Chapter News

By Sue Klefstad
Fall 2014

In lieu of our Indiana meeting, this fall’s business meeting happened via Skype. If you missed it, two important topics were discussed.

Electronic recordkeeping

Throughout its lifetime, Heartland chapter has been passing paper records from officer to officer, generally by handing off a box or a bag. Unfortunately, paper is easily water damaged, as happened to our box of secretary records. Marilyn Augst and Kay Reglein have been going through the papers and putting them into a plastic box. Thank you both!

When I asked ASI about recordkeeping, they suggested storing records electronically. Since we have no central office, it seems as though The Cloud is our current best answer to centralized storage.

At this point I’m thinking that we’d put PDFs of the documents into a free Dropbox account. Give a shout out on the Heartland email list if you have other thoughts about electronic recordkeeping.

What is the future of ASI chapters?

Heartland chapter canceled our fall workshop due to lack of participants. The Mid-South Atlantic and Golden Gate chapters also canceled their fall workshops for lack of participants. The Chicago/Great Lakes chapter held their fall workshop, but to a smaller turnout than in recent years. The Southeast chapter had to cancel their latest workshop, about a year ago. The Southern California chapter is just hanging on; the New York City chapter is inactive.

What did you think of the recent Chapter Issues discussion on the ASI-L email list? Should the national meeting be held every other year, with “regional” meetings in the off years?

What is the future of ASI chapters? The answer is up to the members. What are you seeking from the Heartland chapter? Or from ASI?

The ASI-L discussion was divided among proponents of literal face-to-face meetings and virtual face-to-face meetings (physical gatherings to discuss virtual presentations), with a few advocating an entirely virtual approach. But chapter members are voting with their feet and a large number are saying that literal face-to-face is not worth the hassle required to achieve it.

Can we make both sides happy with a hybrid approach? One idea presented at the latest Heartland business meeting (which was held over Skype) was that Heartland could cooperate with another chapter to present a program. One of the chapters would have the program live at their site, and the other chapter would be gathered at their site to join the program virtually. This would let people sit next to other real people while participating in a program neither chapter could present alone. Extending this idea, the program could be recorded and available for later viewing online. Or perhaps virtual participants could watch the program as it happens.

The cost for participating in the workshop would be the same, whether joining on site or virtually. The on-site people would have the bonus of the networking face time, which is so valuable. The virtual participants
would be able to take part even though unable to join in person.

I believe that we will increase our chapter member involvement when we’re able to offer virtual participation.

It’s been suggested that chapters change from having two meetings a year to having only one. The Pacific Northwest chapter made this change a couple years ago and it has worked well for them. Should Heartland have only one meeting a year? When?

It seems as though we’re at a crossroads, both as a chapter and as a society: Literal face-to-face interactions are waning, while virtual interactions are increasing. However, everything old is new again: I worked with the Illinois Cooperative Extension Service (now just Extension) back before the Internet existed. They’re a poor-as-a-church-mouse organization that excels in “virtual” group meetings for education and basic networking. Their connections have been virtual for decades because it is efficient. But they always come together for their annual meeting, in person. Almost everyone participates in the annual meetings because that is the expectation of their organization; the time is allocated and the expense is budgeted. We can have it both ways.

We have a lot to learn and we will need to help each other work through the technical hurdles. Plus technology has to catch up with our needs. Streaming a session live or even recording it for later viewing is beyond us at this point and incorporating virtual participants into discussions is clumsy at best. I’m probably not the only one with home Internet issues. Technical hurdles come in all flavors, but time will take care of many of our hurdles.

So what are you seeking from the Heartland chapter and from ASI? What can we do for our members? And what can you do to help us get there?

Heartland Chapter Indexer Survey
Fall 2014
By Shelley Quattrocchi

The Fall 2014 Indexer Survey revealed the following characteristics of Heartland Indexers’ business practices. Percentages were rounded up or down to the nearest whole number in most cases.

Are you a full time indexer (30 hours or more per week)?

More than half of the survey respondents (56%) indicated that they are full-time, (or would be if they had the work) independent contractors. Less than half (44%) are part time by choice. We did not have any respondents indicate that they are full-time employees or part-time moonlighting while working another job.

Do you generally have a contract with a client?

The choices for this response were Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Usually, and Always. Regarding usual practices, six respondents said that no contract is involved. One respondent said that he/she usually provides the contract; three said that they never provide the contract; three respondents indicated that the client usually provides the contract.

What are your typical marketing strategies?

