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Henry Benjamin Wheatley
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HOW TO MAKE AN INDEX.



CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

“I for my part venerate the inventor of Indexes; and I know not to whom to yield the preference, either to Hippocrates, who was the great anatomiser of the human body, or to that unknown labourer in literature who first laid open the nerves and arteries of a book.”

—ISAAC DISRAELI, *Literary Miscellanies*.

IT is generally agreed that that only is true knowledge which consists of information assimilated by our own minds. Mere disjointed facts kept in our memories have no right to be described as knowledge. It

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

2 *How to Make an Index.*

is this understanding that has made many writers jeer at so-called index-learning. Thus, in the seventeenth century, Joseph Glanville, writing in his *Vanity of Dogmatizing*, says: "Methinks 'tis a pitiful piece of knowledge that can be learnt from an index, and a poor ambition to be rich in the inventory of another's treasure." Dr. Watts alluded to those whose "learning reaches no farther than the tables of contents"; but then he added a sentence which quite takes the sting from what he had said before, and shows how absolutely needful an index is. He says: "If a book has no index or table of contents, 'tis very useful to make one as you are reading it."

Swift had his say on index-learning, too. In the *Tale of a Tub* (Section VII.) he wrote: "The most accomplisht way of using books at present is twofold: Either serve them as some men do Lords, learn their titles exactly, and then brag of their acquaintance. Or secondly, which indeed is the choicer, the profounder and politer method, to get a thorough insight into the Index, by which the whole book

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[More information](#)

Introduction. 3

is governed and turned, like fishes by the tail. For to enter the palace of Learning at the great gate, requires an expense of time and forms; therefore men of much haste and little ceremony are content to get in by the back-door. For, the Arts are all in a flying march, and therefore more easily subdued by attacking them in the rear. . . . Thus men catch Knowledge by throwing their wit on the posteriors of a book, as boys do sparrows with flinging salt upon their tails. Thus human life is best understood by the wise man's Rule of regarding the end. Thus are the Sciences found like Hercules' oxen, by tracing them backwards. Thus are old Sciences unravelled like old stockings, by beginning at the foot."

Thomas Fuller, with his usual common-sense, wisely argues that the diligent man should not be deprived of a tool because the idler may misuse it. He writes: "An Index is a necessary implement and no impediment of a book except in the same sense wherein the carriages [*i.e.* things carried] of an army

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

4 *How to Make an Index.*

are termed *impedimenta*. Without this a large author is but a labyrinth without a clue to direct the reader therein. I confess there is a lazy kind of learning which is only indical, when scholars (like adders which only bite the horses' heels) nibble but at the tables, which are calces librorum, neglecting the body of the book. But though the idle deserve no crutches (let not a staff be used by them but on them), pity it is the weary should be denied the benefit thereof, and industrious scholars prohibited the accommodation of an index, most used by those who most pretend to condemn it."

The same objection to "indical" learning is urged to-day, but it is really a futile one. No man can know everything; he may possess much true knowledge, but there is a mass of matter that the learned man knows he can never master completely. He does not care to burden his mind with what might be to him useless lumber. In this case his object is only to know where he can find the information when he wants it. Indexes are of the greatest help to these men,

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[More information](#)

Introduction. 5

and for their purposes the indexes ought to be well made. But it is needless to labour this point, for has not Johnson, in his clear and virile language, said the last word on the matter?—"Knowledge is of two kinds; we know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it. When we inquire into any subject, the first thing we have to do is to know what books have treated of it. This leads us to look at catalogues and the backs of books."

Before going further, it would be well for author and reader to come to an agreement as to what an index really is. An index may, in certain circumstances, be arranged in the order of the book, like a table of contents, or it may be classified or chronological; but the index to a book such as we all think of when we speak of an index should be alphabetical. The other arrangements must be exceptional, because the books indexed are exceptional.

It is strange, however, to find how long the world was in coming to this very natural conclusion. The first attempt

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[More information](#)

6 *How to Make an Index.*

at indexing a book was in the form of an abstract of contents in the order of the book itself. Seneca, in sending certain volumes to his friend Lucilius, accompanied them with notes of particular passages, so that he "who only aimed at the useful might be spared the trouble of examining them entire." Cicero used the word "index" to express the table of contents of a book, and he asked his friend Atticus to send him two library clerks to repair his books. He added that he wished them to bring with them some parchment to make indexes upon.

