



CREATING AN ALPHABETICAL INDEX IN WORD

Help Readers Find What They Need

You mark the important entries. Word does the rest—alphabetizes, adds page numbers, and keeps it up to date.

BEFORE: HARD TO FIND ANYTHING

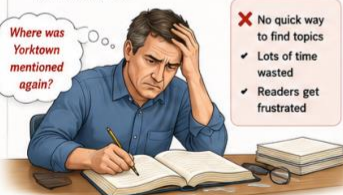
Readers must search page by page.
Time-consuming and frustrating.

Chapter 4: The American Revolution

The French alliance helped the Americans. General George Washington led the Continental Army at Yorktown in 1781. The French Navy blocked British ships in the Chesapeake. The victory forced Lord Cornwallis to surrender.

Chapter 11: After the War

The Treaty of Paris in 1783 recognized American independence. Many Americans were in debt after the long war.



✗ No quick way to find topics
✓ Lots of time wasted
✓ Readers get frustrated

THE INDEX WORKFLOW

1 MARK INDEX ENTRIES

Select the word or phrase, then choose **Mark Entry** to identify important topics and names.

Mark Index Entry

Index

Main entry: George Washington

Subentry:

Options: ☒ Mark ☐ Mark All

Mark Cancel

2 WORD TRACKS IT

Word inserts a hidden XE field at each location.

{ XE "George Washington" }
led the Continental Army...
{ XE "George Washington" }
was a great leader.

3 INSERT INDEX

When you're ready, insert the Index. Word gathers, alphabetizes, and adds page numbers.

Insert Index

Format: Classic

Columns: 2

Language: English (United States)

OK Cancel

4 UPDATE ANYTIME

Add content? No problem. Update the index with one click.

Update Index

☐ Update page numbers only
☒ Update entire index

OK Cancel

AFTER: EASY TO FIND INFORMATION

An index helps readers find what they need—fast and easily.

INDEX	
A	P
Articles of Confederation 142	Paris, Treaty of (1783) 141, 142
Army, Continental 54, 60, 64	Peace negotiations 139–142
C	T
Cornwallis, Lord 62, 63	Taxation (British) 12–15
Culper Spy Ring 95	Tea Act 19
F	W
French alliance 48–50	Washington, George (See George Washington)
French Navy 61, 62	War of Independence (See American Revolution)
G	
George Washington 17, 18, 25, 26, 30, 55, 60, 64, 112	Yorktown 60–64
as Commander in Chief 54, 55	
at Valley Forge 27, 28	

An index turns your document into a powerful reference tool that readers will appreciate.

- ✓ Alphabetized for quick scanning
- ✓ Hyperlinked Click (Cmd/Ctrl) to jump to any page
- ✓ One-click Update Keep page numbers accurate
- ✓ Built from your marked entries and styles

GOOD INDEXING PRACTICES

- ✓ Index important people, places, concepts, and terms.
- ✓ Be selective—don't index everything.
- ✓ Use subentries to keep topics organized.
- ✓ Add cross-references for alternate terms.
- ✓ Review for consistency and duplicates.

• XE FIELD (Behind the Scenes)

Hidden XE fields store your entries. Show them with Show/Hide ¶.

Example:

{ XE "Yorktown" }
was the site of the final battle. ¶

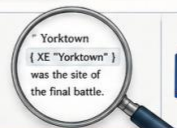


TABLE OF CONTENTS vs. INDEX

- **Table of Contents** = shows the structure of your document.
- **Index** = shows where specific subjects are discussed.



WRITE YOUR DOCUMENT. LET WORD BUILD THE INDEX. Save time. Reduce errors. Make your document more useful.



Creating an Alphabetical Index in Word

Help Readers Find What They Need

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

A Table of Contents Is Not an Index

Many people confuse a **Table of Contents** with an **index**, but they serve two very different purposes. A Table of Contents shows readers how a document is organized by listing chapters and major sections in the order they appear. An index, on the other hand, helps readers locate specific names, places, subjects, and ideas wherever they appear throughout the document. Instead of following the document from beginning to end, an index arranges important topics alphabetically.

For example, a history book might include entries for **George Washington**, **Yorktown**, **Continental Army**, and **French alliance**. A computer manual might index **bookmarks**, **footnotes**, **page breaks**, and **Styles**. Each entry directs readers to the pages where that subject is discussed.

A good index transforms a lengthy document from something that must be read sequentially into a reference tool that readers can consult quickly and efficiently.

Why Would You Want an Index?

Readers don't always begin with Chapter One. Often they simply need one particular fact and want to find it quickly.

Suppose someone is reading a 300-page family history and wants to locate every mention of a particular ancestor. Without an index, that reader may have to search page by page. With an index, the name appears alphabetically along with every page on which it is discussed.

Indexes are especially valuable in books, memoirs, historical works, instruction manuals, textbooks, cookbooks, policy guides, technical reports, and lengthy research papers. While a two-page business letter certainly doesn't need an index, any document that readers are likely to consult repeatedly probably does.

