Chapter Updates

By Carol Reed

Our environment is constantly changing, and adapting to it is a given for any organization. We see it all the time in business: Netflix adapted; Blockbuster didn’t. IBM used to make typewriters; now it provides software cloud services.

Indexing organizations and chapters have been affected by a variety of industry and technological changes in the last decade—software and file-sharing advances, e-books, offshoring, the 2008 recession, and online educational resources, to name a few. Fortunately, these changes have not diminished the need for professional indexers; but they have definitely changed the environment in which we operate.

In particular, the increase in online resources has made it far easier for indexers to network and grow in their indexing and business skills without ever leaving the office. Chapter meetings are no longer our only option for professional development or networking, and the time and cost involved can make traveling to chapter meetings harder to justify.

However, as most Heartland members agree, online resources don’t replace the face-to-face connection that happens at chapter meetings. Last year’s survey showed that members place a high value on face-to-face relationships and programming and don’t want those things to slip away. The tricky part is that the number of attendees at our meetings doesn’t always cover speakers’ expenses, and we need to consider the long-term sustainability of what we do.

We’ve been talking about this for the last few years, and have tried some different ways of adapting. In 2014, we cancelled the fall meeting due to low attendance and held our business meeting via Skype instead; fortunately, our speaker was local and flexible enough to reschedule for the spring meeting. For our fall 2015 meeting, we brought in a well known indexing expert, Kate Mertes. Attendance was good, the program and personal interaction were great—but attendance didn’t increase like we expected.

Our next step in figuring out how to adapt is to form a strategy committee. This committee will look at our past and future programming and attendance trends. Focusing on high-quality support and long-term sustainability, the committee will recommend a strategy for moving forward. The strategy committee is currently being formed, so if you’re interested in serving, please contact me at caree15@bluestemclarity.com.

At the same time, we’ll be evaluating GoToMeeting and similar tools for hosting online events, to see whether they might be a good alternative for one of our biannual meetings, or as a backup plan if few people are able to make the drive. We’ll keep you posted as these long-term items develop.

For the upcoming year, we’ve got some exciting plans. We’re looking forward to being involved at the ASI national conference in Chicago, June 15–18, 2016. To avoid competing with that event, we will hold our spring business meeting via Skype or GoToMeeting. As we get closer to the event, watch the Heartland email list for carpooling and room-sharing opportunities. Next fall, we’ll host a networking event at one of the Indiana locations and also encourage members to attend the Chicago/Great Lakes chapter’s fall workshops.

Of course, we also need leaders to help us make the most of our Heartland community in the coming years. Our co-president, Mary Peterson, recently resigned for personal reasons but will continue to be involved in the chapter. This means we will have at least two positions to fill in the spring elections. We’re making it easier to serve on the Executive Committee by spreading out
responsibilities, which will make better use of our individual skill sets. We are currently handling programming as a volunteer position separate from the co-president position, and the strategy committee will share the task of setting a future course for the chapter, so the president and co-president will be well supported. Taking a leadership position provides opportunities to give back to the chapter, as well as building your own professional network and visibility.

Email me if you have questions!

Also, watch for discussion on the Heartland email list about ways we can help support the ASI national conference. It’s a great opportunity to meet indexers from around the country and welcome them to the Midwest. We’re looking forward to your thoughts and involvement!

On Aboutness
Presentation by Kate Mertes at the Fall 2015 Meeting
By Roseann Biederman

The guest speaker at our fall meeting was award-winning indexer and author Kate Mertes. In her morning presentation, “On Aboutness,” Kate discussed the importance of establishing a clear vision of a book’s conceptual focus—or “aboutness”—before beginning the indexing process.

Getting a handle on aboutness helps indexers in two ways, according to Kate. First, it affects our indexing efficiency: When we understand a book’s structure from the start, we avoid time-wasters such as tweaking existing entries and adding additional entries to an almost-finished index. Second, it vastly improves the quality of the index, since it ensures that the index structure reflects the relative importance of the concepts in the book.

Understanding aboutness starts with identifying its metatopic, or main theme, along with four additional topic types that may or may not relate to the main topic. Kate identified the essential characteristics of each type (with a particular focus on the metatopic), and provided some exercises to help attendees identify them in a text.

