

## Do editors focus on the wrong things?

*Too many editors focus on the details and don't pay enough attention to the bigger picture when reviewing documents. Do you agree? Jean Hollis Weber examines this controversial viewpoint.*

Is this statement true, or do writers, managers and others only perceive it to be true? If it is true, why does this happen? If it is not true, why do so many people think that is what editors do?

I think the statement is true (notice I said 'too many', not 'all' or even 'most'), and that it is a problem for editors in general. (See note 1). Because some editors focus—or appear to focus—mainly on details (spelling, punctuation, formal grammar, word choices), other people are left with the impression that all editors are pedantic, nit-picky people who are more interested in correcting mistakes and enforcing rules than in helping writers create the best document for the intended audience.

Am I saying that the details aren't important? No, certainly not! I am saying that the details are only part—often a rather small part—of

what an editor can and should be reviewing. After all, a document can be correctly spelled and punctuated, grammatically correct, and use only approved terminology selected for the target audience, and yet not serve that audience's needs.

Why does this narrow editorial focus occur, or appear to occur? I can think of several reasons, some to do with editors themselves and others associated with the perceptions and priorities of managers, writers and other clients.

Many editors are in one of these groups:

- They don't believe they can contribute substantively (see note 2) because they haven't been trained in substantive editing or they aren't sufficiently familiar with the subject matter they are editing.

- They are more comfortable enforcing rules than making suggestions and then dealing with writers and others who may not appreciate those suggestions.
- They know they can contribute substantively, but they don't have time (or aren't allowed) to do so.
- They lack the basic skills and knowledge to do a good job of copyediting, so they never get the chance to go beyond that stage, even though they might be very good at substantive editing.

Many managers, writers and other clients believe one or more of the following statements; you can probably think of others.

- Editors do only the picky things, not more substantive evaluation.
- It's not an editor's job to substantially revise a writer's work.

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### Next meeting: Tuesday, 2 November 2004

Professor Pam Peters will discuss her new book *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*.

How can anyone working with words not want a book which, says one reviewer, 'is unique in the extent of its coverage of all the major varieties of English and in the degree to which it is based on corpus evidence'? Another reviewer says, 'This is the kind of book that helps you sort out the nitty gritty of areas of usage when you need them and then you find yourself straying to other points and then to other pages until you've probably forgotten why you picked it up in the first place.'

*The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* is the most recent of Professor Pam Peters' four books. Professor Peters is based at Macquarie University where she is Associate Professor in Linguistics, Director of the Dictionary Research Centre and Style Council Centre and Coordinator of the Postgraduate Program in Editing and Publishing.

Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, 280 Pitt Street, 6.30 p.m. for 7.00 p.m. Drinks and light refreshments provided. \$13 for members; \$16 for non-members and those who don't RSVP; \$7 for holders of a current concession card. Please RSVP to 9294 4999 (voicemail) or <brehed@pnc.com.au> (email) by Friday, 29 October. **December meeting: Tuesday 7 December.**

- Substantive editing takes too long and costs too much.
- Editing is done after the manuscript is written, leaving insufficient time to change anything major that an editor might find.

Can we, as editors, do anything to overcome these beliefs and attitudes? Certainly, if the problem is at our end, we can seek training in both editing skills and negotiating and other skills for dealing with people.

We need to make sure that we know how to add value through substantive editing, if we're going to put ourselves forward to do it. That often means we need to learn a lot more about technical topics, not just writing and editing issues. Indeed, we may need to know almost as much about the topic as do the writers we edit. The main difference is that we should come from the audience's point of view more than from the technical side. For example, if we're editing documents aimed at accountants, we need to know something about accounting, so we can tell whether the writing is pitched at the right level, uses appropriate concepts, is organised into tasks that accountants would do, and so on.

If the problem is with others' perceptions, we can point out the considerable value we can add by substantive editing as well as copyediting. (Indeed, we can point out that the copyediting can and should include more than it often does.)

We need to counteract the impression of an editorial focus on minutiae that one gets from reading some of the exchanges on the Technical Writers' list (TECHWR-L) and the Help Authoring Tools and Techniques list (HATT), among others. The impression may be false, but it's a common one. Reading the Copyeditors' list (COPYEDITING-L) gives a better picture of the range of editorial work, but our clients, managers, writers and other co-workers are less likely to read that list.

To help us make our points, we need good examples that are meaningful to the people we're trying to convince.

Our case is always stronger when we are perceived to be presenting facts, not just opinions.