Ranked by most to least-used strategies:

- Personal Website (78%)
- Heartland Chapter Indexer Locator (67%)
- Networking and Referrals (56%)
- Cold Email (44%)
- Speaking Presentations and ASI Indexer Locator (33%)
- Blogging and Cold Calls (22%)
- Article Writing (11%)

How is a pay rate established?

Rates set based on personal income goals:

- Never (3 people)
- Occasionally (2 people)

Rates set based on basic industry rates:

- Occasionally (2 people)
- Often (5 people)
Client determines the rates:

- Occasionally (2 people)
- Often (3 people)
- All the time (2 people)

What other work activities or revenue streams supplement your indexing?

Heartland indexers supplement their income by other freelance activities such as researching, abstracting, copyediting, proofreading, and writing magazine articles and books; a spouse’s full-time employment; and eBay sales.

How is your business structured?

- Unincorporated sole proprietorship (67%)
- Incorporated (LLC or S-corporation) (33%)

How do you track your accounting?

- Financial software (such as Quickbooks) (12.5%)
- Electronic spreadsheet (62.5%)
- Paper spreadsheet or bookkeeping (25%)

Do you have a business plan, vision, or budget?

- One respondent (11%) has a business plan that he/she revisits regularly to update.
- Three respondents (33%) formed their business with a business plan but have not updated it.
- Five respondents (56%) do not have a business plan.

This survey answers some basic questions about how we conduct our business and sets up possibilities for future discussion of some finer points such as what exactly entails a contract and what specific factors are taken into consideration when establishing a pay rate (i.e. density, illustrations, due date, special vocabulary). ■
Metatopic and Structure

Creating Better Indexes, Part 7

By Margie Towery
Fall 2014

Metatopic and index structure together form one of what I call the “Ten Principles for Creating Better Indexes.” The other principles (or characteristics) are accuracy (part 6), audience and access, comprehensiveness and conciseness (parts 4–5), clarity, common sense (part 2), consistency, reflexivity (part 3), and readability (part 1).

What are metatopic and structure?

The metatopic is not so much a characteristic as it is an overarching presence in an index. Webster’s includes many meta-words, which reflect the increased use of the prefix: metagalaxy, metaethics, metafiction, and so on. Meta- means more comprehensive than the original term. It is often used with a discipline, such as linguistics or mathematics, to highlight a discussion in which the discipline itself is the object of critical examination.

Do Mi Stauber seems to be the first to apply it to the main subject of a text. She then identifies it as “the structural center of the index: every single heading . . . will be implicitly related to it” (Facing the Text, p. 9). There may also be multiple metatopics (e.g., class, race, and gender), which of course affects the index structure.

The structure of an index includes the entry arrays (and ideas about which are more or less important to the metatopic) as well as the cross-referencing system that lies as a subway grid under the entry arrays.

When I first started indexing, I didn’t think about index structure when I was in the middle of indexing a text, perhaps because as a newer indexer I was focused on analyzing the text and creating appropriate entries. Nor was it something I remember my mentor discussing. But I soon learned to think about structure from the very beginning, along with the analysis and entry-making. The benefit of this approach is that it becomes easier to “see” what is going on in the text and thus to keep the index more reflective of the text.

Indexing approaches

Recently, a question related to metatopics was posted on an ASI Special Interest Group listserv. There is an old idea that the metatopic itself should never appear in the index, because if it did, you would have to index the whole book under that single main heading. The idea that the metatopic should never be in the index is truly unhelpful thinking that foils all but the most sophisticated index users—and perhaps even them. Indeed, though a knowledgeable user may not turn to the metatopic in the index, why should the less skilled user be denied such a splendid entry into the text and index?

I and many other indexers argue for a more nuanced approach to the metatopic and index structure. Such an approach is based on several ideas. First, the metatopic can create a useful entry into the index structure. Second, most index users do not know that the metatopic main heading “shouldn’t” be in the index. Third, even experienced users may turn to the metatopic main heading to see how the subject is treated in the book. That and a quick glance at the table of contents may dictate whether or not they buy the book.

While I agree that there are some indexes that do not require a metatopic main heading, I would argue that those indexes are much less common than those that do benefit from it. Even an alphabetically structured book, such as Hans Wellisch’s Indexing A to Z, includes lengthy entry arrays for indexers, indexes, and indexing. The index for Nancy Mulvany’s Indexing Books also includes lengthy entries for index, indexers, and index-writing process.

