

## Ten Tips for Spotting a Bad Index

### 1. The index has no subheadings.

This means one of the key functions of the index has been ignored. An index brings together pertinent discussions about a topic that are scattered throughout the book. (An exception to this rule is a textbook or a short e-book that teaches a new subject, and its main purpose is simply to define new terms.)

### 2. There are long strings of page references after entries (i.e., more than five to six pages).

This is a sign of a lazy indexer. Readers are asked to search page after page of a book looking for what they want. Long strings of page numbers often accompany indexes with no subheadings. Both things are a disservice to your readers who want to know what you have to say in your book.

### 3. The index is less than 4% of the book pages in length.

This means the index is probably too short. The index does not present a "balanced" picture of the book. You can bet something, even a lot, has been left out of the index.

### 4. The main topic of the book (its "metatopic") is fully indexed.

The main topic or metatopic of a book is what the book is about. The book's metatopic may be included in the index as a jumping off point to more specific topics. In this case, it will have *See also* cross-references to other topics. That's ok! But a metatopic that is indexed in depth is too general. For example, a book on nursing with a hundred subheadings on nursing is meaningless. Main headings of an index should be specific aspects of the book's metatopic.

### 5. There are long columns of subentries under a topic - and the book is not a library reference-type book or a multi-volume cumulative index.

This is likely to indicate the indexer hasn't done their job. Just as indexes bring scattered discussions together, they also discriminate among discussions and break them down into separate topics. Long columns of subentries usually mean the topic has not been broken down into its more discrete components as it should have been.

### 6. Headings and subheadings are single words only, especially when the singular rather than plural forms of the words are used.

Indexes are not word lists. They are organized, structured "shorthand" for the concepts conveyed by your book. Concepts usually require phrases to express them. The "art of

indexing" is brevity, clarity, and precision in wording of those phrases. Single-word indexes are likely self-indexed indexes by amateurs. They indicate a certain "cheapness" on the part of authors who use them.

### **7. Unrelated items are lumped together, e.g., grapes (a fruit) and grape leaf (an herb)**

This is especially common when a lot of single word headings and subheadings are used in an index. This shows the indexer has no clue at all as to the meaning of the material in the book. They are just picking out words at random.

### **8. The essence of a discussion is not mentioned.**

This problem is harder to spot. But if you know the book's material, imagine you are a reader. Try looking up something in the book. Did you find it? Indexes with single-word topics will often omit the real essence of a discussion and simply grab at words that dance around a topic.

### **9. Trivial mentions of unimportant topics are included.**

You can spot this in an index when you see subentries with pages that are all adjacent. Or a list of protocols with sequential series of numbers. The indexer is just filling up space. While too much and too specific information is annoying, it is better than too little and too vague information! Keep in mind too that some mentions that seem trivial, are not, e.g., names of well-known scholars in the book's subject area, or names of people the author wants to buy their book!

### **10. There are no *See* and *See also* cross-references in the index.**

Again, this reflects laziness on the part of the indexer and/or cheapness and lack of concern for the reader. Cross-references lead the reader from one topic to another. *See* cross-references lead the reader from unused terms to the terms used in the index. *See also* cross-references lead the reader from narrower to more general terms; from more general to narrower terms; or from one related topic to another. A book with no cross-references is like a highway with no road signs.

### **BUT WAIT! The biggest indexing failure of all? There is no index in your book.**

Need I say more? How is the reader supposed to find anything in your book? More importantly, how can the reader quickly evaluate what your book covers when they're deciding whether or not to buy it? Use a quality index to market your book!