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Because everybody
needs an editor . . .

and a newsletter



Indexing

See also surprise, unexpected

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Haven't I done enough for you?

That would be the response from a nonfiction author who has clawed a path to a complete manuscript only to realize that more clawing is involved. All that research, writing, and refining isn't enough because readers need help finding their way. You must supply an index to guide them and to provide direction for

those who might want to cite or check your work.

Readers are so needy.

Big deal, you might think. Go through the pages, find people, places, and other stuff, put them in alphabetical order, and jot down the page numbers. There's your index. How hard could it be?

Ah, innocence. Maybe you plan to use Word's indexing function. It's right there under the References tab. You imagine it will sort out all that stuff, along with making cross-references and see alsos. I thought that myself as a nonfiction book I am writing began to take shape.

Except . . .

"Word's native indexing feature stinks," [Heather Pendley](#), a book editor and indexer, wrote in an email interview. Anyone who has tried to use it would agree.

"It is time-consuming," she said, "you can't see the index as it builds—you must 'generate' it every time you want to see your progress—and subheading levels are limited. InDesign is not much better."

Authors who have tried to pull it off themselves with Word can come away bloodied.

"I was disappointed, frustrated, and felt defeated," said Pat Gaffey. He is about to publish his authorized biography of longtime radio disc jockey, program manager, and station owner Bobby Rich, a name familiar to listeners in San Diego, Tucson, and about two dozen other stations across the country.

"I was disappointed in Microsoft for not figuring out how to make it more user-friendly after all the years they've had their program out."

Pat eventually prevailed upon his book's graphic designer to help with the index. His plan is to identify names, radio stations, and other elements that readers might want to find. The designer will connect those items with page numbers.

Still, going it alone is not impossible.

Jack Herrmann, a veterinarian, university professor, and public health expert, has never been one to shy from a challenge. We have been friends since we were thirteen, so I am qualified to make such a statement. He and colleague Yvette Johnson-Walker co-edited a science-based text, [Beyond One Health: From Recognition to Results](#), to help readers understand the One Health

concept (human, animal, and ecosystem health are inextricably related) and how it can inform public policy.

“Having never indexed a book before, my expectations were open and certainly naïve,” Jack wrote in an email. “Going into it, I didn’t really know what to expect. I knew it would take a lot of time, but I was surprised by how much. We did have a good copy editor, based in Scotland, who was pretty ‘hands off’ but helpful when called on for suggestions and about what is usual, customary, and reasonable in indexing. It was a lot of work but satisfying.”

He and his co-editor approached the work as you hope all index makers would.

“We tried to assume the role of readers and what we, as readers, would like to look up in an index,” Jack wrote. “One of the great frustrations, at least among my science/medicine/public health colleagues, is a good text with a bad index.”

The author who can index is rare, and, as Heather Pendley wrote, the book editor who can index is rare as well. The jobs require a different mindset and approach, she explained.

The trap for authors who do their own indexes may be the very thing that qualifies them as authors.

“While the author is the expert on their subject, they are often too close to it; professional indexers are objective, viewing the book through a reader’s eyes to anticipate and create logical entry points,” Heather wrote. “Authors lack familiarity with what makes a good index and the process in general.

“Without training, authors will take longer to write an index than a professional and the index will not be as useful. I’ve occasionally worked on some author-written indexes after the client realizes they’re in over their head; sometimes the index needs to be rewritten from scratch.”

Indexing apps exist, but they may not be the sort of thing that a first-time nonfiction author may want to buy or spend the time learning. They are a critical tool for pros.

“I wouldn’t want to create an index without my specialized software,” Heather wrote.

Even that software doesn’t automate the process. And it doesn’t mean you can ask an AI bot to make your index.

“AI indexes have problems,” Heather wrote. “Severe under-indexing, which

prevents readers from finding what they seek, misleads them into thinking the information isn't in the book at all. The 'structure' generated is insufficient or nonexistent, especially cross-references, and AI is still prone to hallucinate, including invented page references and even wholly nonexistent topics, which waste the reader's time and break their trust. Entries are autocompleted based on statistical likelihood; AI cannot understand context as the human brain does."

Typically, a book must have progressed to the typesetting/design phase before indexing can commence.

"A BOB (back-of-the-book) index is best created by referencing paginated proofs, most likely a pdf," Heather wrote. "Embedded (hyperlinked) indexes have a little more leeway because an entry is linked to a word or phrase in the text, similar to a functioning table of contents."

So the decision on whether to hire a professional indexer can be delayed until after you have either found a publisher or decided to produce your book yourself. And by the way, most publishers, traditional and otherwise, leave the indexing and its expense to the author. The cost to have an expert do it is usually about \$5 per indexable page, though it can vary by subject matter.

Pat Gaffey is a seasoned broadcast news pro and veteran of corporate communications, but he was not expecting that expense when he began writing the biography. His hard-won knowledge about indexing will guide him as he contemplates future books.

"I wouldn't necessarily pick fiction to get around having to do an index," he joked, "but I think in my next book, if it were nonfiction, even a memoir, I would probably keep a running tab of names, places, and people that I wanted to index, and I'd be looking to explore whatever apps are out there to assist me in that process."

Writers travel long on Revelation Road. Around certain turns, they might get a glimpse of something they never expected, such as the skill required to produce a reliable index and the beauty of the final result.

"It was one of those under-the-radar elements of writing a book that I only came to understand and appreciate once I was well into the writing," Pat said. "And that's part of learning as you go."

Kind regards

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