



# KeyWords

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a Workshop on Periodical/  
Database Indexing Online  
by Linda Dunn

H.W. Wilson Award

# Ten Things I Learned Teaching a Workshop on Periodical/Database Indexing Online

BY LINDA DUNN



**Linda Dunn** has been a periodical indexer for almost thirty years. Since 2007, she has been indexing English and French journals for a European-based database. She has presented several workshops on periodical indexing and creating controlled vocabularies for various chapters of ASI and will be teaching her third workshop on Periodical/Database Indexing for Simmons Graduate School of Information and Library Science Continuing Education Program in October 2011. Linda is currently the Immediate Past President of the New England Chapter of ASI and was the founder and first manager of the ASI Periodical/Database Indexing SIG.

**In January 2011 I taught my first workshop on periodical/database indexing online through the Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science Continuing Education program.** Although I had given several presentations on periodical indexing and thesauri development, I had never done a five week workshop and my presentations had always been to a live audience. Thanks to a lot of help from the Simmons Continuing Ed staff, *Kris Lieberman* and *Stacy Reardon*, as well as a wonderful set of participants, teaching my first online workshop was a wonderful experience. Here are ten things I learned while preparing and teaching the workshop.

## 1. How much more I had to say about periodical indexing than I would have thought possible

I was a little concerned as I started preparing the workshop that I would not come up with enough to fill a five-week workshop with the “lectures” as well as assignments and activities. In this type of online workshop the lecture materials are written sections delivered in PDFs. I began by simply writing down everything about the periodical indexing process that I could think of. I started with the special qualities of periodical indexing and its differences from back of the book indexing. I found that, despite my initial concerns, I had plenty to say — it just flowed through my fingers onto the screen. I congratulated myself on how well my preparation was going.

## 2. But it is not always easy to find the beginning

But was I really starting at the beginning? The voice of my coeditor at the *Film Literature Index* kept echoing in my head with the advice she always gave me when training our student assistants — you need to start further back, Linda. Would all the participants know the parts of a periodical and

the terminology I was using? Or would they think defining everything was too elementary? Finally I decided that it would be better to err on the side of too much information rather than not enough. So I went *further back* by including definitions and explanations of periodical and indexing terminology and processes.

## 3. Preparing a workshop with five classes takes exponentially longer than a two hour presentation

I had launched myself into the workshop preparation with a positive attitude but a very poor sense of how long it would take to create a workshop. I had made a schedule. But with all the words piling up in my word documents, I was falling farther and farther behind. By Thanksgiving I had not finished the third of the five classes although I had already logged over a hundred hours (after which point I stopped keeping track as it became too discouraging to know how much actual time this was taking me). While setting the table for our guests, I decided that newcomers to the periodical indexing process might not be quite so interested in the minutiae of my chosen field. So I started cutting back on some of the interesting details and tried to push ahead a great deal faster.

## 4. Organizing the workshop into five separate classes was like the glass slipper — very hard to find the right fit

Besides not keeping up with my schedule, it was more difficult than I had ever imagined organizing all I had to say and especially to fit it into five parts. No matter how I organized the materials, there always seemed to be pieces that didn't fit anywhere, but couldn't be left out. After many rearrangements (taking up more precious time), I finally wedged the concepts I wanted to cover into five parts and tried to make the amount of reading come out about the

same for each class. In order to accomplish an even distribution of time, some of the steps in the periodical indexing process didn't always fit precisely into one class, but spilled over into the next. This offended my organizational mind, but it seemed only fair to the participants.

## 5. Figuring out the assignments for the workshop turned out to be the hardest part – how much is enough but not too much

The most difficult part for me was figuring out the assignments. I wanted to include some actual indexing activities as I think that is the best way to remember what you are learning, especially when it is a lot of material. But how could I do that with 15 or 20 participants who were not in the same room with me.

Finally an idea began to percolate. I could have the participants pick one issue each of two periodical titles about the same subject, such as two cooking or two travel magazines. These issues would be the basis for a “mini” index. Together the periodical issues could be used to create a format for the index citations, to generate the subject terms for the controlled vocabulary and thesaurus, and to provide the articles for practice indexing. I had real doubts about whether this would work, as I wouldn't have the actual issues of the periodical titles in front of me. This decision worked out very well -- because the participants chose the titles themselves, they were more invested in them and enjoyed the process of creating the “mini” index for “their” journals.