1. The Metatopic

Since the metatopic is the overall argument of the text, it should be the starting point for building an index. Figuring out what the metatopic actually is can be tricky. While the book title sometimes reflects the metatopic, it can just as often be irrelevant or even misleading. The book may also contain multiple metatopics (e.g., a multi-author text), leading to further confusion. Kate provided a couple of techniques for identifying the metatopic:

• Read the book’s introduction and the publisher’s summary on Amazon;
• Invest some time in writing a précis or summary of the metatopic(s). This clarifies the book’s “aboutness” in your mind and helps you understand how other concepts relate to the topic once you are knee-deep in the text.

Attendees practiced writing a précis during the metatopic exercise. Kate distributed several books she had indexed and asked participants to write a précis using the book’s title, introduction, table of contents, and index.

Kate believes that the metatopic should be indexed if the publisher allows it. While indexing textbooks have generally advised against indexing the metatopic, she finds that readers actually do look up the metatopic (i.e., “whales” in a book about whales), and they are confused when it’s not there. In her own indexes, Kate includes a metatopic entry that functions as a directory to the next tier of related objects. She uses undifferentiated locators after the main heading to point to general overview information (rather than including an “about” or “overview” subentry), and includes subheadings that often point to a chapter range. Finally, she includes a
note after the main heading that instructs users to look up the subheadings for breakdowns.

2. Ur-topics

Kate defines these as the “basic, fundamental, or original concepts upon which the metatopic is based. She derived the term from the German prefix –ur (“original”), and from the name of the city in Mesopotamia which is said to be the origin of Abraham, the biblical source of civilization. This etymology helps us grasp the Ur-topic’s function as a classifier.

According to Kate, “Every book has an Ur-topic; it’s how a librarian would shelve it.”

Ur-topics can be too general and can thus fool indexers, making it difficult to build a structure for the index. “If an index is growing and growing, you’re indexing with the Ur-topic and it’s time to redirect,” says Kate.

An example of this might be a book whose metatopic is “Buddhism in ninth century Vietnam” and whose Ur-topic would be “religion.” Indexing anything more than perhaps a general definition of religion here, and cross-references to other specific religions and denominations, could end up with a huge and relatively useless array.

Participants honed their skills at distinguishing between the metatopic and Ur-topic by identifying the Ur-topics in the books they used for the metatopic exercise.

3. Chapter topics

As the name suggests, these are the subjects of the book’s individual chapters with regard to how they fit into the argument of the metatopic. Kate noted that the first chapter is generally about the metatopic and establishes general information about the book, and can thus be a useful tool for establishing aboutness.

Kate provided an exercise for determining how each chapter topic relates to the main topic, which she recommends completing early in the indexing process. Using the table of contents from a theology book she indexed, she demonstrated how to create chapter topic entries and cross-references. If the actual chapter titles provide a definite link to the subject matter, she says, they can be used as headings. If the chapter titles are cute, discursive, or otherwise misleading, the indexer will need to change the terminology and/or phrasing to create useful headings.

4. Microtopics

Kate categorizes these as topics to which the book regularly returns and which are germane to the metatopic, but which are not given their own chapter treatment. Although microtopics aren’t directly related to the metatopic, they are nevertheless important leitmotifs that recur constantly in the book. Since readers will remember and search for them, microtopics should always be included in the index.

5. Non-topics

This final topic category comprises concepts which are randomly or repeatedly mentioned in the text but which are not central to the text’s overall argument. “Most books have them,” says Kate, “and it’s easy to create extraneous entries from them if you aren’t focused on the metatopic.” She advises against “daisy picking” non-topics, but says that a rare (or even bizarre) story or case related to the main topic should be indexed because readers will look for it.

