

# Five Fatal Myths of Indexing

by Sylvia Coates @

*“What is it you do? Indexing? Now, let me get this straight, people send you books to read, you can work your own hours and in your own home, and people pay you for this? Where do I sign up?”*

Many people looking for a career change consider indexing to be a dream job. Not only does freelance indexing come with the luxury of working in your own home but it can have the potential of being quite lucrative. Yet, out of the many who actively pursue an indexing career only a very few manage to succeed. Why is this?

I believe that this high failure rate is connected to the five fatal myths of indexing. These indexing myths are as follows:

1. No special training is required to learn indexing.
2. Anyone can be a successful indexer.
3. Clients are easy to find with no need to market oneself.
4. It is not necessary to invest in appropriate equipment or to master technical applications.
5. One can make a living wage immediately.

Let us examine each of these myths.

## ***No special training is required to learn indexing***

Too many of those pursuing an indexing career assume that indexing does not require any special training or education. “I love to read, I bet I could index.” Laughable, but how many of us have heard this from someone interested in our profession?

To the prospective indexer I would say this: learn your craft. This means learning the correct conventions, rules, and parameters used in the indexing process. Prospective indexers sometimes think that they can learn to index by practicing and copying from already indexed books. However, this technique is invalid unless the correct conventions are being applied during these practice exercises.

There are several very good courses available which can provide a solid foundation for indexing. Probably the best known courses are the Basic and Applied Indexing USDA correspondence courses. Indexing courses may also be available through local library schools. These courses can be supplemented by the one or two day workshops available through ASI chapters. These workshops can be excellent additions to the courses already mentioned but are not adequate training by themselves.

Mentoring is another way to receive indexing training. There are some experienced indexers who are willing to take on the inexperienced and train them over a period of time. Mentoring relationships can be very rewarding and beneficial for both parties.

There are also freelance indexers who have received their training by working as in-house indexers. They are able to take their in-house training and experience and parlay it into a freelance career.

## ***Anyone can index***

Indexers share certain personality traits and work ethics. Test yourself. Can you work alone and isolated from other people? Can you work unsupervised or do you need someone to monitor your progress? Can you manage your time and work under deadline pressures? How comfortable would you be making countless indexing decisions without constant affirmation from colleagues or supervisors? In addition, there exist a myriad of indefinable characteristics making up a personality suited to indexing.

Honestly assess yourself. Does indexing, often accompanied by isolation and extreme time pressures, sound like something you would enjoy? Many experienced indexers do enjoy, even thrive, in this kind of environment, but it’s not for everyone.

Last, but definitely not least, is a particular mindset characteristic which enhances the indexing process. This mindset is the ability to conceptually understand text and to organize the information using the indexing process. This mindset is apparently an innate quality or talent, is distinct from intelligence, and cannot be easily taught. Several of the USDA instructors have commented to me that individuals with this mindset stand out among their students. It is evident that indexing is easier and possibly more proficient for those with this innate ability.

## ***Clients are easy to find with no need to market oneself***

Marketing is part of the business of indexing. Indexers with experience, and a proven track record, have an easier time finding new clients. However, for the inexperienced indexer the client market is quite different.

In the book production process the index is close to being the last completed item. If the index is late or needs to be redone, for whatever reason, the production can be thrown off schedule. This may

make an editor hesitate to use a new indexer. This Catch 22 reality makes it difficult to get those first jobs. Marketing, under these circumstances, becomes a particularly crucial issue for the new indexer.

Marketing is a constant necessity and should be considered part of the job for all indexers regardless of experience. ASI can serve as both a networking organization and a source of valuable marketing strategies and tips.

Again, you need to honestly assess yourself regarding the marketing aspect of indexing. Are you willing and able to market yourself? If not, you may need to reconsider an indexing career.

***It is not necessary to invest in appropriate equipment and to master technical applications***

Though an indexing business can be run with little overhead there are some pieces of equipment which must be purchased. You should purchase the best computer that you can afford. At a minimum your computer system should allow access to e-mail and the Internet. A good indexing software program should also be purchased and learned. Printed business cards and stationary will make your marketing look more professional. A message machine or message service is also a necessity.

Some equipment may be purchased as your business grows. A fax machine, though not a necessity, can be extremely useful and adds professionalism to your business. If possible, a second dedicated phone line should be added to your office. Many indexers are now adding Web sites as a part of their marketing strategy. Specific software applications and equipment can be added as your business needs expand.

There are some experienced indexers who continue to manage their business without e-mail or even computers. While this may work for an already established indexer it would not be advisable for the new indexer trying to break into the market.

***One can make a living wage immediately***

It is this myth which can be the most crucial impediment to a successful indexing business. There are too many prospective indexers who need to make money right away and assume that a new indexing business can produce a living wage immediately. This unreasonable expectation can quickly lead to bitter disappointment and disillusionment with indexing as a career. It is unrealistic to expect to make a living wage for the first and possibly the

second year of freelance indexing. It has been estimated that a freelance indexer needs to have eight to ten clients in order to be able to index full time. We define a client here as a source of repeat business and not just a one time indexing assignment. Building that kind of client base requires time.

So how have other indexers overcome this impediment to launching a successful freelance business? There are several ways this can be done. Some new indexers are fortunate enough to have someone able and willing to support them while they build up a client base. Other new indexers may have a source of independent means available, either substantial savings or a private income. There are some indexers who have kept a day job while taking on freelance assignments to build up a sufficient client base. I know of one indexer who worked in house for many years. She was able to go free lance by securing enough work almost immediately from her former colleagues.

Additional cash flow issues are late payments from clients, deadbeat publishers or authors, and slip schedules. Late payments from clients are a continuing problem and may severely impact on your cash flow. Deadbeat publishers or authors aren't a common problem but are always a possibility. And slip schedules, when the agreed upon indexing schedule is postponed by several days or weeks, will result in the payment also being postponed. Given these situations even a busy indexer may experience financial stress on occasion.

Each new indexer needs to assess their financial situation and resources. Again, an honest assessment is needed to make a realistic decision to pursue a freelance indexing career.

No doubt there have been successful indexers who have been exceptions to the rule for one or more of these five fatal myths of indexing. However, for the majority of prospective and new indexers counting on these myths will lead to disappointment.

The purpose here has not been to discourage prospective or new indexers. On the contrary, our profession is strengthened by the energy of newcomers. However, prospective and new indexers need to prepare themselves to insure a successful indexing business. Proper preparation, in this context, means researching accurate information, doing honest self-assessments, and making informed career decisions.

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