Word Cannot Choose the Entries for You

Microsoft Word can build and format an index automatically, but it cannot decide which subjects deserve inclusion. That part still requires human judgment.

As the author or editor, you identify the names, places, concepts, and technical terms readers are most likely to search for. Word then keeps track of where those subjects occur and assembles the finished alphabetical listing.

This distinction is important. Word performs the mechanical work, but the writer provides the intelligence.

Marking an Index Entry

Creating an index begins by selecting a word or phrase you want readers to find. After highlighting the text, open the **Mark Index Entry** dialog box.

Where to find it: References → Index → Mark Entry.

The selected text appears as the **Main Entry**. You may accept Word's suggestion or edit it before marking the entry. Clicking **Mark** indexes only the selected occurrence, while **Mark All** indexes every identical occurrence throughout the document.

Although **Mark All** can save considerable time, use it carefully. The same word may appear in places where it isn't important enough to deserve an index entry.

The Hidden XE Field

Whenever you mark an index entry, Word inserts a hidden field code known as an **XE field**, short for *Index Entry*. It looks something like this:

```
{ XE "George Washington" }
```

These hidden codes normally remain invisible, but you can display them whenever you need to review or edit your index entries.

Where to find it: Home → Show/Hide ¶.

Don't be alarmed if your document suddenly fills with paragraph marks and field codes. They're editing symbols only and will never appear in the printed document.

Main Entries and Subentries

Some subjects benefit from a second level of organization. Rather than listing dozens of unrelated page numbers after a broad topic, Word allows you to create subentries.

For example:

Microsoft Word

bookmarks, 42

indexes, 76–79

Styles, 18–23

tables of contents, 31–35

To create this arrangement, enter **Microsoft Word** as the Main Entry and each individual topic as a **Subentry**. Subentries make large indexes easier to scan while preventing major topics from becoming cluttered with long strings of page numbers.

Cross-References

Sometimes readers search for one term when your document uses another. An index can guide them through cross-references.

For example:

Great War. See World War I

or

Word processing. See also Microsoft Word

These cross-references help readers locate information even when they don't know the exact terminology you've used in the document.

Inserting the Finished Index

After you've marked the important entries, place the insertion point where you want the completed index to appear. Since indexes normally appear near the end of a book or report, that's usually where you'll insert it.

Choose:

References → Insert Index

Word opens the **Index** dialog box, where you can choose the number of columns, select a formatting style, align page numbers, and customize the page-number leaders. After clicking **OK**, Word gathers every marked entry, alphabetizes them, inserts the correct page numbers, and creates a professionally formatted index in just a few seconds.

Updating the Index

Like a Table of Contents, an index is never permanently finished. If you add text, delete pages, or mark additional entries, the page numbers will almost certainly change.

Fortunately, updating the index is simple. Click anywhere inside the finished index and choose **Update Index**, or right-click and select **Update Field**. Word recalculates every entry and updates the page numbers automatically.

There's no need to rebuild the index from scratch each time your document changes.

Editing Index Entries

If you discover that an index entry is misspelled or grouped under the wrong heading, don't edit the finished index itself. The next update will overwrite your changes.

Instead, display the hidden formatting marks, locate the appropriate **XE field**, correct the text there, and update the index again. Remember that the printed index is merely the finished product; the XE fields are the source information from which Word builds it.

Don't Mark Everything

One of the most common mistakes beginners make is trying to index every important-looking word. A useful index is selective, not exhaustive.

As you work through your document, ask yourself a few simple questions. Would a reader reasonably search for this subject? Is the discussion substantial enough to justify an index entry? Would the topic be better organized as a subentry beneath a broader heading? Is the same concept already indexed under another name?

A good index doesn't include everything. It includes what matters most to the reader.

Curt's Quick Tip

Create your index after the document is nearly finished, but don't wait until the very last minute. Marking entries requires thoughtful decisions and often takes longer than expected. For large documents, work through one chapter at a time, marking significant people, places, concepts, and technical terms before reviewing the completed index for duplicate or inconsistent wording.

For example, **Civil War**, **American Civil War**, and **War Between the States** may all need to be consolidated or connected through cross-references so readers can easily find the information they're seeking.

Table of Contents or Index?

The difference between these two features is surprisingly simple. A **Table of Contents** shows readers how the author organized the document. An **index** shows readers where particular subjects are discussed.

The Table of Contents helps readers follow the author's presentation. The index helps them answer their own questions. Long nonfiction works often benefit from having both.

Making a Document More Useful

An index is far more than a decorative list tucked away at the back of a book. It's a carefully organized roadmap that helps readers locate information quickly and efficiently. Microsoft Word handles the alphabetizing, formatting, and page-number tracking automatically, but the quality of the finished index depends entirely upon the author's judgment.

Choose meaningful entries, organize them thoughtfully, and your document becomes far easier to navigate and much more valuable as a long-term reference. That's the real purpose of an index—not merely to finish a book, but to help readers find exactly what they're looking for with the least possible effort.