“It’s hard to analyze the metatopic and work out the conceptual focus of a book, but that’s our job as indexers,” says Kate. Evaluating topics according to this hierarchy of categories can help us identify the metatopic, follow it through the text, and build a truly useful index.
Don't Be a Hermit!
An Indexer's Guide to Working with Clients

Presentation by Kate Mertes at the Fall 2015 Meeting
By Roseann Biederman

The afternoon session of the Fall 2015 Heartland Chapter meeting featured a workshop with Kate Mertes, a co-author of ASI’s Working with Authors and Editors. Focusing on the entire process of client interactions—from first contact to turning in the final index—Kate outlined the different client types an indexer might encounter, and how to effectively address their varying needs.

Kate began the discussion on a light note with an explanation of the “hermit” reference in the session title. Noting indexers’ tendency to “huddle” and close themselves off from the outside world as they work, she pointed out that even a group of Franciscan monks—working as indexers on the side—still maintained regular contact with clients, despite the fact that they were a silent order. The point, she said, is that by staying in touch with clients throughout every stage of the indexing process, indexers go a long way toward establishing clients’ confidence and trust in their work.

A Client Taxonomy

It’s helpful to understand the client “type” you’re dealing with up front, according to Kate. She outlined the three most common categories of indexing clients, along with their defining characteristics:

• Editors. While they are typically knowledgeable about scheduling and technology with regard to the index, they are not as concerned with the final product. Surprisingly, they (including production and commissioning editors) sometimes don’t even know the content of the book very well. In these cases, the indexer may need to establish contact with the author early on for any follow-up questions about the text.

• Packagers. They are also unfamiliar with the book. They tend to have tighter schedules than publishers and, since the index is a cost center for them, tighter budgets.

• Authors. They may have never worked with an indexer, so you’ll need to spell everything out for them. Kate described four subcategories of authors, who each impact the indexing process in their own unique way:

  “High-Energy Tinkerer”: They are very involved in the indexing process (the book is, after all, their “baby”). While this may be inconvenient for the indexer, it can produce an award-winning index. They are the best type of author to work with.

  “Kvetcher”: The opposite of the tinkerer, the kvetcher is a fault-finder who asks a lot of irritating questions about the index and is generally looking for trouble. Kate noted that indexing credentials can be useful when dealing with kvetchers, since your experience and knowledge may silence them. (Also, you can point out the mistakes in their text that have been overlooked by copyeditors …)

  “Easy-Goer”: As the name implies, this is a very low-maintenance author who just wants a finished index. They aren’t persnickety, but they also won’t challenge you to produce the best index.

  “Know-It-All”: Know-it-alls think they know everything about indexing, but they don’t: and a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. You need to teach them the rules of indexing by referencing The Chicago Manual of Style, usability tests, etc. With effort, you can turn a know-it-all into a high-energy tinkerer.
The Negotiation

Armed with an understanding of how various clients operate, you’ll be on solid ground when faced with working out the terms for specific projects. For the benefit of attendees, Kate outlined an indexing scenario she regularly encounters, in which an academic author/client contacted her to complete the index for his soon-to-be-released book. She provided sample documents pertaining to the assignment for participants to adapt to their own businesses.

One such document is the Intake Sheet, which Kate fills out immediately after they contact her. Since the client may not provide crucial information about the project in the initial email, and timing is critical (she schedules projects six weeks in advance), she uses the completed Intake Sheet to establish the basic parameters of a project.

At this early stage, Kate also requests a sample chapter from the client to determine the per-page rate, and to clarify any special project requirements. In the case of an academic index, for example, Kate says it is important to establish how footnotes will be handled (e.g., CMS, house style), and to be clear about how many indexes the client will receive.

When the terms of the project have been established, the indexer can send a boilerplate contract to the client if requested (Kate provided a sample for attendees), or simply rely on the email chain, which serves as a contract in a court of law. Kate advises indexers to carefully study any client-generated contracts before signing to ensure that the terms are acceptable. You should add to such contracts (as well as your own contracts and email communications) that the rights to the index will not be transferred until you receive payment. Also be sure to send a W9 form (or other form required by the client to process your invoice) to prevent payment delays later.

When the Text Comes In

Once the indexer and the client agree to the terms of the project, the indexer can get to work. More often than not, says Kate, the text will be late, and indexers should come to expect this since they cannot control the timing of the availability of final proofs. She advises immediately addressing a revised completion date when a text comes in late. Kate notes that receiving an index early is actually a bigger problem, since you may not be able to take the project if the schedule has been moved up. Regardless of when the index arrives, always check the files carefully, and email the client to confirm their receipt and reconfirm the schedule.

