

Guidance for students on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and indexing as a career

In response to students' concerns about the future of the indexing profession and whether GenAI tools will become the standard means of producing book indexes, the Training Course Committee has approved the following guidance for students and all those involved with delivery of the Training Course.

There are a number of factors affecting the viability of GenAI tools for indexing and their impact on an indexing career. As well as the general AI chatbots, there are now a small number of commercial GenAI tools offering book indexing services. Anecdotally, we know that publishers are probably already using GenAI tools to create indexes, but there is no clear evidence of a general downturn in demand for professional indexing services. Students may find it helpful to consider the following points when planning their indexing career:

1. *How well do GenAI tools perform at indexing?*
 - a. All tests to date of GenAI tools for indexing show that they do a poor quality job, in terms of accuracy, comprehensiveness and consistency.¹
 - b. We already know that some publishers are satisfied with poor quality indexes, because books are published with them, so it is possible that some publishers will choose to save money and use GenAI tools for indexing regardless of the quality implications.
 - c. However, there is no evidence that all publishers will choose this approach. Automated indexing software has existed for some time and is still not widely used because of its limitations.²
 - d. GenAI tools could, in theory, be better trained to produce better indexes. But there is no incentive for the people with indexing expertise (indexers) to help improve these tools, and the people producing specialist GenAI indexing tools do not have indexing expertise.
 - e. As yet, there are no GenAI tools for embedded indexing.
2. *What factors might encourage publishers to use GenAI tools for indexing?*
 - a. Cost savings and improved profitability.
 - b. Speed of production, allowing them to market books more quickly
 - c. Willingness to publish books with poor quality indexes.
3. *What factors might deter publishers from using GenAI tools for indexing?*
 - a. Security of intellectual property: publishers are keen to protect IP, and contracts with freelancers already prohibit the uploading of manuscripts/proofs to GenAI tools. It is very unclear (and variable between GenAI tools) what happens to any content uploaded and how secure this is.
 - b. Cost:
 - i. GenAI tools are becoming increasingly and significantly more expensive.³
 - ii. Since indexing is a relatively inexpensive part of book production budgets, turning to GenAI indexing may not reduce costs sufficiently to merit investment.

¹ See <https://www.indexers.org.uk/ai-and-indexing>, <https://asindexing.org/ai-and-indexing/>, Izzard, Tanya, 'Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Its Performance at Indexing Tasks', *The Indexer*, 42.4 (2024), pp. 383–400, <https://doi.org/10.3828/index.2024.24>

² See Duncan, Dennis, *Index, A History of The* (Allen Lane, 2021) for an example of these limitations.

³ See <https://thefinancialengineer.substack.com/p/the-april-every-ai-plan-broke> (accessed 09/05/2026)

- iii. Because GenAI outputs require considerable review to ensure accuracy and completeness, there may not be any cost or productivity savings from using them.
- c. Copyright in GenAI outputs: it is unclear who owns this. This probably varies between tools and will also depend on the location of the user and of the owner of the tool. This could mean that a publisher does not have the right to sell an AI-produced index in one of its books.
- d. Ethical and environmental impacts: for some publishers, these may be in conflict with their aims, values and policies.
- e. A preference for indexes produced by professional human indexers, whether driven by author and reader feedback or by the publisher's own professional standards.

SI will continue to promote the value of professional human indexing and indexing standards and quality. We will also review and report on the use of GenAI tools for indexing. We have a statement on the website discouraging publishers from using GenAI-produced indexes and will also regularly promote this via social media. The future of AI development and regulation is obviously outside our control, but we will push back against developments where appropriate.

This guidance note will be updated at six-monthly intervals.

Last updated June 2026 by Tanya Izzard