I view the metatopic main heading as a useful place for any reader (especially one who is unfamiliar with the subject) to start an index search (though I am aware that many users will not start there). The metatopic main heading can be a window into the structure of the index and thus the text. Within this key entry array, I generally place two kinds of information: (1) subheadings that gather disparate bits of information that may not serve as main entries themselves (alternatively, some or all of
the subheadings may also be double-posted to main headings, depending) and (2) cross-references to the most important main headings in the book (I call these mainmain headings).

In terms of structure, the index must reflect the text and yet parse the information into a useful, alphabetical format. A text may be relatively straightforward in organization, for example, tackling one aspect of the metatopic in each chapter. In such a case, the index structure may have mainmain headings that reflect the text and the table of contents (ToC). Thus, the metatopic main heading would cross-reference to these mainmain headings. Usability may in fact be enhanced by such a ToC approach to index entries. In real life indexing, though, it’s seldom so straightforward, especially in the scholarly indexing realm.

At any rate, when I think about structure, I think of the metatopic main heading as the key main entry, the mainmain headings related directly to the metatopic as the next most important, and then the rest of the entries as maybe somewhat less important but likely with fewer subheadings (this is aside from institutions, personal names, and events, etc.; of course any of these can be a metatopic!). For me, every entry (or entry array) is, in the end, important. Not only will the index be used by those with deep knowledge and interest in the specific subject, but the index will also serve those who are looking for a related category that may be peripheral to the metatopic (e.g., food in a book on Civil War battles). Thus, the index must include all the important topics as well as gather up minor discussions and ideas.

**Try this!**

It might be surprising to newer indexers that even experienced indexers get stuck. For me, these snags are directly linked to metatopic and structural issues. I have two particular sticking points: getting started and hitting the wall about the halfway through (the latter is more likely in a longer text than a shorter one).

I have a routine now that helps me get started on an index. (Note that I am not an indexer who reads the whole text before I start; I sit down at the computer, with the pages in front of me, and read and index all at once.) The first task for me is to seed my brain with some terminology. I read the description of the book on Amazon; I look over any author-provided concept lists; I may check Wikipedia on the subject; I check the author’s website, if he or she has one; I read the acknowledgments and preface and sometimes part of the introduction, if there’s a section where the author lays out each chapter’s focus. In addition, if the topic is similar to the author’s previous book(s), I will check those on Amazon to see if I can “look inside” at the indexes; alternatively, if I indexed a previous book for the author, I will review that index, if the subject is similar. All of this provides a starting point for possible terminology. There is also a danger in doing this! I must be careful not to “overwrite” what is actually in a text by the terminology ideas I gathered in the starting process.

Another great indexer’s tool is mindmapping. This can be used at any point in the indexing process. If you read the whole text in advance, then you could create a mindmap before you start indexing. There are many sites on the Internet about mindmapping; some also provide freeware or paid software. But you don’t need a program for this, just paper and writing tools that you enjoy.

Mindmapping is an aid to getting past my second sticking point: hitting a wall in the middle of indexing, where my brain just stops and says, “What?! What am I doing?” If you find yourself in a similar situation, it is an excellent point at which to remove your fingers from the keyboard and get yourself a cup of tea (or other libation). Pick up a piece of scrap paper and something fun to draw and write with. Multiple colored markers are perfectly acceptable.

In the middle of the paper write the metatopic subject. Circle it if you want; for some reason, I usually circle all the terms on a mindmap [see example on page 6]. Next, think about those mainmain headings and write those down out around the metatopic (remember this is a map not a list), connecting them to the metatopic by lines and/or arrows (maybe even directional arrows). If one of those mainmains is tightly connected to another mainmain, then connect them with lines as well (these translate into cross-references in the index). Write down other entries you’ve made or anticipate making; connect those, and so on, until you have a map of the metatopic and thus the structure of the index. Step back and consider what you’ve just created. Now you are ready to get back to indexing. ■

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An Ounce of Prevention
Intentional Communication with Authors

By Carol Reed
Fall 2014

This morning, an indexer asked for advice on one of the indexing email lists: how should she respond to an author who was asking for rather extensive revisions that may not serve the index very well? This kind of scenario has happened to many (perhaps most) experienced indexers at some point, and it can be very frustrating for both indexer and author. Best to avoid the whole scenario. But how?

Having recently experienced a similar situation myself, I approached three established indexers who do the majority of their work directly with authors—Margie Towery, Naomi Linzer, and Kate Mertes. I wanted to know how they have fine-tuned their communication with authors. The tips that follow are a summary of our conversation. I’ve already tweaked my author communications with positive results, and I hope you’ll benefit as well.