## 6. Learning to use the Moodle website was daunting at first, but fun when I got used to it

Because time was pressing, I decided not to wait until all the classes were complete to begin putting the finished elements of my workshop on the Moodle website. Moodle is a Course Management System that is an “open source free web application for the online learning environment.” It allows for a number of components including the aforementioned “lecture” materials, readings written by others, assignments and activities, as well as the opportunity for discussion through “Discussion Forums” which are email exchanges like listservs. Simmons provides a Moodle tutorial for the instructors and also a link to the Moodle website. I read the tutorial, but still felt rather confused. Kris and Stacy at Simmons were wonderfully helpful. They answered my questions about the basics of working with Moodle and how to arrange the workshop's home page. Stacy suggested that it is helpful to have similar parts of the



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class look the same so I had a good time creating some graphic design thematics tying similar parts of the classes together while I learned how to manage the Moodle module.

## 7. Teaching online can be lonely for both the teacher and the participants — overcoming the bubble chamber syndrome

As I said in the introduction, I had never taught an online workshop before. Again Kris and Stacy were incredibly helpful (and tactful) by pointing out the following important point about teaching online.

Taking an online workshop can feel very lonely. They stressed the importance of the instructor's presence through written interaction with the participants. Following their suggestions, I set up a News Forum



My online workshop on periodical/database indexing, offered through the Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science Continuing Education program. The lecture materials are written sections delivered in PDFs.



Moodle News Forum reminder message to the students

through which I could communicate messages to the students such as “Remember the assignment due date is coming up” and general comments on the finished assignments. I tried to keep these announcements short and breezy so they wouldn’t sound like mothers reminding them to do their homework.

I also tried to respond to any questions from the participants made through the Help Desk Forum and to me directly as quickly as possible so they would feel someone was paying attention to their progress in the course. When some of the participants fell behind, I wrote to them encouraging them to continue and offering whatever help they might need to stay in the workshop. In the evaluations for the class my communications with the participants were given very good marks.

## 8. Teaching an online workshop can have some great discussions – by mail

Encouraging discussion is something all teachers try to do whether teaching in person or online. Each assignment was posted on its own discussion forum so everyone could see what choices other participants had made. I also asked the participants to comment on at least one other person’s work. As more assignments were posted the participants not only commented but also responded to those comments made about their own work and replied to comments on other participant’s work as well. I found that the participants of the January workshop were actually eager to “discuss”, willing to ask questions of others, wanted to make comments on other participants’ work, and happy to respond to my suggestions and comments in a way I had not found in my face to face presentations. There is a certain anonymity in emails that makes it easier, I think. And some of the January workshop

participants wanted to use the information in a practical and specific way in the library jobs.

## 9. I enjoyed teaching a lot more in an online setting

I was very surprised at how much more I enjoyed teaching an online workshop than doing a live presentation. I am not very good at speaking and answering questions quickly and with authority, but I like writing, so this made the format of an online workshop a perfect fit for me. And the interaction with the students was great. We had some really interesting theoretical and practical discussions about periodical indexing, which I miss because I work alone most of the time.

## 10. I learned so much from preparing the class and even more from the participants themselves

Of course, one of the things I learned from the participants was which parts of the workshop went well and which were confusing

or misleading. Things that had seemed obvious to me became topics of discussion and I learned to broaden my horizons in defining periodical indexing as well as making certain parts of the workshop clearer. I also learned new information and new applications of the periodical indexing processes. As one example, I had made the assumption that most periodical indexes were like the one I had worked on which indexed many periodical titles. But most of the participants were interested in indexing one title only – and they took the class for that reason. A group of librarians from Trinidad and Tobago were planning to index some of their library’s historical journals during their digitization, while several other people had taken on volunteer indexing jobs for a professional association or sorority of which they were members. Throughout the workshop questions were asked which challenged my preconceptions, led me to do more research, and were generally stimulating to the process of thinking about periodical indexing.

## Conclusion

I think I was very lucky that the participants in my first workshop were so amazing – they did all the assignments (although there was a little fall off at the end by some), even struggling with those they didn’t understand by asking questions until they did. I am teaching this workshop again as I write this, and the participants are just as interesting and involved as the previous workshop’s participants were so maybe luck has little to do with it. In any case, I am grateful for this opportunity and hope to go on teaching periodical/database indexing to others.

To find out about Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science Continuing Education program go to: [www.simmons.edu/gslis/careers/continuing-education/index.php](http://www.simmons.edu/gslis/careers/continuing-education/index.php)



Moodle “Discussion Forum.”