Working on the Index

As you work through the text, keep a running list of queries for the client. “Unless a question stops you dead in the water, save it for later,” says Kate. Above all, don’t pester the client. “As a freelancer, no one cares about your drama, so don’t contact the client unless absolutely necessary.” She adds that, when working with authors, more back-and-forth is acceptable since the book is their “baby” and they will want to be apprised of any glitches. And while you should generally avoid sending partial indexes to clients for review (since you don’t want to have do a lot of clean-up work at this stage), sometimes it is a reasonable request you should honor, if the project is a large one. Be prepared, though, for clueless questions about why the part of the book you haven’t yet gotten to has no index entries yet!

Turning in the Index

Since timing is crucial in the late stages of the book production process, clients are delighted when they receive a completed index early. With this in mind, Kate suggests building extra days into the schedule so you can deliver the finished index a few days ahead of the deadline.

After ensuring that the index conforms to any house rules and is formatted correctly, send it to the client with the following information:

- cover letter highlighting important details about the index, along with guidelines for revision;
- query list;
- invoice (even though you may work on the index again).

Kate always sends a back-up email requesting that clients contact her if they haven’t received her earlier message. If she doesn’t receive a response within 24 hours, she follows up with another email and a phone call.
**Tweaking the Index**

Approximately 40 percent of indexes will require minor tweaks after you turn them in to the client, according to Kate. When submitting the finished index, you can either send a note with specific directions for making changes (such as using Track Changes so you can see what alterations they want), or offer to let the client make the changes without your further involvement. If the client changes the original guidelines after you have finished the index, you can charge additionally (by the hour or the page) for your extra work. Kate notes that this is why ongoing email communication with the client is so important, since you may need to reference earlier conversations to support your argument for charging more.

Occasionally indexers are asked to make arbitrary—or even senseless—changes to a finished index, such as removing all cross-references. In these cases, says Kate, you can refuse the client’s request and explain your rationale. “It’s important to be up front in your communications. You can tell the client, ‘Indexing is a rules-driven system and there are reasons for what I’m doing.’ Most of this process is about getting your client’s trust. They buy in to your expertise,” she says.

**Getting Paid**

While most indexing clients pay on time, and some even pay early, a few will make collecting payment an exercise in futility for freelancers. Kate advises waiting one week beyond the invoice due date, then following up with an email reminder. Another reminder two weeks later may also be necessary. If payment still isn’t forthcoming, Kate suggests the following bargaining approaches, which typically resolve the issue:

- Tell the client, “My accountant says I’ll have to charge a late fee if I don’t receive payment promptly.”
- Remind the client, “You can’t print the index until the copyright is transferred.”

It is important to be diplomatic in whatever approach you choose. “Establishing a good client relationship is crucial,” says Kate.

**Getting a Second Job from the Same Client**

Since having repeat clients keeps you in business, it’s important to think of every indexing project as an opportunity to develop relationships with editors and authors—and any friends they may refer you to. “Do a good job and be on time,” says Kate. “Try to make this a positive experience for them. If they’re happy with your work, they’ll call you again.”
Consistency and Clarity
Creating Better Indexes, Parts 8 and 9
By Margie Towery

In this installment of Creating Better Indexes, I’ll look briefly at two of the remaining three characteristics of quality indexes: Consistency and Clarity. The other characteristics are audience and access (yet to come in part 10), metatopic and structure (part 7), accuracy (part 6), comprehensiveness (parts 4 and 5), reflexivity (part 3), common sense (part 2), and readability (part 1).

Consistency, defined

*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* has several definitions for consistency, because the term can be applied to many endeavors, from cooking to dog training to painting. *Webster’s* third definition fits best with what I mean by consistency: “agreement or harmony of parts or features to one another or a whole.” Thus, consistency is always relational, contingent, and dependent on context.