Before the Index

Before accepting an indexing job for an author, a few strategies will set the foundation for a successful project.

1. Understand the author’s mindset and your role in the relationship. They’ve just completed an exhausting process and are heavily invested into this work. The book will likely be reviewed by their peers and possibly a much broader audience, which is both exciting and nerve-wracking. Margie Towery empathizes with the author’s stress. During the proofing and indexing stages, she says, “they are often dealing with the book cover and other final details, and often have a full-time teaching load, plus family issues of their own.” Kate Mertes adds, “The author is handing you their baby, which they’ve spent years of research on. To us it’s a project that we’ll be finished with in a month or less and on to the next thing. It’s important to remember what the work means to them.”

It’s always been the case that authors are surprised to learn how much is involved in the indexing process. Like anything else, it looks easy until you have to dig into it more deeply. Thus, indexers have always expected to educate authors on some of the usability considerations behind our indexing choices. But these days, as more and more research happens via online searching, authors may be even further distanced from standard indexing conventions, and they’re likely to assume more of the indexing process is automated than is actually the case.

The author knows their subject and audience far better than the indexer. This is both a benefit and a challenge, as the author may or may not realize how their intense involvement with the text makes it difficult to see the index through the “fresh” eyes of their readers.

Authors don’t have time to learn the intricacies of indexing, and they trust the indexer to treat their work with great care. They may be paying for the index out of pocket. Empathize with the author’s concerns and pressures—it will help set the stage for productive communication throughout the project.

The indexer is part of a team, working with the author and the press to create the best possible publication. Let the author know how you see your role. This can help build trust and openness.

2. Turn down a project if you see red flags. In your correspondence with the author, watch for indications that this may be a difficult person to work with, or that their expectations of the indexing process are unrealistic. Looking at a sample chapter of the book may also alert you to problems with structure or editorial quality that can make it difficult to create a solid index.

3. Use a project summary or multiple emails to make sure you’re on the same page. Standard agreement items include index specifications, deadline, page delivery schedule, index delivery format, compensation rate, and your hourly rate for additional changes. In addition to those items, you may want to include the following:

- Links to the ASI indexing evaluation checklist and the criteria for the ASI/ElS Publishing Award for Excellence in Indexing. Asking authors to review these up-front will educate them on best practices and equip them to review the index draft.
- Indexing decisions, such as handling of footnotes
and authors who are cited in the text but not discussed.

- If you are including an author review in your process, add it into the schedule.

What about contracts? While few indexers use formal contracts (unless provided by the press), it’s good to know that email agreements function as legal contracts.

4. Send a copy of the project summary to the project editor, even if you’re working directly with the author. Naomi Linzer asks for the name of the project editor even when she is working directly with the author. She says the project editor can be your ally if the author delays the review schedule or requests changes to the index that affect usability. It’s also an opportunity to develop a relationship with the project editor and perhaps get more work from that press in the future.

During the Indexing Process

Kate Mertes offers her three main tips for working with authors:

1. Do a good job - It’s still the best marketing tool in the world.

2. Don’t pester - Asking too many questions too often can be counterproductive; clients want you to get the job done with a minimum of drama.

3. Show some enthusiasm - Authors are often exhausted at the end of the whole book grind; showing a little pep and interest in their work can help a lot.

Do a good job

Kate’s first tip deserves more attention here, because the author is trusting you to do a good job on the index. No amount of communication will compensate for a poorly structured index. How can solo indexers ensure quality from one index to the next?

- As an ongoing part of your business, take advantage of the continuing education opportunities and publications offered through ASI and its chapters and SIGs, as well as the international indexing societies.

- Ask an experienced indexer, whose work you have seen and admire, to do a paid review of one of your indexes. While peer reviews can be helpful, the quality of feedback can vary greatly.

- The index evaluation checklist and award criteria you sent to the author? Use them. Incorporate them into your own workflow, editing, and proofreading checklists. Update your checklists often to incorporate lessons learned and strategies that improve your process.

- Talk to other indexers. Chatting about the issues you’re facing often helps you reach solutions you may not have considered.

- Take the time to do a final edit on every index you submit, preferably after you have set the index aside for a day or two. We’ve all seen published indexes that appear to have skipped that step.

