

# Melbourne Indexers Bulletin

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## October meeting: Singular or plural headings

This month's meeting looked at singular or plural headings and how they should be used in indexing.

### **When to use?**

As indexers, we have been taught that if there can be more than one of something, then a heading should be plural. For example, bananas, rather than banana.

This "rule" can also be expressed in terms of how many versus how much. So for items that are theoretically countable (e.g. beetles, drugs, soldiers or stars), make them plural, but for items that cannot be counted (e.g. air, water or pollution), make them singular.

These are nice clear-cut examples, but it is not always so simple. For example, when dealing with the human body, if you have two or more of an organ or limb, then the approach is to make the heading plural; e.g. arms, ears, lungs or toes. Where you only have a single organ, however, the entry remains singular; e.g. heart, nose, tongue, brain or skin. But what do you do if you are comparing the brain of a human with the brain of an animal? This index entry must be plural, i.e. brains, even though each animal only has one.

In botany and zoology, the tendency is to make the class of organism plural, e.g. flying foxes or blue gums, but make the specific type singular, e.g. grey-headed flying fox or mountain blue gum. The following bird example illustrates this difference. It is even more noticeable when inverted headings are added to the mix.

helmeted honeyeater 52–3  
honeyeaters 45–53, 65  
    helmeted 52–3  
    Lewin's 48–9  
    white-naped 50, 51  
    yellow-winged 45–7  
Lewin's honeyeater 48–9  
white-naped honeyeater 50, 51  
yellow-winged honeyeater 45–7

But is this approach applicable to everyday life? Going back to our banana example above, if you go to the greengrocer, you would probably purchase either a specific number of bananas or a specific

weight of bananas, so the index entry would be bananas. But if you want to buy sugar bananas (a particular type), then by our logic above, applicable to plant names, the index entry should be sugar banana! I doubt if this approach would receive much acclaim, so why the difference? In general, subject context determines usage.

Continuing with the fruit and vegetable theme, in cookbooks, there can be difficulties in deciding between the use of the singular or plural. For example, should an entry be eggplant or eggplants; lettuce or lettuces; zucchini or zucchinis? The difficulty here is deciding which terms are plural nouns by definition or convention.

In children's books, the singular is preferred, even if an illustration shows more than one of a thing. So even if two or more butterflies are shown, the correct entry is still butterfly.

In foreign language indexes, e.g. French and German, different conventions apply, and the singular form of nouns is often used throughout.

This tendency to use the singular form frequently applies to glossaries as well, according to Pat Booth (2001). So if the index is combined with the glossary, which a number of publishers tend to do, you may be forced to keep with the singular.

### **Terms**

If there are differences in meaning between the singular form and the plural, then using parenthetical qualifiers, or glosses (for our American colleagues), is the only option, e.g. writing (activity) and writings (artistic works). Similarly, diamond (industrial material) and diamonds (gemstones), law (the whole body of official rules or subject areas) and laws (individual rules and regulations), or building (construction) and buildings (structures).

In cookbooks and self-sufficiency books, there is a need to distinguish between lamb (meat) and lambs (animals). Similarly, in gardening books it is important to distinguish between apple (tree) and apples (fruit).

Sometimes, the difference between the singular and plural form can be much more than the addition of a simple 's' – history and histories, or security and securities, for example. With this marked difference in spelling between the singular and plural forms, is it still necessary to add qualifiers? The answer is a definite yes.

Getting the plural correct was one of G Norman Knight's (1979) pet grievances. The plural of index is indexes and not indices. Although indices is a perfectly valid word in mathematics and business, the indexing profession has always used the term indexes.

### **Style**

If both singular and plural forms are combined into a single heading, what is the best way of displaying this to the user, so that the entry is meaningful? The most common approach is to add (s) after the singular, e.g. habitat(s). Another technique is to add /s, e.g. habitat/s. Whether either of these approaches is understandable to the reader is debatable. However, where there are difficult word endings between the singular and plural, e.g. antibody and antibodies or glomerulus and glomeruli, it is preferable to use either the singular or the plural to avoid complicated and confusing terms, such as antibody(ies) or glomerulus(i).

It is interesting that a number of authorities, such as Mulvany (2005) and Wellisch (1991), disapprove of plural endings in parentheses. Those at the meeting concurred this view. An

alternative approach would be to have separate singular and plural entries, but if there is no difference in meaning between the forms, that is likely to be more confusing for the reader.

**Filing**

The difficulty of using a combined term, e.g. habitat(s), affects how the entry is filed. Do you treat the entry as singular or do you treat it as plural? The examples below show both approaches.