#### Footnotes

1. Some people who agree with me on this issue are Don Bush (who writes the 'Friendly Editor' column in the STC's newsletter *Intercom* and with Charles P. Campbell wrote a book titled *How to Edit Technical Documents*, 1995, ISBN 0897748700) and Bruce Byfield, (see 'Tech Writers, Grammar, and the Prescriptive Attitude' on the Techwhirl website, <<http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/magazine/writing/grammar.html>>). Carolyn Rude (author of *Technical Editing*, third edition, Longman, 2001, ISBN 020533556X) and Judith A. Tarutz (author of *Technical Editing, The Practical Guide for Editors and Writers*, Addison-Wesley, 1992, ISBN 0201563568) emphasise both details and the bigger picture. No doubt many other editors say the same.

2. Substantive editing is also called comprehensive or developmental editing.

#### Further reading

See the links from my 'About Technical Editing' page <<http://www.jeanweber.com/about/index.htm>>; in particular: 'The role of the editor in the technical writing team' <<http://www.jeanweber.com/about/edrole.htm>> 'Classifying editorial tasks' <<http://www.jeanweber.com/about/classify.htm>>

*Jean Hollis Weber is a technical editing consultant based in Airlie Beach. Jean has written many articles on editing and her website <<http://www.jeanweber.com>> provides a valuable resource for editors. This article is reprinted with permission from the November/December 2002 issue of the Newsletter, Society of Editors (Victoria).*

## CALL FOR CONTRIBUTIONS



Do you have something to say? Have you been to an interesting conference or event? We welcome your contributions to

Blue Pencil.

We would like to publish your articles, book reviews or letters. Please email the editor at <[cje\\_editing@hotmail.com](mailto:cje_editing@hotmail.com)>



# The twin pillars, viewed from the trenches

Janet Mackenzie, *The Editor's Companion*, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.xii + 219, ISBN 0 521 605 695

## BOOK REVIEW

The twin pillars are the *Style Manual* and the *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*. The trenches are where Janet Mackenzie has been, editing, writing and teaching, for many years. This book lives up to Janet's ambition of providing, on the editor's desk, a partial substitute for the mentor.

The book has a brief overview of what an editor does, but concentrates on offering sage advice on how to do it. There are cross references to the *Style manual* for the details of editing tasks, and to the *Standards*, to show where the tasks fit in the overall editing process. This approach allows discussion of a wide range of topics in a relatively short book. The book concentrates on freelancers and their problems, but will still be useful to in-house editors.

As well, the book is a good read. There are plenty of jokes and asides to make the content easier to absorb, and the advice is clearly based on many years of experience.

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Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is the conversation it invokes between the twin pillars, itself, and the reader. It would be educational indeed to have the three books open on the desk, reflect on what each is saying on a topic, and consider how one's own practice compares. Of course, typical academic that I am, I didn't actually do this myself, but it would be useful all the same.

I think all members should acquire this book, if they haven't already, and use it as a basis for study and professional development.

Bruce Howarth

*I think all members should acquire this book, if they haven't already, and use it as a basis for study and professional development.*



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# Deleting the headaches from quoting

*'Would you give me a quote for editing this, please?' We've been down this path before, but it is a perennial problem, so perhaps another look at quoting won't go amiss at the start of a new editing year.*

If we all worked in offices and employed staff and were members of a union, perhaps our hourly rates would be pretty much determined for us. But we don't, and we aren't. Some of us have high overheads to consider, families and homes to maintain, staff including graphic artists, office workers, other editors and so on to think of and budget for.

The vast majority of us, however, work at home, alone, often in a corner of the living room, sometimes sharing the family computer with children doing homework—maybe the house is paid off, maybe there's another breadwinner, maybe this is more of a hobby than a career, occasional rather than full-time.

None of that is anyone's business but our own. Whatever our situation, we are all expected to have professional standards and maintain a professional image in the eyes of our clients—in Canberra that means very largely the public service. So how do we arrive at a reasonable fee for the work we are about to do?

In my early editing days, I used to phone around a group of editors working on documents similar to those I was editing, and chat with them about

fees. I would get a rough idea of where fees were at the start of that particular year. As time has gone on, and I have gained experience and a clientele, I have pushed my basic fee up to a point that seems fair for the job and doesn't seriously undercut people who have much bigger overheads than I have.

But there should be a formula for arriving at a fee for any job. Can we devise one by trying to answer these, and probably many other, questions?

- What level of edit is the job?
- What other responsibilities go with the job (for example, project management, indexing)?
- What proportion of the MS can you wrinkle out of the client for assessment?
- Is it representative of the whole document?
- Is it purely editing, or is some tuition or explanation expected on the side?
- How well qualified/experienced are you as an editor?
- Can you work confidently alone, or do you need help/mentoring?
- Can you work on-line?
- Can you meet all of the criteria set down by the client?
- Are the sample pages sufficient to assess the level of edit etc required?

