

# How do I index thee? Indexers count the ways

## Part I

By Kari Kells

**Y**ears ago, Pat Booth wrote a terrific article in The Indexer called "Six Ways We Work" (v.20 n.2). I found it extremely valuable when I was getting started and I still refer students to it. Booth's article is quite dated now – most contributors mention using 3x5 cards in boxes. In fall 2003, I posted a note to the IndexStudents discussion list asking indexers to describe their processes. I detailed my typical process and asked others to chime in. This article grew out of that brief discussion on-list, and several mini-discussions off-list.

Many experienced indexers feel their processes are either quite ordinary or quite unique and don't seem terribly convinced that others would find it useful to hear about their processes. People who teach indexing seem more attuned to the value of discussing various processes. Seeing variety in the processes of several indexers helps new indexers come to some important realizations: there isn't one right way to go about writing an index; most indexers alter their processes, not following one process for every index they write throughout their entire career; and if you find any aspect of indexing challenging, altering your process may reduce the impact of those challenges.

On a more selfish note, I wanted this article to be written (by whom, I didn't care so much) because I enjoy talking with other indexers about their processes. My own evolves mostly based on ideas I get when hearing other indexers discussing their own

processes.

One difficulty indexers encounter in describing our ideal processes to others is that our processes in ideal indexing situations evolve over time. (For example, the process I outline here is one that I've only been following for a couple of years.) Another major challenge is that there are many variables that seem to cause most indexers to alter their processes. For example:

- Is the index embedded? If so, will indexing happen after all writing and editing have been finished, or will it happen while other tasks are still being performed?
- Is the indexer getting the entire text in one bundle or in batches?
- How well-written is the text? If it's poorly written, and we get lost as we're reading it, we alter our process in ways that keep us actively engaged in the text.
- How well-organized is the text?

In this two-part article, I've collected processes outlined by several indexers who have interestingly different approaches. I'll get the ball rolling by giving you a snapshot of my own process as it is now:



### Kari Kells

*Kari Kells has been indexing since 1994. Although she likes to think of herself as a generalist, she tends to index a lot of software-related manuals.*

The steps below describe my ideal process for a typical, standalone (non-embedded), back-of-the-book index.

**First:** I browse through the text, reading the table of contents (TOC), chapter headings, sections within chapters, and looking at illustrations. This gives me a sense of where the author is going, what and how major themes are presented, and the preferred terminology.

**Second:** I index section headings (entering them into SKY Index™ Professional). This

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helps me become even more familiar with the conceptual layout of the text, and also provides a skeletal structure to the index based on the TOC. When chapter and section headings don't accurately reflect the content, but are instead merely fluff ("decorative," as Do Mi Stauber calls them), I skip this step.

**Third:** I read and markup the text, highlighting terms and making notes in the margins about possible sub-entries and cross-references. If necessary, I consult reference materials to inspire additional ideas for cross-references and to help clarify index structure. During this stage, I'm fleshing out the index structure.

**Fourth:** I input the highlighted terms and marginal scribbles into my indexing software. I tend to overindex at this stage. (Overindexers like to point out that most people find it much easier to whittle down a longish index than to inflate a shortish one.) I often make notations in my software about decisions I want to consider later. I rarely iron out difficult decisions about structure or terminology as I write. Instead, I save those issues for my editing stage (my fifth step). I've found that wrestling with difficult creative issues interrupts my flow, my groove. I strongly resisted this when I first started indexing, because I thought it was more efficient to make decisions and edit along the way. I've learned, though, that what's more efficient for someone else, isn't necessarily more efficient for me.

**Fifth:** After all the terms are in my soft-

## Key Words Indexes

**Vol. 1-7, Jan/ Feb 1994 –  
Nov/ Dec 1999, and  
Vol. 8-11, Jan/ Feb 2000 –  
Nov/ Dec 2003**

Indexes are now available from the ASI Web site, [www.asindexing.org](http://www.asindexing.org), and the ASI Administrative Office, [info@asindexing.org](mailto:info@asindexing.org).

ware, I edit the index (my favorite part). Editing consumes about 30-50% of my total indexing time. The more consistent and smooth the main text, the less editing time I need. When I edit, I print out the index, edit on paper, then make those changes in the index file. I repeat this until my due date arrives. I edit on paper mainly because I often make decisions in the A's and B's that I change my mind about once I get to the M's. If I were working in my SKY Index™ file, and I had deleted and edited entries early on but later changed my mind about how to treat that kind of entry, I'd have to go back and undelete and unedit entries I'd just changed. Because I don't trust that I'd remember every edit I'd made previously, editing on paper is more efficient for me.

