

Three-by-Fives. Ruled. Ink, Never Pencil.

Cohen, Sydney: as indexer, pp. 22-43, 44-49

Sydney Wolfe Cohen makes book indexes. Day after day, often without warning, the phone will ring in his office on lower Fifth Avenue, and an editor will be on the line asking Cohen, the publishing industry's premiere index-maker, to undertake a 500-page book on menopause or another biography of Madonna. Among Cohen's most recent "power" indexes: Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, David McCullough's *Truman*, and Nigel Hamilton's *JFK: Reckless Youth*.

Cohen, Sydney: before indexing, pp. 11-18

A slender sexagenarian, with hair the color of crisp typing paper, sparkling eyes, and the reassuring manner of a moderately jovial physician, Cohen was born in Paterson, New Jersey, and studied English literature at NYU and Columbia University. During graduate school, he found himself employed at Columbia's Butler Library; he later worked for a time at a mailing-list house and edited the first *Celebrity Register*. "It seems now that nearly everything I've ever done professionally was prelude to being an indexer," he acknowledges with bemusement. "It certainly didn't seem that way then."

Cohen, Sydney: on indexing as a career, pp. 37-41, 47

Cohen started indexing, with his wife, in 1960; their first book was *Introduction to Romance Languages and Literature*, by Erich Auerbach, as translated from the original French by Guy Daniels. The way Cohen sees it, "no one starts out thinking of himself or herself as an indexer forever. It wasn't until the late seventies that I finally began to think of indexing as 'what I do,'" he insists. "Now I can't count the number of indexes my staff and I have done in 30 years. It must be something like 5,000—about 400 or more a year at this point, which averages out, I guess, to better than 1 a day."

Indexes: good ones, p. 192

A good index, according to Cohen, must first be a "tidy" one—clearly spaced and beautifully typed. It must also "reflect the text very well," have "good structure and good language," and must "read well," though Cohen concedes that people generally do not read an index. "Maybe one or two do," he points out. "The author and the editor." Cohen nevertheless always writes his indexes with the thought that "there might be someone out there someday who might read it from start to finish. I can't help it. That's what I do."

Indexes: form and substance, pp. 118-133

"All indexes have 'main entries,'" explains Cohen. "And then they have 'subentries.' The main entry is on top; it's the main heading. The subentries follow. They qualify the main entry and make it more specific. It's really considered poor indexing to have too many page references for a main entry. You want most of your page references in the subentries." (See: *Indexes: personality*.)

Indexes: personality, p. 213

According to Cohen, no two indexers, given the same book, will ever arrive at the exact same choices for subentry headings. Cohen's distinctive personality as an indexer is superbly illustrated by his subentries in an index he created for *The Experts Speak*, Christopher Cerf and Victor Navasky's compendium of misinformation. This index earned Cohen the 1984 H. W. Wilson Company Award for Excellence in Indexing, with entries such as:

Soviet Union:

gaiety most outstanding feature of, 276
KGB viewed as secret police only by enemies of, 276
U.S. beaten in almost everything by, 260

and:

Reagan, Ronald:

French president Giscard d'Estaing evidently unknown to, 146

Indexers: and lawyers, p. 397

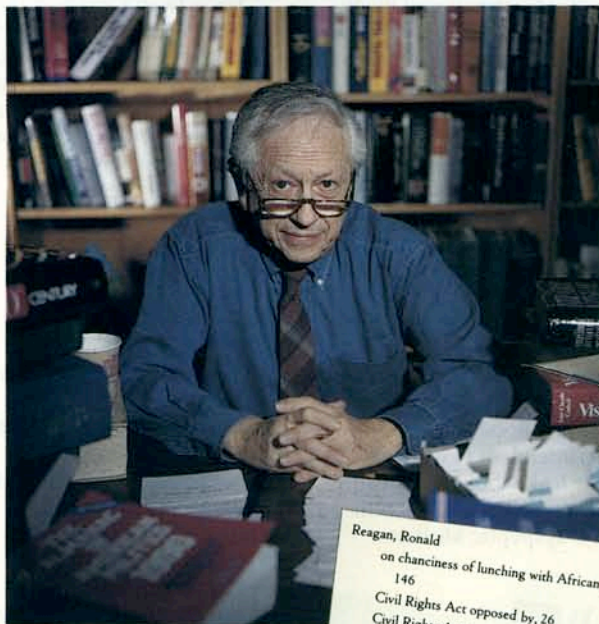
According to Cohen, lawyers are sometimes concerned about indexes' revealing too much about a book. Publishing-house lawyers do not want to make it any easier for potential litigants to litigate without at least the nuisance of reading the entire book.

Computers, pp. 412-414

Cohen says he still does 60 percent of his indexing on index cards, marking up a manuscript, then meticulously copying his notations onto the cards. "Not until you get computers that can write the books will you get computers that can do the indexing," he says.

Index cards, p. 1

Three-by-fives. White.



Index-maker Cohen and a sample of his handiwork.

Reagan, Ronald
 on chance of lunching with Africans,
 146
 Civil Rights Act opposed by, 26
 Civil Rights Act supported by, 26
 French president Giscard d'Estaing
 evidently unknown to, 146

Ruled. Ink, never pencil.

Authors: and indexers, pp. 352-356, 417

Though authors almost always pay for an indexer's work out of their own royalties, authors generally do not work with indexers. "Indexers have come to believe that authors are not the best people to help with their job," Cohen explains. "Usually the author, having finished his book, is too close to the project to be helpful and is in a state of mind better served by a trip to the Bahamas or England or someplace."

Indexers and authors: "the eternal question," pp. 593-96

"The question is, How on earth can you take an author's work, which he or she has been struggling over for perhaps two or three years or who knows how long, and convert it into ten or twenty pages of compact, alphabetical, iambic *nothing*, and have him or her love it?" asks Cohen. "That is the question. The time comes, though, when all of you is inside this process, regardless of the quality of the text. You may love it, you may hate it, but either way, in the end, you're in it. You're *in* it. You're indexing."

BARRY SINGER