

How to assemble an authoritative reference work

David Crystal

For: *How to Get Published: a Guide for Academics* (THES, January 2004)

Early in the planning of the first edition of what later became *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, I visited the office of W & R Chambers in Edinburgh, to learn about the production process. Never having edited a one-volume general encyclopedia before, I was curious to know what sort of size and shape they had in mind for the final product. The production controller had a full-size dummy available, full of blank pages. He heaved it down from the shelf and opened it at the first page. 'I've done my job', he said. 'Yours is to start at the beginning and write small!'

To begin at the beginning? Only Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* does that. Reference books are rarely written or compiled from left to right. And that leads to the first big principle, if you decide to write or edit a reference book, whatever its subject-matter: the success lies in the planning.

You need to devote much more time to planning the structural organization of the work, compared to other types of publication. The cardinal criterion is to give your subject a balanced treatment. If you do not, be prepared for hate-mail afterwards. All subjects are equally contentious, in this regard. It is not just a matter of balancing Democrats and Republicans, or Christianity and Islam, in terms of numbers of entries or numbers of words. Proponents of minor schools of thought in linguistics or sedimentology can write pretty severe letters, if they think they have been short-changed. You have to be fair-minded.

At the same time, you have to be thick-skinned. No matter how fair you try to be, you will get hate-mail anyway. People always think that their particular favourite subject (or film-star or sports hero...) has been under-represented. But at least, if you've quantified your policy in advance, you have a defence ready.

For general reference works, you need to have a genuinely catholic range of interests. You cannot edit a subject well if it bores you. At the very least, you have to have a high regard for the range of intellectual traditions you are dealing with, and learn to develop a tolerance and respect for other people's enthusiasm and industry. Especially in such areas as religion, politics, and history, you have to display great sensitivity. It is so easy to slip up - for example to betray a Eurocentric bias by saying the British 'discovered' a country (when native Indians had lived in it for generations).

You need to be very clear about the general characteristics of the work. Length is the critical factor, as reference works tend to be long, and there are limits to the size that can be happily bound and handled in a single volume (as well as to purchasing price). Is it to be organized alphabetically, or thematically, or some kind of mixture of the two? Is it to be illustrated, in which case what is to be the balance between pictures and text? Is the organization to be in terms of chapters or sections, or is the text to be continuous? Will pages run on, or will information be organized into double-page spreads? Will there be sidebars or other extraneous material? None of these matters will be decided by the author or editor alone, of course. Expect daily email exchanges with your commissioning editor.

If you are going to use contributors, then whatever time you are proposing to allocate to the task of finding them, double it. This is one of the most frustrating sides of the business. Make your initial hit-list as inclusive as you can, regardless of duplication. You will rarely get your ideal set of people. The excuses will roll in. 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.' It took me eighteen months to get all my contributors for the first edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*. Things do speed up a bit, as you get to know people, and they get to know you.

The problem is compounded by the fact that it is not just a matter of finding specialists. There are plenty of specialists. You want specialists who can write. People who deal with the public - such as museum and gallery staff - are often better at exposition than academics. You also need to bear in mind internationalising contributor coverage (if the book is to sell in a particular part of the world), maintaining a balance of female and male writers, and perhaps reflecting an ethnic or religious balance, depending on the subject-matter.

The writing isn't as easy as is sometimes thought, because reference writing is actually highly creative. There is no simple subjective vs objective opposition here. I have written imaginative literature, in my time, and when I write or edit reference material I see many similarities. People select topics and slants and turns of phrase which are inevitably personal. They give an account which - unless the work is highly specialized - is inevitably a series of selected and simplified observations and approximations. Constraints of space and readability combine to make most general reference works sophisticated half-truths. There are no facts but editing makes them so.

When working with contributors, or even alone, you have to be a mixture of wooer, tactician, and disciplinarian. You have to persuade your contributors that your allocation of space is correct. It is of course an exercise in genteel scholarly debate - but it is a debate you must win. If you have decided that different religions will each have 10,000 words - say, 200 entries at 50 words, in an alphabetical approach - then the individual contributors must obey. They are not responsible for maintaining your thematic superstructure. That buck stops with the editor.

Contributors will agree to what you say, of course - and then proceed to ignore you. You will receive 220 entries, with several at 75 words, and an apologetic note. If you have asked for entries to be written in a particular house style, they will ignore that too. So you need a further personality trait: ruthlessness. If you cannot rewrite or cut, sensitively but firmly, then you are no reference editor.

