

Lick the Needle, Not the Thread: A How-to Guide for How-to Books

by Nan Badgett

I'm a junkie, a how-to junkie. That's right. Whenever I want to do anything or go anywhere, I get a stack of books from the library to tell me the best way to get there or how to do it. Of course online research is useful and often more up-to-date, but I still like to sit down in my recliner or on the porch swing or in the bathtub and read a book. That's really no surprise. After all, I produce indexes for printed books: how-to books.

Producing indexes for how-tos may not be as noble as struggling through a scholarly tome, but I can argue that it is more pragmatic. I can work faster on how-tos than on scholarly books, so I can make more money per hour. No author index required! And since how-tos no doubt have larger readership than specialized scholarly books, trade publishers often can pay more.

I index a few scholarly books every year and always find them interesting and challenging. But useful to me, personally? I once indexed a book on theories of teaching mathematics. Fascinating, yes, but I'm not a teacher and I never liked math. On the other hand, I've had many occasions to fix a toilet or unclog a drain, remove a stain or unclutter my desk. My how-to indexing career has provided an incredible wealth of information I can use every day.

For example, my sister the quilter sat struggling to thread a needle. "Lick the needle, not the thread," I suggested. It worked! I hadn't even realized I knew that.

My mother's caregivers thought I was a genius when I removed a broken light bulb from a socket using a potato.

Got candle wax on your tablecloth? I know all the tricks for removing it.

Does your eraser smudge? File it with an emery board.

If you're painting the stairs, paint every other one so you're not stuck at the top or the bottom.

Although my brain is full of how-to tips, I don't choose to use them all. I don't wash my husband's baseball caps in the dishwasher,

nor have I wired a house during construction, although I've read many, many times how to do so.

Nonetheless, I live the books I index. While indexing a book on running, I enjoyed a short stint as a trail runner. Since completing a book on birdfeeding, my yard is becoming a bird sanctuary.

Even so, I don't remember *everything* I read. When I need information on how to cook a trout or clean an heirloom quilt, I hope there's a well-indexed how-to that can provide it. Like all how-to readers, I want specific information and I want to find it fast.

Beginning indexers may think how-tos will be great entry-level work. Perhaps, but don't be deluded. I started indexing how-tos because they were the kind of books I knew and loved, and I thought sitting around reading cookbooks and craft books would be fun. It is! But I quickly learned that indexing them can be more challenging than expected, and these challenges can affect index quality.

Nan Badgett, dba Word-a-bil-i-ty, has been indexing how-tos since 1991 after she discovered the indexing profession while researching careers in publishing. She is a past president and secretary of ASI's Arizona Chapter. Her Tucson home is a continual home-improvement project. Floors are next!

hit the highlights. If I have 5 index entries per page of text allowed, I may have to dig to find enough entries. No, this isn't always indexing at its best.

Writing indexes for length sometimes forces compromise. I once submitted an index to an established client and was asked to add about 100 lines. My index was fine, but the book designer had made a mistake and we had to fill another page. The editor and I decided on additional terms for the index, although I admit some of them were fluff.

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One of the issues I've struggled with throughout my indexing career, one over which I have little control, is *index length*. Not all publishers or designers do a good job of figuring index length. I've worked on books with far too little space allowed, as well as a couple with too many lines needed. To create an index within the range of lines requested requires a little planning.

I always ask the publisher for the number of lines allowed for the index. Then I translate that figure into number of entries per page of text. That gives me a good gauge for the depth of indexing. If the publisher has allowed a 3-page index for 300 pages of text, I can only

Even though length restrictions can pose real problems, that's not an excuse for an index with too many *unanalyzed page references*, which I often see in trade indexes. I believe the indexer must address this problem with careful analysis and creativity.

For example, I own a 350-page consumer medical book with a 3-page index. Maybe not enough room for a quality index, but with careful analysis, it could be greatly improved. When I analyzed the entry below, I found that many of the page references did not provide substantive information and therefore should not have appeared in the index. Differentiat-



The author takes a break from indexing how-to books and practices with the tile saw for her next big project: Floors! (photo by Jerald Harmon)

ing substantive references from passing ones is an integral aspect of good indexing—and the challenge that assures computers won't replace us.

Original entry:

Carbohydrates, 4, 134, 136, 139, 140, 141, 143, 154, 157, 223, 234, 261, 276, 290–291, 348, 351, 356

Revised entry:

Carbohydrates
 cravings for, 156–157, 234
 defined, 351, 356
 types of, 140–142
 dietary intake of, 154–155

In the original index, the carbohydrate entry took four lines, while my revised version takes five. Not to worry. Since the original index is more of a concordance than a true index, I think careful analysis would actually provide more available lines. After all, “cortisol” had thirty-six unanalyzed references! Perhaps editing this entry would have allowed room for “caffeine” or “coffee.” Neither appeared in the index, but both were prominent subjects in the text.

Another issue that I believe affects index quality in how-tos is *sub-*

ject-matter expertise. Many trade books don't require experts as indexers, but a lack of subject familiarity may be evident in the index, especially in cross-referencing.

Few might think of sewing as a technical subject, but it is a subject with its own specialized vocabulary. I once saw a sewing index in which the terms “facing” and “interfacing” were confused. It was evident that the indexer wasn't a seamstress.

