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Key issues on Index-L

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Abstract

Index-L is an electronic mailing list available through the Internet. It is used by book, journal and online indexers, as well as by editors, academics, technical writers and others interested in issues relating to indexing. The main users, however, are probably freelance book indexers.

Index-L is a forum for discussion of issues related to indexing, ranging from practical issues such as scheduling and quoting, to personal issues such as how your cat relates to your computer. Specific indexing choices are discussed (e.g. styles and entry words) as are general policies and relations with editors. Some jobs are advertised, and notice of meetings and conferences is given. The list is important for moral support as well as for exploration of intellectual and practical issues. Examples of typical discussion 'threads' will be given in this talk.

What is Index-L?

Index-L is an electronic mailing list available through the Internet. A mailing list enables a group of people to send messages to, and receive messages from, all other members of the group. The distribution of mail is fully automated, and the list-owner coordinates the list, and deals with any problems.

Index-L is a forum for discussion of issues related to indexing, ranging from practical issues such as scheduling and quoting, to personal issues such as what indexers do in their spare time. Specific indexing choices are discussed (e.g. styles and entry words) as are general policies and relations with editors. Some jobs are advertised, and notice of meetings and conferences is given.

Index-L is an important source of information and support for indexers and enables indexers from around the world to share ideas. This type of communication is particularly important in a field such as indexing, where many people work in relative isolation, communicating professionally with other indexers only at meetings and occasional conferences.

Newsgroups are democratic, and enable people to share ideas no matter what their qualifications, sex, colour, or whatever. No-one need know who you are or what you look like; all that matters is what you write. Paradoxically, however, one of the joys of this newsgroup is discovering what the other contributors are like, as people. Discussion of political correctness in indexing brought personal responses from people from minority groups. A query "What else do indexers do?" brought an avalanche of responses including other work, and also lists of hobbies and other lifestyle choices. A question of mine on combining indexing with family life brought a number of personal responses and good advice.

Of course the flip side of the democratic nature of unmoderated newsgroups means that useless messages are mixed with the useful. On Index-L this is a minor problem, and the useless messages are mainly unsubscribe messages that have been sent to the wrong place, and the occasional spam (inappropriate advertising message).

After subscribing for a number of years you find that there are recurrent issues for discussion (e.g. rates, getting started, multiple indexes, use of prepositions). Judicious use of the archives (and sometimes a textbook) would free the list of this repetition. It is much nicer,

however, to interrogate a vital friendly list than the huge unorganised archive, and the questions and responses continue.

How to subscribe and contribute

To subscribe to Index-L you need a computer, modem, and Internet connection. Subscription is free, but you will have to pay charges for Internet access and for online time and downloading data (different Internet Service Providers have different charges).

To subscribe, send the message:

Subscribe INDEX-L Firstname Lastname

to the list address: lyris@listserv.unc.edu

replacing 'Firstname Lastname' with your name. If you have an automatic signature file you should turn it off.

You will then receive subscription information. You should save this information as you will need it if you want to unsubscribe, and you may need it for other information about the list.

There is a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ list) and answers. This list includes details about indexing software, useful publications, etc. It is updated from time to time, and the new FAQ is then sent to all subscribers (this was last done in October 1996). Its aim is to prevent the list getting clogged with these common questions.

The subscription message gives details of how to write to the list and reply to other messages. Most subscribers start by lurking, that is, reading messages to get a feel for the tone of the list before replying. Many then introduce themselves in their first message as a 'newbie', and receive warm welcomes to the list.

Who is on Index-L?

Subscribers are mainly book, journal and online indexers. Different perspectives on indexing are given by editors, academics, and technical writers. Many subscribers are 'wannabes' who are studying indexing, or hoping to branch out from related fields such as librarianship.

At the moment subscribers come mainly from the United States and Great Britain, with a smattering from Europe, Canada and Australia.

There are many more subscribers than contributors, so your writings reach more people than you might expect. As one subscriber warned with a smilie wink: "Be careful what you say about the editors who employ you, as they might be lurking".

What are Index-Lers like?

As many newbies have commented, Index-Lers in general are helpful and dedicated. In 'water-cooler' discussions they share the trials and joys of indexing. They tell how they exercise, what else they do, and how they got started. They tend to be educated and interested. Some live in the country and intersperse bursts of indexing with chores such as chopping wood and milking cows. Because of this ways of speedily sending page proofs and indexes are crucial, hence much discussion of the FedEx system (in the U.S.), and some of electronic delivery.

INDEX-L discussion topics

I will highlight a number of INDEX-L discussion topics in the conference talk.

Topics discussed on Index-L include practical issues of importance to freelancers such as marketing and coping with deadlines, and nuts and bolts issues such as the correct form of names, use of multiple indexes, and organisation and order of page numbers. Philosophical issues such as whether an index should be 'dumbed down' to ensure that a wider range of people will be able to use it are also discussed. Index-L is a good source of information about

indexing software and hardware, including ergonomic keyboards, lighting, and uninterruptable power supplies.

Developing issues

Much of the content on Index-L is very practical discussion of issues currently facing indexers. Developing issues include electronic indexing (including indexing of CD-ROMs), and embedded indexing (e.g. using FrameMaker). Announcements of developments such as the free availability of Medline through the Internet keep indexers up-to-date, as have brief discussions on the concept of meta-data.

Conclusion

On Index-L you can participate as much or as little as you like. You can lurk only, or you can share your own expertise, while gaining from the expertise of others. Index-L is a great way to communicate with the international community of indexers, and to share the feelings of interest, stimulation, frustration, exhaustion and exhilaration than indexing brings.