Many old manuscripts have useful tables of contents, and in Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (1340) there is a very full table with the heading: "Thise byeth the capiteles of the boc volzinde."

It was only a step to arrange this table of contents in the order of the alphabet, and thus form a true index; but it took a long time to take this step. Alphabetical indexes of names are to be found in some old manuscript books, but it may be said that the general use of the alphabetical arrangement is one of those labour-

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction. 7

saving expedients which came into use with the invention of printing.

Erasmus supplied alphabetical indexes to many of his books ; but even in his time arrangement in alphabetical order was by no means considered indispensable in an index, and the practice came into general use very slowly.

The word "index" had a hard fight with such synonyms as "calendar," "catalogue," "inventory," "register," "summary," "syllabus." In time it beat all its companions in the race, although it had the longest struggle with the word "table."*

* All these words are fairly common ; but there is another which was used only occasionally in the sixteenth century. This is "pye," supposed to be derived from the Greek Πύραξ, among the meanings of which, as given in Liddell and Scott's Lexicon, is, "A register, or list." The late Sir T. Duffus Hardy, in some observations on the derivation of the word "Pye-Book," remarks that the earliest use he had noted of pye in this sense is dated 1547 : "A Pye of all the names of such Balives as been to accompte pro anno regni regis Edwardi Sexti primo."—*Appendix to the "35th Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records,"* p. 195.

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

8 *How to Make an Index.*

Cicero used the word “index,” and explained it by the word “syllabus.” Index was not generally acknowledged as an English word until late in the seventeenth century.

North’s racy translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, the book so diligently used by Shakespeare in the production of his Roman histories, contains an alphabetical index at the end, but it is called a table. On the title-page of Baret’s *Alvearie* (1573), one of the early English dictionaries, mention is made of “two *Tables* in the ende of this booke”; but the tables themselves, which were compiled by Abraham Fleming, being lists of the Latin and French words, are headed ‘Index.’ Between these two tables, in the edition of 1580, is “an Abecedarie, Index or Table” of Proverbs. The word “index” is not included in the body of the dictionary, where, however, “Table” and “Regester” are inserted. “Table” is defined as “a booke or regester for memorie of thinges,” and “regester” as “a reckeninge booke wherein thinges daily done be written.” By this it is

Introduction. 9

clear that Baret did not consider index to be an English word.

At the end of Johnson's edition of Gerarde's *Herbal* (1636) is an "Index Latinus," followed by a "Table of English names," although a few years previously Minsheu had given "index" a sort of half-hearted welcome into his dictionary. Under that word in the *Guide into Tongues* (1617) is the entry, "vide Table in Booke, in litera T.," where we read, "a Table in a booke or Index." Even when acknowledged as an English word, it was frequently differentiated from the analytical table: for instance, Dugdale's *Warwickshire* contains an "Index of Towns and Places," and a "Table of men's names and matters of most note"; and Scobell's *Acts and Ordinances of Parliament* (1640-1656), published 1658, has "An Alphabetical Table of the most material contents of the whole book," preceded by "An Index of the general titles comprized in the ensuing Table." There are a few exceptions to the rule here set forth: for instance, Plinie's *Natural*

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Excerpt
[More information](#)

10 *How to Make an Index.*

Historie of the World, translated by Philemon Holland (1601), has at the beginning, "The Inventorie or Index containing the contents of 37 bookes," and at the end, "An Index pointing to the principal matters." In Speed's *History of Great Britaine* (1611) there is an "Index or Alphabetical Table containing the principal matters in this history."

The introduction of the word "index" into English from the Latin word in the nominative shows that it dates from a comparatively recent period, and came into the language through literature and not through speech. In earlier times it was the custom to derive our words from the Latin accusative. The Italian word *indice* was from the accusative, and this word was used by Ben Jonson when he wrote, "too much talking is ever the indice of a fool" (*Discoveries*, ed. 1640, p. 93). The French word *indice* has a different meaning from the Italian *indice*, and according to Littré is not derived from *index*, but from *indicium*. It is possible that Jonson's "indice" is the French, and not the Italian, word.