Which approach is more logical for the reader?

**Habitat(s) treated as singular**

- habitat(s)
- alpine plants
- desert plants
- dry sclerophyll forest
- fire impacts
- grassland ecosystems
- marsupial mole
- wetland plants
- habitat clearance
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat conservation
- subheading
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat decline
- habitat destruction
- subheading
- subheading
- subheading
- subheading
- sub-subheading
- sub-subheading
- habitat fragmentation
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat modification
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat rehabilitation

**Habitat(s) treated as plural**

- habitat clearance
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat conservation
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- habitat decline
- habitat destruction
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- subheading
- sub-subheading
- sub-subheading
- habitat fragmentation
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat modification
- subheading
- subheading
- habitat rehabilitation
- habitat(s)
- alpine plants
- desert plants
- dry sclerophyll forest
- fire impacts
- grassland ecosystems
- marsupial mole
- wetland plants

Treating habitat(s) as singular has the advantage of readability, as the heading appears at the beginning of the 'habitat' terms, before the long list of adjectival nouns. However, treating habitat(s) as plural, and placing it after the adjectival nouns, is preferable in terms of filing. My personal preference is to file at the beginning, but there was no consensus amongst the group on this.

The preceding discussion has primarily considered the use of singular or plural main headings. However, the issue of singular or plural subheadings was also raised. For example, in the field of opera, Mozart wrote several operas, so the index entry would be Mozart, operas. Beethoven, however, only wrote one opera, so the index entry would be Beethoven, opera. This obviously

shows an inconsistency in indexing, which is frowned upon by some purist indexers. My preference in this situation is to favour accuracy over consistency.

In conclusion, there are four salient points to remember when dealing with singular or plural forms of headings.

1. As a general rule, if there is likely to be more than one of something, then make the entry plural.
2. Specific subjects have their own conventions.
3. Use qualifiers to avoid ambiguity between singular and plural forms.
4. Always consider where an entry will file when using combined headings.

## References

Booth, P. (2001) *Indexing: the manual of good practice*. München: K.G. Saur.

Knight, G.N. (1979) *Indexing, the art of: a guide to the indexing of books and periodicals*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Mulvaney, N.C. (2005) *Indexing books*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wellisch, H.H. (1991) *Indexing from A to Z*. New York: H.W. Wilson.

Max McMaster

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## Think Australian 2017

Prepared for the Frankfurt Book Fair, this guide gives a brief overview of publishing in Australia.

<https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/ThinkAustralian/ThinkAustralian2017.pdf>

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## Indexes – a chapter from *Chicago Manual of Style* 17<sup>th</sup> edition

With the new 17<sup>th</sup> edition of *Chicago Manual of Style* they have again published separately the chapter on indexes. Comparing this edition of the chapter with the 16<sup>th</sup> edition, there are only a few tweaks. For example, 'foreign' words are now 'non-English', there are a couple of new sections such as linked indexes for e-books and Korean names, and a couple of sections have been merged. The text has only grown by one page.

The main difference is the index. It has grown from 7 to 9 pages. It is fascinating to compare the two indexes. It is a great example of two different indexes to the (almost) same publication. The new indexer has added more entries for non-English names. Index entries in one, but not the other, had me reading the text and deciding if I agreed with the omission or not (usually not). Variation in the construction of headings or subheadings made me consider which I liked better. Locators are section numbers and again the omission or inclusion was interesting to compare. Rather than highlighting specific differences, I'll leave you the delight of comparison. Perhaps an interesting discussion for a meeting – next year?

If you are unfamiliar with this publication, it is worth obtaining a copy or at least borrowing the 16<sup>th</sup> edition from our library to read. Obviously, it promotes the Chicago style of indexing but the basic information is still very useful. I purchased my copy from Book Depository for about AUD 25 (incl. postage as not charged).

*Mary Russell*

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## Upcoming meetings

### ***End-of-year social event***

**Date:** Wednesday, 6 December at 7:00 pm

**Venue:** La Q, 223 High Street, Kew

**RSVP:** By 1 December to Mary Russell (mruss@ozemail.com.au)

Our December meeting will be purely social, so do join us for dinner at a favourite Melbourne Indexers venue.

### ***Indexes through Publishers' Eyes***

**Date:** Mid-March, 2018

**Venue:** CAE, Flinders Lane

Details of this full-day seminar coming soon.

Contributions to *Melbourne Indexers Bulletin* are welcome at [melbourneindexers@gmail.com](mailto:melbourneindexers@gmail.com)