

Why Hire a Professional Book Indexer?

By Lisa Rivero (<http://lisarivero.com/indexing>)

Many authors of non-fiction books, especially academic and scholarly books, are surprised to learn that they are responsible for the creation of an index. Authors' choices can include creating the index themselves, contracting with a professional indexer, or having the publisher contract with an indexer at the author's expense. In any case, except for high profile books, most authors will pay for the indexing in either time or money.

The question many authors ask themselves is why not just create the index themselves? There are many reasons to invest in professional indexing services for your book.

Experience Matters. Professional indexers have experience with indexing dozens if not hundreds of books (I have indexed at least 500 titles in my career). This experience allows an indexer to find and choose terms, cross-references, and sub-entries that someone new to indexing is almost certain to miss. Also, every publisher has its own guidelines and expectations for indexing format and style. A professional indexer is not only familiar with the most popular indexing style guides, such as the University of Chicago's guidelines, but also the idiosyncrasies of each press.

Viewpoint Matters. While it is true that authors know their subject matter better than the indexer, this intimacy with the topic can be a drawback when it comes to indexing. A professional indexer will seek to understand and reflect the author's unique terms and arguments and, at the same time, keep in mind the needs of readers. Readers turn to the index for many reasons: to look for a section they have already read, to see if they want to buy the book, to find a topic they need quickly for reference, even to see if they—as a colleague in the field—are mentioned in the index. The specialized knowledge of authors can become an indexing blind spot when it comes to other readers' needs.

Indexing Takes Time. Often but not always the indexing is completed when the final galley proofs are produced and simultaneously with proofreading. Authors who have job obligations apart from their writing are often hard-pressed to do a good job of proofreading and complete a high-quality index in the time allowed. Every professional indexer has the experience of frantic calls from authors who tried to index their own books but found, at the last minute, it was too overwhelming.

Indexing Is Both a Science and an Art. Finally, indexing is far more than doing a search for words or names. We all know the experience of looking for a specific name or topic in an index and not finding it (even though we know it is discussed), finding a string of a dozen or more page numbers with no clue as to which are more substantive, or trying to make sense of an overly long list of sub-entries, each with only one page number. Experienced indexers know which names and topics to include (or not), when to add sub-entries to keep readers from turning to page after page in search of what they need, and grouping sub-entries into topic chunks to make the index more user-friendly.

Is it worth paying the money to hire a professional indexer? A book is usually published only once, and that edition will remain on bookshelves in libraries and stores for years if not decades. Typical indexing fees are \$3 -\$5 per indexable page, depending on the book's complexity. A 200-page manuscript indexed professionally at \$3.50 per page will cost \$700, which not only saves the author valuable time at the proofreading stage but is also a relatively small investment in a book that was years in the making or even the result of a lifetime's work or even the result of a lifetime's work.