pays to be actively involved in your society. It is a good practice to spend time on building and maintaining a network of colleagues. Colleagues can be a source of new assignments and a font of knowledge on indexing itself. Asking an established indexer to mentor a starting indexer is another option. A website and a presence on Twitter, LinkedIn or Facebook can be very beneficial as well. Don’t be afraid to ask for advice, the worldwide indexer-community is very friendly and supportive!”

Some had advice about building a client base in the early stages.

“Be patient in getting work as it takes time to build up a reputation. I still have quiet times during which I always wonder if I will ever get another job. Don't believe you will get always get SI recommended rates as this rarely happens in my subject areas, but you can make it work for you by calculating an hourly rate you are willing to accept. Your indexing speed will improve with time. Check everything before you send off the index. Take care taking on last-minute rushed jobs with new publishers or in unfamiliar subject areas as this can be very stressful.”

“Try to sound positive when an editor rings you up or emails you to offer work.”

“Be prepared to work very hard in the first year or so after qualifying. This is for two reasons: you won’t be indexing at full speed, and you may have to accept fees lower than the SI recommended rates until you get yourself established, and that means taking on more work to make ends meet. It means that self-care, like taking breaks and exercising, is particularly important. You are your own business asset. But the good news is that, in working so hard, your speed – and your indexing confidence – will increase.”

“Sound confident, and don't be afraid to ask questions.”

“Keep up the marketing. No matter the flow of work from particular clients you will be dropped at any moment and will need new clients.”

“Marketing is often a stumbling block for a beginning indexer, but work doesn’t miraculously come your way. Get out there, participate in all the discussion lists and be of help to others.”

“Keep at it at the beginning. Once the first commissions start to come in, things will escalate.”

“Don’t expect work to fall into your lap immediately. It can take time – months or even years – to build up a clientele that will keep you in work full-time.”

“It can be hard to get started as the index is so late in the publishing process and if time is short editors can be reluctant to try someone new, but do persevere. How else can you get paid good money to sit and read books all day?”

“Indexing can be an interesting and rewarding career but don’t expect to make a fortune.”

“I would recommend that a newly qualified indexer makes the effort to become proficient in embedded indexing. It’s a very good source of work, and mainly comes directly from the author, so you can negotiate your own fees.”

Finding the right type of work for you.

“I often describe indexing as ‘being paid to read books’. Once you've got over the hurdle of finding the first few jobs, try to find a particular niche in the market in an

area that really interests you, capitalizing on your subject knowledge and past experience.”

“Everyone works differently. Some people still print off proofs but I tend to work on an iPad to mark up. Sometimes I mark up and sometimes I don’t. Talk to as many people as you can to find out what they do. It’s fascinating and useful.”

“Treat your business seriously. Don’t forget that you are offering a valuable service; this costs money and takes time. Make sure that clients give you enough of both to do the job properly.”

“Really take the time to find out what works best for you and identify your weaknesses and strengths as an indexer and freelance worker. Be honest. Are you a perfectionist? That will be something to be managed, and it will be hard. Do you have trouble saying ‘no’ to nice editors when you really have no time left in your schedule that month? That could also be a problem. Whatever it is, try to deal with it early on and you’ll find your working life much healthier and happier.”

“Consider all your interests and experiences when looking for work, not just those you’ve acquired ‘professionally’. Your hobby or obsession could translate into expertise on a subject.”

“If you enjoy indexing keep at it.”

Some indexers had suggestions about how to approach the process of indexing when you receive your first commissions.

“If you are working on books that have conclusions or introductions read them first. You can often make more sense of what is going on. Not always, but a lot of the time.”

“‘Listen’ very carefully to the gist of the meaning, look for subtle themes which may be touched on (using different) terminology in earlier chapters and then get developed later on. Often the early stuff is well worth indexing as the author often draws on wider thinking at this point, and the use of different terms can be useful for xrefs (especially if it is by an overall volume editor rather than the author who is actually discussing this stuff in detail in a multi-author work.) These days, if there is a chapter-by-chapter discussion in the early/introductory material I actually enter ‘chapter1, chapter2’ etc in the index, then replace this by the ‘proper term’ I am using for the relevant chapter later on. This way, I don’t miss early introductions to core ideas (especially if it is by an overall volume editor who may have a slightly different perspective).”

“I often find that I reach a point where the index I am doing looks a mess and nothing seems to make sense. Experience has shown me that if I just keep going, it will come together.”

And last, but not least. . .

“Frequent cups of tea (or coffee) and the odd biscuit make everything better.”

Huge thanks to the indexers who very kindly gave their time to respond to this survey, which was expanded and updated in 2022: Helen Bilton, Hilary Bird, Pierke Bosschier, Christine Boylan, Emma Caddy, Non Lowri Evans, Rob Gibson, Gillian Lonergan, Ruth Martin, Judith Reading, Pam Scholefield, Christine Shuttleworth, Helen Taylor, and three anonymous participants. Four indexers also contributed to an earlier version of this document, and their responses have also been used here: Joan Dearnley, Auriol Griffith-Jones, Jill Halliday, and Ann Hudson.