**Sixth:** If I have time, I sort the index by page and go through the text page-by-page verifying that every index entry is on the page referenced and also that I'm not missing any concepts or terminology. Please note that I *rarely* have time for this step. It's a true luxury.

**Seventh:** I send the finished index to the client. Some editors send their editorial suggestions and questions back to me so that I can make corrections in my indexing software (that creates an **Eighth** step).

When I get pages in batches, my process is much the same as I've outlined above with the following alterations:

**First** and **Second:** I use a TOC instead of the actual pages to follow the same process.

**Third** and **Fourth:** I perform these same activities one chapter at a time, for whatever chapter is in front of me at the moment.

**Fifth:** I do the exact same things: after I've done data entry for the entire book, I begin to edit. Sometimes I do minor (very minor) editorial tasks before I have all the chapters.

**Sixth** and **Seventh** steps: identical to the above.

There are some other situations that cause me to vary my process:

- I skip step 2 for some texts. One client's texts in particular are extremely well-organized and well-written, and I've worked with them so many times that I know their style.
- There are times when I don't mark-up the pages (skipping step 3), as well.
- Often, I vary my tasks throughout the day. Sometimes when I'm restless, I work on

steps 3 and 4 for one chapter at a time.

- My process differs for different disciplines and subject matter. What actually prompted me to make the most recent major alteration in my process (adding what's now my step 2) was that I was working on a book that I was having trouble following. The author's use of language was way over-the-top: he was definitely orchidaceous. I kept getting lost in his language and his digressions, and I needed to find a way to ground myself. It was like trying to hold down a hot air balloon with just two fingers: I needed a much better anchor. Adding that second step (activities I'd heard others mention at meetings) made writing that index *so much* easier that I tried it with other texts and ended up feeling really comfortable with it. So it stuck.

You can see that my process is fluid and has evolved over time. This current process has stuck for a couple of years now. I suspect after looking over other peoples' processes as I write this article that I might get ideas for altering it once again.



### Janet Perlman

*Janet Perlman has been indexing since pre-computer days, full-time solo for the past 10 years. She indexes in both English and Spanish: encyclopedias, trade books, textbooks, and journals, and specializes in science, medicine, and engineering.*

I don't read the book first. At the outset, I scan the introduction and TOC. If I don't have a TOC, I create one. I need to have a sense of where the book is going and what it includes.

After scanning the TOC, I begin marking proof with a red ballpoint pen. I mark proof extensively, and do most of my thinking and actual "indexing" while marking. I mark headings, subheadings, and page ranges. I underline the main entry and circle the sub-heading. I indicate with a notation whether I want to flip the entry or pull the subentry out as a main entry also. (My typical notations are the function keys I'll use in MACREX™ to perform the desired operation: i.e. F3 circled after the entry means I'll flip an entry.)

While marking, if the wording of a subentry

is tricky or will take extra thought, I think about it right then, and write it down. I also write down the cross-references I wish to see, so that when I do data entry, they are there for me to read off and "type." When I mark text, I do much more than highlight terms or indicate page ranges. This is the meat of my indexing work.

I can only hold so much in my head, and then I have to actually see the index forming onscreen. So, I mark proof for a few hours, and then I enter topics into MACREX™ so that I can see the index coming together. I usually do a quick read onscreen before going back to marking.

I go through the whole book this way: alternating marking, entering, and editing.

Entering the index in MACREX™ is a simple and fairly fast affair, since most of my thinking has already taken place. For me, that is true "data entry," and is much less thought-intensive than marking proof. Marking proof, for me, has to be done when I can bring a fresh and attentive mind to the process. I save data entry for when I'm tired.

I always do a few final edits onscreen after the index is finished. I go through the index one last time with fresh eyes before submitting it.



### Cathy Martz

*Cathy Martz has been indexing since 2001. She specializes in investments, as well as general business and economics.*

When I get the text, I start reading. Not skimming, but reading thoroughly. While I'm reading, I'm marking terms in the text, making notes to myself, and writing page ranges next to the headings in the text. When I'm done, the index is sort of floating around in my head and I have a good idea of the main entries I want.

Next I start putting the entries into Cindex™. As I'm working through the text, I'm also skimming it for anything I might not have marked the first time through.

I work one chapter at a time, making entries for one chapter, then stopping. I use the FIND feature to gather entries for the chapter I'm working on. I edit the little chap-

ter index as I read the text for the third time. I work like this, chapter by chapter, all the way through the book.

After I've gotten through the entire text, I start the final edit, which usually takes about 30% of my time. I work on-screen first, checking for entries that need fixing, like duplicates, too many locators, not enough locators for subs, the obvious stuff. When I think it's getting closer to looking done, I start printing drafts. It takes about two or three drafts until I've got it the way I want it.