Comments on consistency

Consistency and accuracy are closely related, for example, in use of capitalization and punctuation, treatment of titles, and so on. Those sorts of things should be accurate and consistent throughout an index. Another example is locator treatment. Locators must be accurate as well as consistent in the use of special typography, format for end- and footnotes, and in the method of abbreviation, if one is used.

Both consistency and accuracy are key to the terminology used in the index. Index terminology must accurately represent what is in the text and must consistently treat similar discussions in similar fashion. In other words, *do not do this*:

- floods and flooding, 14–25
- oil spill disasters: cleanup after, 35–37; environmental damage from, 30–34; history of, 26–30

The two discussions cover the same number of pages and should ostensibly be treated similarly in the index.

That is, “floods and flooding” should have subheadings rather than a long range of page locators.

Parallel construction, whether in subheadings or main headings, is a tactic for consistency in indexes:

- immigrants and immigration (group and concept)
- slaves and slavery (*not* slavery and slaves)

If you create a subheading for “education” under one individual’s heading, don’t use “schooling” under another individual’s heading in the same index and when the information is similar. In other words, use the same term to capture similar information in subheadings.

Cross-references and double-postings are additional components where consistency is important. For example, page locators should be identical in double-postings:

- Illinois lottery, 3–6, 8, 10
- lottery, 3–6, 8, 10

The format of cross-references should be consistent within an index:

- Mexican-American War (1846–1848) wars. See also Mexican-American War wars. See also Mexican-American War (1846–1848) wars. See also Mexican-American War (1846–48) wars. See also Mexican American War

The first two cross-references are correct. The third one uses a format for years that is inconsistent with the main heading; the fourth one is missing the hyphen. While technically the cross-reference should exactly match the main heading, I tend to delete the parenthetical gloss, such as (1846–1848), from the cross-reference, unless the gloss is needed to disambiguate main headings:

- Russell, Sarah (1749–1789)
- Russell, Sarah (1815–1875)
- weavers . . . See also Russell, Sarah (1749–1789)

One area of consistency that highlights its contingent
nature is the “2x vs. Xref” issue. The Chicago Manual of Style recommends a maximum of about six locators; more than that, then subheadings should be created. Organizations with abbreviations comprise one type of heading where this issue frequently arises.

The general guideline on the “2x vs. Xref” issue is: If there are no subheadings (thus, six or less locators), then double-post (2x) under both spelled-out version and abbreviation; if the two entries fall very close together, retain the one most used in the text and delete the other. If there are subheadings, then place the subheadings under the text’s preferred term and create a cross-reference (Xref) from the nonpreferred term.

In my experience, this indexing practice is the most confusing thing to authors, and I now explain it in every letter that I send to an author with an index for review (if it’s an issue in that particular index). I think it’s confusing because they miss the contingent, relational nature of consistency in an index.

**Tools for consistency**

The first and easiest tool to use for ensuring consistency is your software. Be sure your settings are correct for the index specifications. Second, indexers can also deploy Adjustable Indexing Rules for each project. For example, one of my regular AIRs is to specify the maximum number of page locators allowed before subheadings are needed. In practice, though, I generally create subheadings for most page locators, because it’s easier to delete the subheading terminology than to go back and create it in the edit stage. Nonetheless, I definitely need that particular AIR when I am editing. Another AIR that I use in a book with non-English terms is whether I am going to enter a term in the original language with the English translation in parentheses or vice versa. I pick one and stick with it; that AIR makes it easier to then decide whether to double-post or cross-reference the terms, which I would do in my edit stage. So, indexers, go forth and create some AIRs of your own!

**Clarity, defined**

*Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* defines clarity as “the quality or state of being clear.” Well, right. Turning instead to *Roget’s International Thesaurus*, we find that clarity has many nuances from “intelligibility” to “literary elegance.” Indeed, these are characteristics of a quality index. Following these terms through the thesaurus, we find related concepts such as comprehensibility, readability (yes!), refinement and restraint (could that be conciseness?), lucidity, and my favorite, perspicuity. Turning back to *Webster’s* for a definition of perspicuous, we come full circle: “plain to the understanding esp. because of clarity and precision of presentation.”

