How to Get an Index for Your Book

A Step-By-Step Guide for Authors

JoAnne Burek

What authors need to know

"I understand that scholarly books often take many years of work. You deserve the best index possible to market your book and to help your readers."

Judy Dunlop, winner of the Ewart-Daveluy award for excellence in indexing

If you're writing a non-fiction book, you already know the value of a good index. In your own research, you may have experienced the tedium of searching cover to cover, possibly in vain, through a book without one.

Investing in an index makes your book not only more useful—it can also **boost sales**. If your book has no index, a librarian may decide not to place a multi-volume order.

You may be putting your book on Amazon, where prospective buyers can open the "Look Inside" feature and browse the index. Sometimes they're looking for a topic, and sometimes they want to get the gist of the book. If they like the gist, they'll buy it, even without reading customer reviews.

In most publishing situations, producing the index is the **author's responsibility**. Writing a quality index is harder than it seems, but commissioning an index is easy when you know how.

This guide will take you through the process from start to finish and show you how to make it stress free. Follow these steps and you'll get an index that meets the publishing deadlines and earns you the everlasting appreciation of your readers.

1 Find an indexer

Hands down, the fastest and most reliable way to get an index is to hire a trained and experienced indexer for the job.

Most indexers are freelancers, many of whom specialize by type of book and subject.

To find an indexer, you can start with the web pages of national indexing organizations. They have member databases that are searchable by specialty and subject area. North American organizations include:

❖ The Indexing Society of Canada / Société canadienne d'indexation (ISC/SCI) at http://indexers.ca

❖ Editors Canada at http://editors.ca

❖ American Society of Indexers (ASI) at http://asindexing.org

Many freelance indexers also have websites on which you can view their portfolio of work.

"Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information on it."

Dr. Samuel Johnson

Who are indexers?

Few people know any indexers personally, or know how they do their work.

Here are some facts:

- ❖ Most have taken formal training in indexing—or they have decades of experience.

- ❖ They really do read the whole book. Multiple times.

- ❖ They use specialized software to manipulate and sort the index entries.

- ❖ They tend to be well-educated—many have advanced degrees.

- ❖ They care about your book as much as you do.

Select one or more indexers who you think could be a fit for your book. Because they work from page proofs, the time to reach out is around **four to six weeks** before the proofs will be ready. They need enough notice to slot you into their schedule.

The bid

Send the prospective indexers an email asking whether they would be interested in your book, be available in the time frame, and what the cost would be.

Include in your email:

- ❖ The topic and description of your book

- ❖ Estimated number of pages (or words)

- ❖ Expected date the page proofs will be available

- ❖ Scheduled date the index is due to the press

- ❖ Sample chapter, if possible, and/or the intended audience

Choose an indexer and don't forget thank the runners-up for responding.

Keep your list of runners-up, in case your chosen indexer becomes unavailable.

2 Set the parameters

Indexing is solitary work, just like writing is.

So you would almost think you could throw your book over the wall and have the completed index thrown back over to you. It's *almost* true…except at the start.

Scope and style

Before work begins, your indexer will ask questions about the scope of the index. For example, will references to photographs and content in footnotes be included in the index?

Ask your publishing house if they have their own style guidelines for the index, and pass these on to the indexer. In the absence of guidelines, the indexer will use his or her best judgement for the type of book.

One of the indexer's greatest concerns is how much room has been reserved for the index. It determines whether the book will be indexed lightly or more in-depth. You might not have the answer until the page proofs have been created.

Sharing credit

If the editor agrees, ask the indexer if he or she would like to be credited on the copyright page.

3 **Send the proofs**

Once you receive the page proofs (with their final page numbers), send them immediately to the indexer so that indexing can begin.

In collaboration with the editor, set a due date that will allow for a few days of review before the index is due at the press.

When the schedule slips

If the delivery of the page proofs is going to be delayed, you should inform the indexer.

If it's a long delay, the indexer may run into a conflict with other projects. In that case, the indexer may offer to find another indexer for you, or give you a list of names so that you can make a selection yourself.

Indexers are a close-knit community, so it is unlikely you will be left in the lurch. And you can always fall back on your runners-up list, if you have one.

Keep in mind that if the page proofs are delayed, the due date of the index must be allowed to move also, unless the indexer can make some accommodation.

4 Review the index

While the indexing is in progress, you will not hear from the indexer **unless he or she has questions**. There is no review of drafts, nor any checkpoint meetings.