I vary my process when clients send chapters in batches. I just read what they send me and start making entries. It doesn't really bother me too much, maybe because they are business textbooks and are organized in an outline-style form. If these were philosophy or religion books, I'd be up a creek!

I am a fan of PDF files. I just finished indexing a book that came in Xerox copies to my front door, and at the end I wanted to go back and check for a topic, but I didn't have time to read it all again. I will ask for PDFs on every project now. I don't charge clients for printing; the convenience of the search function makes it worth it to me. Paper and printer cartridges are tax-deductible business expenses, anyway.

Some other important notes about my process:

- My work hours are usually 9 to 4 (or whenever my son needs to be picked up at school), take a break for dinner with the family, and if I feel like I need to, I also work from 7 to 11.
- I must have *coffee*. I must have soft

music, mostly new age and a few favorite classical pieces, the kind you can listen to over and over. If I feel like I've got to work fast, the *Riverdance* soundtrack works wonders. Or maybe it's the coffee.

- We have a black lab puppy who reminds me now and then to take a break and throw a tennis ball for him. Otherwise it's easy for me to sit at the computer for way too long, and then it's hard to get up! I like to do the chapter edits standing up at the breakfast bar. The more I change positions, the better.
- At the end of each session at the computer, I save my work to a disk.



### Sherry Smith

*Sherry Smith has been indexing in the scholarly field since 1997. Her subject areas include economics, environmental studies, natural history, agriculture, aviation, history, and public policy. She also teaches advanced and basic indexing.*

Scholarly materials comprise the majority of my indexing projects. These materials are conceptually dense with no visible structure to duplicate in the index. Space is seldom limited and usually there is adequate time to write the index. These factors have influenced the strategies and procedures that I have developed for each stage of my work process.

During each of these stages, all of my strategies and procedures have two purposes

– to keep the index structure visible and to maintain mindfulness. As I watch the structure develop, I am also creating a mental image of the index. This image allows me to continuously monitor my work for consistency and coherency. Continuous monitoring creates mindfulness. When I maintain this mindfulness, I always know if an entry supports the index structure or if it detracts from that structure.

**Stage 1** organizes the materials for best visibility. First, I eliminate front and back matter that is not needed for indexing. Then I create a worksheet packet that includes the title page, table of contents, and any publisher letter. These pages are placed between two sheets of blue paper. The blue cover sheet includes a checklist and space to make notes about problems that develop. I write the publisher name, book subject, and date in the upper right hand corner. The back cover sheet is a grid of page numbers so I can track the length of the book and record blank pages. The packet helps me stay organized mentally and physically. Since it is blue, I don't lose it on my desk. Placing the checklist and the "thinking-out-loud" space on the cover sheet keeps these parts of the process at the front of my brain.

**Stage 2** is a quick glance at the table of contents to briefly familiarize myself with the subject of the book. After completing these first two stages, I have an impression of the length and scope of the book and how these factors might influence the structure of the index. I do not look at the rest of the book at this stage.

**Stage 3** is a first pass through the page proofs. The work is done at the computer without marking the pages. During this pass, I read quickly and create most of my entries. This stage seems equivalent to the browse/skim stage that other indexers describe. I need the physical activity of making entries in order to mindfully build the structure of the index.

During this stage, I do not stop to solve problems. Nor do I stop to improve phrasing. My goal is spread the pieces of the index across the paper so that I have a preliminary picture of the structure. If I stop to solve problems or improve phrasing, gaps develop in my mental image of the index. I also lose my momentum which translates into lower productivity.

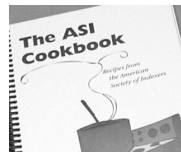
## ASI MARKETPLACE

The Chicago/Great Lakes Chapter is selling T-shirts, polo shirts, sweatshirts, and baseball caps embroidered with the ASI logo and the phrase "The Index is the Key." Colors available are: wheat, forest green, turquoise, or burgundy, and sizes range child size small to adult XXXL.

Complete information and order forms are available from Chicago/Great Lakes Chapter

Treasurer Martha Malnor at 630-834-3545 or [mamalnor@aol.com](mailto:mamalnor@aol.com).

ASI is also selling binders, mugs, bags, and cookbooks. For more information and order forms, [info@asindexing.org](mailto:info@asindexing.org).



Three questions guide my first pass: “What is this about?”, “What else is this about?” and “What else in the index is related to this discussion?” In other words, I assume that there is more than one aboutness in all parts of the author’s discussions. Asking these questions regularly helps me create entries that are framed by an understanding of the big picture. Using these questions also allows me to create most of my cross reference structure early in the work process.