You need to be brave, especially if you are editing your seniors, or editing a subject which you know little about. I remember receiving several hundred entries from my professorial chemistry contributor to what is now *The New Penguin Encyclopedia*. They were excellent chemistry, but mostly unintelligible. Although my knowledge of chemistry is minuscule, I rewrote them so that they made sense to the general reader, then sent them back to my chemist for checking. He wrote back that they now made excellent sense but they were terrible chemistry. He revised, and I reread. That cycle recurred several times, until we were both satisfied. It took about three months (in the days before email).

Clarity is everything, and it applies to format as well as content. You are responsible for making the reader's task as easy as possible. It is no good having information if it is unclear, but equally, it is no good having information which cannot be found. So you need well-designed preliminary matter, a substantial preface or introduction explaining your approach, sensible running heads, prominent section breaks, judicious cross-references, and above all, in a thematic reference work, an excellent index. A thematic Factfinder without an index is a contradiction in terms.

If you are going to have illustrations, there is one cardinal principle: decide upon the pictures as early as possible, *before* you start writing the text. Writers usually think the other way round, and there lies a chronicle of wasted time. I learned this the hard way, with the first edition of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. I would write the text of a section, then think of a possible picture, and allocate a postage-stamp-sized space for it. The picture researcher would in due course produce a fantastic picture for me, which I just had to use - but it would take up a quarter of a page. As a result, I had to cut out several lines of text, which I believed I had already honed to perfection, to make the picture fit. (But that is easier than the opposite: when a picture is found which is *smaller* than the space you have allocated for it, and you then have to unhone, by finding relevant and unwaffly material to add seamlessly to said perfection.)

Reference books by their nature rely greatly on the work of others. You are always standing on shoulders. And it is important to check whether any of those shoulders need permission before they can be stood upon. You should start obtaining clearances as early as possible, therefore, and this is especially important if a piece of text is totally dependent on obtaining a particular picture, or diagram, or quotation. Some poetry estates are notorious for refusing permission if there is any adaptation to be made. Some publishers are notorious for their delays in processing applications. Some sources are notorious for the costs they charge, which may exceed your budget. All kinds of problems may make it impossible for you to use a desired source - and if your text is already written, you have wasted your time.

What personality traits are prerequisite for successful reference publishing? I have already mentioned some, such as fairmindedness and ruthlessness. Additionally, you have to be well-organized, especially when you are dealing with dozens of contributors, whose material is coming in at different times, and where your interaction is operating at different stages of editorial involvement. Because of the time it takes to get contributors, you might find yourself on the same day having a preliminary discussion

about content with author A, reading a first draft from author B, tweaking a final version of author C, and copy-editing a version of author D (or checking the work of your copy-editor).

You have to be able to switch on and off, as you move from subject to subject. My notes tell me that one morning, in the middle of an encyclopedia edition, there was a series of phone calls from (a) the pharmacologist, wanting to discuss some modifications to his entry on AIDS drugs, (b) the ornithologist, with various ideas about illustrations, (c) one of the religious studies team, replying to a query about the options for Biblical references, and (d) the in-house editor at the publishers, who had queries about (e) the use of hyphens and dashes in chemical formulae, and (f) the dating conventions for historical battles. During all this, I was (g) attempting to edit the literature entries.

You have to have the ability to focus. Having worked out a general schedule, you must teach yourself to forget it, and live only for the day - or, indeed, for the entry. You must imagine that the entry or section on which you are working is the only entry that exists in the world. That is how the reader sees it, after all. Few reference books are read continuously, from left to right. Readers work non-linearly, when they look something up. Only that part of the work counts, for them. Nothing else exists.

There is an additional benefit from this item-by-item focusing. It keeps you sane. The day you allow into your consciousness the fact that you still have 17, 569 entries to write or edit, you are lost.

You have to be a deeply suspicious person. Trust no-one. For current affairs, check everything in two sources. Above all, never trust the Web, where editing standards are often conspicuous by their absence.

You have to be loyal to the book. A reference work is never finished. It always needs updating. It is not like a novel, or a monograph, which you can send off to the publisher and effectively wash your hands of it. New or corrected editions always loom. You can never leave it behind. A reference work is like the old man of the sea, always hanging on your neck, no matter how old a neck you have.

And lastly, you have to be firm with yourself. Valéry's dictum applies as much to reference works as to poems: they are never finished, only abandoned.