

**Seth Maislin: A is for Arbitrary**, Managing Partner of Potomac Indexing, LLC (<http://www.potomacindexing.com>)

In his preface, Seth said, "Alphabetical order, despite its illusory appearance of being easy to implement, is a terrible way to organize things. We don't think, talk or act alphabetically, nor are we limited to the alphabet when we think, talk or act. Let's take some time to explore all of the other, better sorting options, learn how to implement them practically, and find lots of good excuses to abandon A to Zzzzz."

Seth started by giving us some of the problems with arbitrary orders, such as alphabetical, and the rules accompanying them:

- In ASCII software, capitalized letters precede lowercase letters.
- In the SKY Index application, the "Of" in "Of Mice and Men" would be ignored at a subheading level.
- And what do you do about "The Who" if you dismiss the "The"?

He proposed the fascinating problem of managing a school reunion with 1,000 attendees: How would you organize them into a database for registering, searching, matching, etc.? Some possibilities are:

- Last names, first names, married names – probably alphabetical
- Locations – listed by state, city, or town name; or mapped?
- Employment status – full-time vs. retired?
- Hair color - real vs. fake, current vs. past, bald vs. balding? And what is the "spectral alphabet" of hair color and shades anyway?

Another flawed example: *The Dictionary of Musical Themes* which gives many themes all transposed to the key of C. For example, Beethoven's *Ode To Joy* is EEFGGF, with no indication of tempo, instrumentation, etc., and happens to share the same sequence as a theme from Dvorak!

As we can see in these examples, sorting, which is really useful, is contextual and requires that we throw away 99% of the information that doesn't matter and keep the 1% with the greatest impact.

Seth projected a slide which was clear and enlightening:

# Data Organization Schemes

## Exact (objective, limited)


- ▶ by letter (alphabetical)
- ▶ by digit (numeral)
- ▶ by value (numerical)
- ▶ by time (chronological)
- ▶ by location (spatial)

## Ambiguous (subjective)

- ▶ by concept (topical)
- ▶ by task (functional)
- ▶ by audience
- ▶ relative to an external system (metaphoric)

## Custom (usually exact)

## Hybrid (mixed)

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Some examples of sorting which illustrate the need to use a sorting scheme other than an alphabetical scheme:

- How would you find a particular implement in someone else's kitchen? A spatula? A pitcher? A whisk?
- How do you organize your LP records or CDs? By your favorite performer? By composer? By mood, style?
- The Periodic Table is an amazingly powerful scheme.
- The Windows and Mac desktops are organized metaphorically, but once learned they are very powerful!


And some examples of hybrid schemes:

- Greeting cards in the stationery store: by occasion, by recipient, by age, by tone (e.g., humorous), with sound, etc.
- Internal Revenue Service (IRS) forms and instructions are numbered but also organized by function.
- At the <http://www.house.gov/house/> you will find members of the U.S. House of Representatives organized by state on a map of the country, in addition to alphabetically by last name.

Another valuable slide:

# 'Xamples for real-life indexes

- ▶ **Counting or chronological order**
  - infants, toddlers, schoolchildren, adolescents, young adults, ...
  - Windows Vista, Windows XP, Windows 2000, Windows 95
- ▶ **Spatial order**
  - !, @, #, \$, %, ^, &, \*, (, ), -, + [from qwerty keyboard]
  - troposphere, stratosphere, mesosphere, thermosphere, exosphere
- ▶ **Topical order**
  - addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, exponentiation, ...
  - bedroom, bathroom, living room, dining room, home office, storage, ...
- ▶ **Task or functional order**
  - arrest, booking, arraignment, plea bargain, preliminary hearings, pre-trial, ...
  - Envisioning phase, Planning phase, Developing phase, Stabilizing phase, ...
- ▶ **Audience or person order**
  - students, teachers, administrators, parents
  - woodwinds (piccolo to bassoon), brass, percussion (any), strings (violin to bass)

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(The word *Examples* in the title of slide above is shortened as part of an alphabetizing joke.)

In summing up, Seth recommended:

1. Know how your audience is thinking.
2. Learn how to override the defaults in your software program.
3. For typical back-of-the-book indexes, main headings remain essentially in A-to-Z order, but:
4. Determine your exceptions, and any exceptions to exceptions.
5. Rewrite labels to counteract alphabetical arbitrariness such as the order of 5, 15, and 50, spelled out as *fifteen*, *fifty*, and *five*!

— Submitted by Dick Luxner