Provide status updates and reminders

Sometimes an index is straightforward, and you may not need to exchange emails with the author during the process. If that’s the case, send an occasional update to let them know the index is on schedule for delivery on or before the deadline. It’s one less thing they have to worry about. If you’re working with a first-time author who you suspect is less attuned to the importance of deadlines, Naomi Linzer suggests reiterating the deadline for review comments in an email if necessary.

The Author Review

Having an author review an index you’ve created can be wonderful when the author is engaged in working toward an excellent index, says Naomi Linzer, who also notes that it can also be very challenging if the author doesn’t understand the basics of indexing. Kate Mertes recalls an editor’s term for authors with a lot of questions and suggestions: “high-energy tinkerers.” Mertes says high-energy tinkerers “can be a lot of fun to work with (and probably help produce the best indexes), but they can also be exhausting.” How to make the review process as productive and painless as possible for all involved? It starts before the author even opens the index draft file.

Sending the Review Draft

If you’ve provided links to the index evaluation resources with your initial project summary, your author has a head start on a productive review. When sending the index draft, Kate Mertes says, “I’ve started to send a pretty detailed email covering the review process.” In the email, Mertes links to tips for index evaluation in her website FAQs (see “Once the index is done, how do I know if it’s any good?” and others). Margie Towery anticipates questions the author might
have during review, such as the handling of author citations, footnotes, or chapter authors in a book of collected works. She also suggests a review process that emphasizes paying attention to structure. Mertes tells her authors, “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.” She’s found that this saves time for both the author and herself.

Incorporating Review Comments

When you receive the author’s comments, they generally fall into three main categories.

1. Legitimate edits - Sometimes the author finds editing or substantive items the indexer missed that should have been deleted, included, restructured, or reworded. Or the author will identify nuances of meaning that improve the structure or wording of index entries. Margie Towery is happy to get this sort of comment. “I really feel that if an author is invested in getting a professional index, and they see what a well-structured one can do, then their tweaks usually make it better.” The indexer’s attitude here is key. “Because I work with authors so much,” Towery notes, “I don’t start out with a chip on my shoulder. I start out with a positive view.” Resentfulness on the part of the indexer is unhelpful.

2. Suggestions that will create structural problems - A variety of comments fall under this category: deleting substantive entries; adding a lot of specific subentries that are already gathered under existing subheadings; rewording terms in ways that make them less clear; and deleting helpful cross-references. If the index does a good job of reflecting the text’s structure, it provides a snapshot that may or may not agree with the way the author wants the book to come across (a little like the discomfort many people feel seeing photos of themselves). Naomi Linzer once had an author make extensive changes to an index reflecting their knowledge of the subject, but not reflecting the actual text.

Explaining why suggested changes will compromise structure (and thus usability) can be time consuming, and your schedule might limit how much explaining you can afford to do. Referring to Chicago Manual of Style or the index evaluation lists you provided earlier can save some time here. Regardless, indexers must be able to defend their decisions based on usability considerations and accepted guidelines such as CMS.

3. Suggestions that may not really help, but they don’t hurt, either - These types of revisions are often not worth quibbling over, especially if the changes are easy to make, such as a simple term substitution. Less benign, but still in this category, is the occasional addition of specific subheadings that are already gathered under an existing subheading. While the resulting over-analysis is less elegant, it’s unlikely to create major usability issues if you’re dealing with more problematic suggestions elsewhere (though this is certainly a matter of degree).

Margie Towery suggests picking your battles. If the author still prefers a change after understanding the negative consequences, so be it. “Keep in mind,” she advises, “it is the author’s book. They will be living with the index a lot longer than the indexer.”

Knowing your Limits

Let’s say you’ve communicated clearly throughout the process and have created a good index, but the author is still requesting extensive changes and is willing to compensate you for the extra time. If the request compromises your work on other scheduled projects, or if you sense it would be more efficient for the author to make changes, it’s okay to say so. Occasionally an author gets trapped in an endless cycle of tweaks and un-tweaks in which the indexer is nothing more than a highly paid typist; that’s not a great use of the author’s budget or the indexer’s time. Or an author is obviously rewriting the book during and after indexing. You might respectfully point out that the value the author is trying to add to the index has more to do with their subject expertise and their understanding of the audience’s needs than with your indexing skills.

Many difficult situations with authors can be prevented with some intentional communication at the outset. Like so many projects, it’s easy to skimp on preparation tasks when you’re impatient to get started on the visible work. Cutting corners early on can create disasters later. Improving your communication with authors doesn’t actually take that much time, and you’ll be rewarded with better working relationships, more referrals, and better indexes.