



Indexing—A (Very) Brief Introduction by John Maling

Indexing is both an art and a science. In theory, the best individual to Index a work would be the author, because of his or her total familiarity with the subject of the manuscript. The author has the best grasp of the work as a whole and the relationship of the various parts or subunit ideas to that whole. The hierarchy of importance of those parts, and terms illustrating those ideas used, dictates the priority of the terms and phrases to be included in the Index.

An Index is intended to serve the audience, and who better to determine that than the author? (With a modest assist from his or her editor, of course.)

Typically, the Index job is turned over to a specialist who reads the book, creates the finished product and hands it back to the publisher or author. I've found that the creation of an Index that truly fits the book is created when the Indexer takes the time to work closely with the author. Who best knows the book; unique words and phrases; or any nuances other than the author? The next best individual who could be anointed as "Indexer" would be the author's editor, if approved by the author as providing a satisfactory job. That also assumes no serious clashes of opinion occurred, and no one was fired during the process. The problem with author-as-Indexer would be *time*, followed by *patience*, followed by *lack of technique* in performing that exacting task. That goes also for the editor, although, at least attention to detail is a skill to be insisted upon there.

An Index can be created "by hand" in a straightforward way. Start reading the manuscript and develop a card Index of key words, phrases and ideas as you go along. If the manuscript is in one or another computer format, Word for example, use the powerful "Find" capability of that software program and step through the manuscript seeking the occurrence of the selected word or phrase, and noting the page for each occurrence.

The *art* here, however, lies in deciding the relative importance of the given word or term—what to include and what not to include. Once done with this tedious task, a list of terms and their occurrences is compiled. Voila—the Index.

An adequate software Indexing program turns this task from night into day. The author, having experience in indexing by hand in the past, is currently using a system by *Textract*, (version 9), by a Netherlands based company. Very simply described, the program accepts a PDF version of the manuscript and provides a selection of lists based on 10 levels of significance. The greater the level of significance, the greater number of “suggested” terms in the list, from a few dozen to thousands (depending, of course, on the size of the manuscript).

Art (and tedium) remain, however. Once a level of significance is chosen, each term in the list must be examined for appropriate inclusion in the Index, and possible cross-reference possibilities with other terms. This means examining the term in the text itself for its use in context, possibly in a number of places. Once judged “finished,” the program compiles the Index and it is produced as a document, which can be further edited, if and when refinement is necessary. Once that is done, then off to Layout ... having been reviewed and approved by the author, of course.

A final note: Working with the author during the creation of an Index gives the most satisfactory results, from both the Index-editor and the author points of view. Simply put, the author should be the final arbiter for the inclusion of a given term or phrase. The humble Indexer should remain truly humble in this respect.

*John Maling specializes in editing non-fiction books. Drawing on his educational and scientific background, John is skilled in editing a variety of genres as well as creating the Index when a book has completed layout. John's professional background includes teaching, research and publishing in physics and engineering. He is the author of *Have You Ever Held a Mountain?*, a photo-illustrated poetry gift book, in collaboration with Grant Collier, award-winning and published Colorado photographer.*