I do not create subentries for my main headings until there are at least four locators. This strategy saves me time in the long run. Since I will be doing another pass, I can easily create subentries for the early undifferentiated locators during that stage. If no subentries are needed, I will not have to spend time deleting the unneeded ones. This practice also helps me refrain from adding unnecessary detail to the index.

When the first pass is completed, I have a rough draft of the index that has insufficient coverage and is full of flagged entries and question marks. In other words, I have an index that is full of deferred decisions. Some of the more difficult decisions and problems have been written out in detail on my blue cover sheet. The physical act of writing may help solve a problem. If not, at least it clarifies my confusion. Since these decisions are easier to make after becoming more familiar with the book, my strategy could be called enlightened procrastination.

At this point, I print out the index and read it line by line. With each entry, I ask myself... does this make sense so far? If it does, I know that I am on track and on schedule. If not, I know that I have not understood the text well enough or that the potential structure still eludes me. Another reason that I read the entire index at this point is so that I have the complete index in my head. If I don’t read it, the index is “out-of-sight/out-of-mind.”

At the end of this stage, one-third to one-half of my work time has been used up.

**Stage 4** is a second pass through the pages. This pass is a slower and more detailed reading of the text. During this stage, I will confirm locator accuracy, add more entries, and do some light editing. This entire pass is completed by reading and by using the “Find All” command in Cindex™. First, I start at the beginning of the book and use

“Find All” for a particular set of pages. If the book is dense, I may only pull up one or two pages, if it is less dense, I will pull up more. I read the entries that were created during my first pass for those pages. I then read the text on those pages. I confirm that locators are accurate and that all necessary entries have been made. During this process, I will often create broader terms and gather discussions into larger chunks. Problems and challenges with conceptual relationships are solved. Cross references are finalized. Phrases are polished.

At the end of this stage, there are usually 1-3 days left before the index is due.

**Stage 5** is final editing. I do this by starting with the shortest alpha group. Starting with simpler and easier helps me be productive. Again, I don’t get bogged down in the details because I have some momentum and immediate success. As I work my way through the alpha groups, I also find that solutions have appeared for those remaining structural problems. When I complete this editing pass, I print out the index. I leave it alone for one day.

**Stage 6** is when I read the index again to catch any typos and odd things that don’t make sense in the light of a new day. This reading is done away from the computer. I then go back to the computer and finish the edits. The final formatting is completed and the index is printed out on blue paper.

**Stage 7** happens the next morning: I do one more read and then send the document to the publisher.

My work process sounds inefficient. After all, isn’t the goal to complete the index with one pass? Maybe for some materials and for some indexers, but for me, productivity increases when I do two passes. Using the strategies described above, I am able to index 150-200 pages per week.

Completing two passes allows me to focus on different aspects of the work process. The first pass quickly builds the index structure and identifies the problems that will develop. The second pass ensures that I have completely covered the material and identified all the conceptual relationships. The two passes also result in an index that needs a minor amount of editing. The last stage is not a frantic assembly of the bits and pieces of an index. Instead, it is an opportunity to polish the index and produce elegance.

## Conclusion

The details described by these indexers reveal much more variety than typical process-oriented discussions reveal: these processes go well beyond marking text vs. not marking text, using hardcopy vs. using electronic copy, skimming first vs. diving right into thorough readings of texts, and what tricks in which software packages one uses.

Even indexers who, at first glance, appear to have similar processes, have interesting differences when you scratch the surface. Hearing or reading summaries of the main steps involved in someone’s process isn’t nearly as revealing as seeing microscopic details within the layers of each step.

For example, compare my process to Sherry Smith’s. If we described our processes in 100 words or less, they’d look quite similar. However, in looking at the detailed descriptions, you can see that we have some interesting differences: Sherry’s Stage 3 is a combination of my First and Second steps; her Stage 4 is similar to what I work on during my Third and Fourth steps; her Stages 5, 6, and 7 accomplish the same tasks I work on in my Fifth step. If we both got to our fourth tasks and then said, “I then edit my index,” you’d have no idea how differently we approach our editing.

In the second part of this article (which will appear in the October-December 2004 issue of this bulletin), *Cheryl Landes*, *Kathy Sychra*, *Seth Maislin*, and *Cher Paul* will share their processes. ☞

### Indexing Bumper Stickers

The Washington, DC Chapter has produced some fantastic bumper stickers for indexers. Bumper stickers may be ordered from Maria Coughlin, [mariac@indexing.com](mailto:mariac@indexing.com) or (410) 269-0978. Stickers cost \$4.

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kids about indexing,  
who will?