Before or on the due date, you'll get an email with the completed index. **If you don't get the index by the due date**, follow up immediately. Indexers are very conscientious about deadlines. There could have been a failure sending the email.

The index will be an electronic file, typically with the .docx extension (Microsoft Word) or the .rtf extension (Rich Text Format). RTF files can be read with any of the common word-processing programs.

Look the index over. Truly **read the entries**, don't just scan them. Look up entries that don't make sense. Can you suggest a better term? Your insights can improve the index. On the other hand, when it comes to questions about index structure, let the indexer explain why one technique was used and not another.

If it helps you with your review, you can ask the indexer to give you the list of terms in page number order.

"If you see a consistent practice you don't understand, ask me, rather than trying to 'fix' it. I usually have a good reason for what I do and I'm happy to explain it."

Kate Mertes, winner of two ASI awards for excellence in indexing

5 **Finalize the index**

Now we are close to the publishing date. Because all the little delays have accumulated, this is when the schedule often becomes tight.

Any changes, from cosmetic to the addition and removal of terms, should be made by the indexer, not yourself or the editor. The power of the indexer's software makes editing fast and smooth: a change to a term can affect other entries in ways you don't realize, but the software will handle it correctly.

When the index is satisfactory, send it to the editor or the press so that it can be put into page proofs.

When the index is too long

Occasionally, we find that the index page proofs exceed the number of allotted pages. If changing to a smaller font size is not an option, ask the indexer to shorten it.

The final proofread

Now the index page proofs must be proofread against the index that was submitted. Ideally you'll give it to the indexer. This hasn't been common practice in North America, but it is standard in other parts of the world. Most indexers would be grateful for the opportunity to make sure that the work they put so much care into will appear in the book without problems.

"When I wrote my first book, some seventeen years ago, I announced that I was going to interfere in every stage of the publication, right down to the typeface it was set in, and I have done so ever since. And surely, if a book includes an index, a self-respecting author should be as jealous of its quality as of his own."

Bernard Levin, in a letter to the editor of *The Indexer*, October 1987

6 Pay and comment

Shortly after, or with the delivery of the index, you'll get the indexer's invoice. Unless you've negotiated special payment terms, pay the invoice as soon as you can—certainly within 30 days.

Feedback is always welcome

Consider sending the indexer your comment on the experience, good or bad.

Indexers are freelancers—the only feedback they get comes from their clients.

And because they must market themselves to get more clients, they are always looking for testimonials to put on their websites.
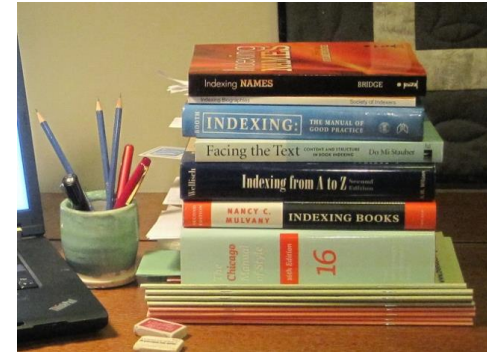
"Home, and to supper, and then saw the Catalogue of my books which my brother hath wrote out, now perfectly Alphabeticall."

Samuel Pepys, 8 January 1667

Concluding thoughts

"And in such indexes,
*   although small pricks.*
To their subsequent
*   volumes, there is seen*
The baby figure of the
*   giant mass*
Of things to come at
*   large."*

William Shakespeare, in
Trollius and Cressida

Getting an index written for your book might just be the easiest part of the book-publishing process. After all, a professional is doing the hard work—the work for which he or she is trained and temperamentally suited.

Make yourself available for the indexer's queries and do your tasks as laid out in these steps. You'll have an index that's a valuable asset to your book and to your readers.

If you would like to know more

Here are some resources about commissioning an index:

❖   http://asindexing.org/working-with-freelance-indexers/

❖   Mulvany, Nancy. "The author and the index." *Indexing Books*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005.

❖   Wellisch, Hans. "Author-Publisher-Indexer Relationships." *Indexing from A to Z*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1995.

About the Author

JoAnne Burek has been a professional indexer since 2014 after a long career in Information Technology. Her indexing specialties are history, biography, and business books.

In addition to indexing, she writes web pages and content for companies, and volunteers with the Indexing Society of Canada.

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