

Book Reviews

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Book Review Editor

STAUBER, DO MI. *Facing the Text: Content and Structure in Book Indexing*. 1st ed. Eugene, Or.: Cedar Row Press, c2004. 374 p. ISBN 0-9748345-0-5 (pb).

Authors of books have usually lived with their material for years before they embark on the arduous business of writing the book, followed by the revisiting during the editing and publishing processes. The indexers of their books usually have between two and four weeks to absorb the subject of the book. Even with a prior knowledge of the discipline, they are faced with the author's particular "take" on the subject and writing style, including any one of a number of ways of presenting the material. This is multiplied in complexity when the book is a multi-authored work, a collection of essays and papers, comprising several authors' differing views and individual styles.

Ideally, the indexer is an expert in the subject matter of the book, perfectly matched to the book; in practice, this almost never happens. Indexers aim at producing an index that is truly reflective of the individual book and its author, a goal that often seems overwhelming when the pile of page proofs arrives with the courier, or electronically through a PDF file, hundreds of pages of closely argued text. As well as the time limit, there can be other restrictions, most commonly having to make the index fit into the number of pages decreed by the publisher, with difficult, even agonizing decisions lying ahead.

Consequently, indexers can fall into a number of different traps: getting lost in a welter of detailed overindexing; or, mindful of time and space limits, indexing too broadly and simplistically, bouncing from text heading to heading, topic sentence to topic sentence. Most indexers of academic books I know, including myself, tend to fall into the first category at least with their first few indexes. Especially when the content is personally fascinating, it's easy to lose a rational, analytical approach to the content of a book, and wrest this back only with difficulty during the editing stage with the deadline looming.

Do Mi Stauber's title, *Facing the Text*, is, thus, provocative, because that's what all indexers inevitably have to do. She knows the process: for example, at the start, the "gap between you and those pages that for a moment seems very wide" (p. 1). This sympathetic, personal tone pervades the book: the emphasis is on the personal experiences, feelings, and perceptions of indexers when confronted by the various situations thrown up by indexing; it's "I" and "you" throughout. The chapter subheadings often echo this: my tendency to lose sight of main topics is explained and diagnosed in "Lost Among the Trees" (p. 63-64). The section "Being Stuck" (p. 324-26), describes a number of reasons for this common malady, along with remedies for each, including the "Hammock Method" (p. 46). Stauber has been presenting workshops with the title "Facing the Text" since 1997, and her book reflects a friendly, listening engagement with her audience.

She divides the topics within the text to be indexed into the categories of metatopics, local main topics, and ancillary topics, followed by subheadings. The indexability of individual topics at whatever level, and their wording, absorb other chapters. Linkages among the topics – cross-references and double-posting – are tracked in the chapter "Connections and Access." Finally, the mechanics of indexing are contained in "Process" and "Inside an Indexer's Brain" describes her own procedure and feelings as she indexes a book from beginning to end.

When I initially faced the text of this book, I felt overwhelmed, even bewildered, by the plethora of terminology, much of it Stauber's own. Further, each chapter is divided into a complex array of headings, subheadings, sub-subheadings, and more. But when I read from beginning to end, all those pieces fell into place. Stauber develops her text logically, explaining each step of the way clearly, distinguishing each detail from others, and frequently linking passages to relevant others. At every stage in the book, she illustrates with copious examples from indexes she or others have compiled. In the case of her own indexes, she describes her thought processes, her initial

reactions to what she read, her decisions regarding the use of particular topics and at what level, and of her chosen terminology; and also, and often, how and why she later changed her mind as she got further into the text. This forms a candid and detailed analysis of indexing, step by step, stage by stage, complex and subtle but with a perceptibly firm connecting structure. In short, she's a good writer.

Facing the Text falls into what I call the third wave of books about back-of-the-book indexing. Each of these waves overlaps, but generally the first consists of the general manuals on indexing books (and other media): Booth, Knight, Mulvany, and Wellisch, along with chapter 18 of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. These set out the fundamental principles, conventions, or rules of indexing in a mostly impersonal, dispassionate tone. The second wave carried manuals on indexing in specific disciplines and genres: biography, medicine, law, psychology, history, genealogy, etc. The third wave, exemplified by Stauber's *Facing the Text* and Smith and Kells' *Inside Indexing*, delves into what goes through the mind of the indexer "facing the text" and putting together an index based on it. The tone is personal and subjective, the authors taking the reader through their own perceptions of the stages of indexing a book, the inevitable problems and subsequent decision making, expressed through their own reactions and reasoning.

Facing the Text is not a manual where the newcomer to indexing can find immediate answers to specific problems: the first and second waves of books on indexing are designed to provide those. It's a book for the professional indexer or academic author indexing more than one book; its effect is to hone skills and refine working habits, to increase efficiency and effectiveness, to create indexes that make faithful, logical sense of the text. Newcomers, including first-time academic-author indexers, should begin with the last chapter "Inside an Indexer's Brain," then the second-to-last chapter, "Process"; in fact, I would suggest that any reader begin with "Inside an Indexer's Brain," for its introduction to the terminology and the overall look at indexing, from the first to the last page of the text to be indexed.

As one would expect, the index to *Facing the Text* is comprehensive; in fact, exhaustive, and admirably detailed. The personable, conversational tone continues here, with entries such as "Subheadings/creating as you go" and "Notes to yourself." Of course, "Being stuck" is there as is, and also helpfully double-posted as "Stuckness strategies."

Finally, and on a relatively small note, this is a nicely designed book. Not only is it laid out for looks, it's laid out for use. The type is a friendly size, and the complex structure of headings, subheadings, and sub-subheadings is rendered immediately intelligible by the well-chosen fonts. My only criticism concerns the tightness of the binding; manuals should lie flat, without having to be anchored on each side with paperweights.

References

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