Especially in a poorly written book, such distinctions may be difficult to make if the indexer doesn't know the subject. The solution? Acknowledge your skills and find your niche. I grew up sewing at my mother's knee, and I've indexed dozens of sewing and quilting books. Construction and home improvement? I'm not an expert, but I've assisted my do-it-yourself husband with laying brick, setting roof trusses, and pouring concrete. I watched as he remodeled our kitchen with granite countertops and a tile backsplash. Last month alone, we replaced a water heater and repaired the underbelly of a mobile home. So I have a clue about several subjects, and I know the terminology. I even enjoy shopping at Home Depot.

Balancing home improvement projects with indexing sometimes compounds the *deadline pressure*, another factor that can affect index quality. Publishing seems to be moving faster all the time. I think most indexers have made mistakes or missed making corrections simply due to the speed at which we must work. But there are a few things an indexer can do to help ease the pressure and assure that enough time is allowed to do a good job.

Although I was reluctant to negotiate deadlines earlier in my career, I've since learned that deadlines are sometimes more flexible than an editor would have you believe. I now have no problem asking for an extra day or two when negotiating a project if I think I'll need it – especially if those extra days fall on a weekend. I would always rather build a cushion into the project and submit it early than to be late. In fact, meeting deadlines has been one of the hallmarks of my success.

Once I receive a project, I set up a work schedule and try to stick to it. I decide how many actual days I will work on the project, considering other work in progress or other life events, then determine how many pages a day I need to index, allowing a reasonable amount of time at the end of the project for editing.

With experience, I've learned that these simple how-to books are sometimes not so simple to index and may require more time than anticipated.

For example, coffee-table books may seem straightforward, but such books sometimes contain volumes of information requiring careful analysis and very subjective decisions. An easy-to-read book on home remedies might require many entries per page, increasing keyboard strokes as well as careful editing to make sure all terms are posted or double-posted as needed. A discussion of RICE treatment for wrist sprain might require the following entries:

Cold compresses
 Compression
 Elevation
 Ice. *See* Cold compresses
 Rest
 RICE
 Sprains and strains
 Wrist injuries

And that may only cover one paragraph! A book on herbal remedies may require entries for common and scientific names, as well as ailments and symptoms treated. That could add up to five or ten entries for each herb.

Last but not least, publishers sometimes impose style requirements or *specific requests* that don't make for great indexes. Although I may suggest alternatives, I'll please the client in the end if they insist.

I once indexed a zany book on growing tomatoes. The author wanted the entire index to be listed under "tomatoes," an idea that fit the tone of the book. I agreed to do so, but only if we could add a head note: "Of course everything is indexed under Tomatoes. Where else would you expect to find information in a book about tomatoes?"

The editor of another book wanted an entry for "zucchini" in a book about zucchini, with recipes included as subentries. This meant

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that almost every recipe in the book would fall under "zucchini." I tried to negotiate the point, but in the end couldn't convince the editor.

Issues of index quality really are much the same regardless of book genre. The point to remember is that easy-to-read does not necessarily mean easy-to-index.

But don't be discouraged; the challenge is worth it. Indexing how-tos can enrich your life with things you never knew you needed to know.

Yes, I painted my office green after indexing a book on feng shui, and I've made soap in the microwave.

Perhaps my indexes will help others find the information they need to try a new hobby or pursue their bliss. We never know how far-reaching our work can be. I talked to a friend just this morning who told me, "I thought of you today, as I filed my eraser." ☞

Indexing or Perish (continued from page 123)

lion to handle their data entry, billing, customer service, payrolls, insurance claims, taxes, accounts receivable, and even routine software development and computer coding. India already has over a half million workers.¹

Sobering news, indeed. According to Gartner Research, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) revenue has been increasing eleven million dollars every year.² Offshore IT Outsourcing states that India is "in a perfect position to enable 24-hour, around-the-clock development."³ Forrester Research estimates that about 500,000+ jobs are now outsourced and by 2015, about 3.5 million more American white-collar jobs will move from the United States.⁴ To low-cost countries, mostly to India, concurs Robert Reich.⁵

One man I corresponded with at Suntec (in India) said he and his associates charge \$1 per page proof page for indexing. I cannot compete with that. Now, before you get your software in a twist, realize something important: He, and others like him, has to earn a living, too. He has to feed his family. Life is cheaper there, so the cost of living is less. You cannot blame him or be angry with him. If I were in his shoes, I would do the same. In fact, I wished him well.

E-Business Strategies states,

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce, the value of U.S. exports of legal work, computer programming, telecommunications, banking, engineering, management consulting, and other private services jumped to \$131.01 billion in 2003, up \$8.42 billion in 2002....

Meta Group predicts that offshore outsourcing will grow by more than 20% annually....⁶

The list continues. What should we indexers do? Rail against the large publishers, which are doing things they have been told to do (cut costs)? Shame them into using US instead of THEM? Form a union even though union membership and clout has been decreasing yearly to its current anemic levels? Move to India? I do not have answers to those questions. I only know I may not be able to keep my day job.

Footnotes:

1. Reich, Robert B. *Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), p. 126.
2. See www.dataquest.com/press_gartner/quickstats/outsourcing.html.
3. See http://offshoreitoutsourcing.com/Pages/outsourcing_statistics.asp.s.
4. See www.forrester.com/my/1,,1-0,FF.html.
5. Reich, p. 126.
6. www.ebstrategy.com/Outsourcing/trends/statistics.htm. ☞

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