**Comments on clarity**

In short, clarity in an index means that a user can understand the index and quickly find the sought-after information. One of the most important aspects of this is the subheading-to-main-heading relationship. If users find this entry in an index:

animals: hunting, 22–24

...they are left wondering what exactly it means. Are animals hunting prey? Are humans hunting animals? Are animals used in hunting? It makes a big difference! Furthermore, in this example from a published index, the surrounding subheadings, which included references to pets, did not help.

When a user reads a main heading and then one or more subheadings, the relationship between each subheading and the main headings must be absolutely clear. If subheadings need additional words or function words (e.g., of, by, on) to achieve that clarity, then those words must be included.

There are several reasons the clarity of sub-to-main is important. First, humans are storytellers; we need to understand the relationship to understand what sort of information we will find at the locator’s position. Second, most of us are on information overload. If the sub-to-main heading is not clear, users may just skip looking up the locator, decide the information is not in the text, or decide the index is useless, and put the text “back on the shelf” whether it’s an print or e-book.

If you, like me, give the index a final A-to-Z edit, pay attention to clarity. If something is not clear to you in that stage—and you have just read and indexed the text—then it’s not going to be clear to users.

**Tools**

There are three simple tools that aid in creating clarity in indexes. The first is to know and use the alphabet. Can you rewrite the subheadings so (1) the most important words comes first and (2) related subheadings fall next
to each other in an entry array? Second, deploy your human storytelling ability to be sure that the connections are accurate, clear, and representative of the author’s meaning. Third, use “beginner’s mind” when you engage in the final edit. Try to look at the index as if you have not just read the book. Be the audience(s) you created the index for.

Looking forward

In fact, I will consider audience and accessibility in the next installment, which will conclude this series on creating better indexes. However, I am excited to share the news that ASI’s publisher, Information Today, Inc., has accepted my book proposal, Ten Characteristics of Quality Indexes: Confessions from an Award-winning Indexer. The book delves much deeper into each characteristic than in this newsletter series, providing more discussion, examples, and tools. It also includes a chapter on evaluating indexes. The book should be out in time for ASI’s June 2016 conference in Chicago.

Meet a Fellow Heartlander: Rachel Shaw

By Carol Reed

It’s always a treat to get to know more about our Heartland chapter members, and it’s inspiring to be surrounded by colleagues who genuinely love learning and have diverse interests. Rachel Shaw is like that; she enjoys digging deeply into a subject and analyzing ideas, balancing her intellectual work with creative pursuits.

Rachel found indexing when she was ready for a change from her career in academia. With a PhD in history and a minor field in communications and cultural studies, she was accustomed to close reading and organizing scholarly information. Indexing turned out to be a good match for her skills and personality. “It taps into a study habit that I had to unlearn in grad school,” she says, “which was to take notes on every tiny detail.” She started indexing in 2005, took the ASI indexing course, and by 2011, was indexing exclusively.

Areas of specialty for Rachel include the history of the American West, environmental history, humanities, and social sciences. Though she also enjoys indexing art books and crafts-related trade books, her “sweet spot” is the scholarly authors and audiences she understands so well. She’s used to the way scholarly authors lay out and develop their arguments, as well as the type of research their readers are often engaged in.

A lot of Rachel’s indexes have been in areas related to her background, especially Latin America and Spain. Newer ground for her is the indexing of images. A recent index for a book on quilts in the Colonial Williamsburg collection posed some interesting challenges. “It was a gorgeous book with full-color spreads showing a wide variety of quilts, often emphasizing their special details,” Rachel recalls. Handling the images and accompanying names, techniques, and discussions gave her a new respect for the history and preservation of quilts as well as for the process of indexing images.

Her biggest challenge lately is managing indexing projects while being primary caregiver for her two-year old daughter. It’s a tricky schedule, but she makes the most of her available time. She tries to avoid rush jobs, and is finding ways to make her indexing process more efficient. When she has the time, Rachel also tries to balance the intensive brain-work of indexing with one of her hands-on, creative interests, which include knitting, sewing, photography, ceramics, sketching, watercolors, and home repairs.

Rachel is a great example of indexing as a good fit across the different stages of life and careers. We’re thankful to have her in the Heartland community!