The lead article by Helena Bond in the October 2001 edition of *Offpress*, newsletter of the Society of Editors (Queensland) Inc, raises a number of issues related to quoting, and ends with the experienced quoter's solution: 'I've trimmed my quoting time down enormously. I kept detailed statistics until I could see patterns emerging, then I analysed those figures to understand how many words I do an hour for each service. 'So when I'm asked to quote, I get a word count, then check my rate and speed for the service required. After that it's just simple mathematics to get the hours for my schedule and the dollars for my quote. Add any standard extras,

like a loading for jobs with extra-tight timelines, allowances for meetings, etc., quick reality check on a sample of the document, and hey presto, the quote's ready.'

I can relate to that approach—I use it myself. But is it as simple as that for the new editor? I don't think so. New editors worry over whether something is really just a proofread, or rather a proofread with a bit of copy-editing thrown in, and if so, should they charge at the copy-editing rate or what? And anyway, what's the copy-editing rate this week for people with not much experience yet, and heck, what's 'substantive editing' anyway? If you have to turn a sentence upside down for it to make sense, is that substantive editing? Or only when you have to rewrite whole slabs? And how many meetings can you charge for? And who pays for the depreciation on your computer and other equipment, not to mention the horrendous insurance you have to carry these days?

And let us not forget a formal letter that sets out what has been agreed to (in public service editing, this will be a contract that you can have amended if need be). And at any time during the assignment, there must be more formal letters setting out any variations that have occurred and confirming phone conversations etc.

The questions are seemingly endless, but as a group I suggest we ought to be able to come up with a formula to help us all when it comes to dealing with that most difficult part of editing—quoting.

*Elizabeth M Murphy*

*This article is reprinted with permission from the January 2002 issue of The Canberra Editor.*

## NEW MEMBERS

Melody Lord  
Sarah Fitzherbert  
Lorraine Leung  
Lisa Burrell  
Tara Mathey  
Diane Jardine  
Deborah Warnock  
Kathy Fox  
Clara Finlay  
Emma Driver  
Shirleyann Gibbs  
Kate McAllan  
Jill More



# Society's Christmas Party

Tuesday, 7 December

Don't miss a special night of good food, good fun and good company.

Mark this not-to-be-missed date in your diary — now.

Please check the website and our next newsletter for more details.

## Abbey's Bookshop to give discount

At the society's November meeting, Abbey's Bookshop will be selling signed copies of *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage*.

Abbey's will give members and other attending the meeting a generous discount on this must-have book.



## Galley Club's Christmas Party

*Date:* Friday, 10th December

*Venue:* Union Hotel

(cnr Pacific Hwy & West St) North Sydney

*Time:* 6.30 – 11.00pm

*Cost:* \$30 members, \$40 non-members (includes drinks, canapes, free pool)

Membership can be renewed on the night

RSVP: by 1 December to Samantha at: catering@galleyclubsydney.org.au

For further enquiries please contact Janis Barbi on 0413 272 091

or president@galleyclubsydney.org.au

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## NEWS AND NOTICES

### **Inner City Life Literary Competition 2004: Deadline Friday, 3 December 2004**

This is a literary competition for adults on the theme of 'Inner City Life' organised by the NSW Writers' Centre, sponsored by Gleebooks and the *Village Voice*, and is open to anyone from anywhere. The topic is 'Inner City Life Anywhere Anytime', and there are two categories. Category One is for Short Stories with a maximum of 500 words. Category Two is for poetry with a maximum of 20 lines.

*Conditions:* You don't have to be an inner-city resident to enter. There is a five dollar entry fee and you can submit as many entries as you like. Judges will be Chris O'Donnell (NSW Writers' Centre), Roger Mackell (Gleebooks), Norm Neill (poet) and Gillian McNally (*Village Voice*).

Prizes include cash amounts for first place (\$100), second place (\$60) and third place (\$50), Gleebooks vouchers and complimentary annual membership of the New South Wales Writers' Centre. Commended entrants will be asked to read their entries at the New South Wales Writers' Centre's Christmas Party on 10 December 2004. The *Village Voice* will publish the winning entries in both categories in its January 2005 issue. For details about the conditions of the competition, phone the New South Wales Writers' Centre (02) 9555 9757) or email [nswwc@nswwriterscentre.com.au](mailto:nswwc@nswwriterscentre.com.au). Competition details can also be found online at [www.nswwriterscentre.org.au](http://www.nswwriterscentre.org.au).

### **2004 Fast Books Prizes for the Best Self-Published Australian Books**

Prizes of \$500 will be awarded to the best book self-published between 1 September 2003 and 30 August 2004 by an Australian writer in the six categories of fiction, poetry, auto/biography/memoir/family history, children's/young adult, non-fiction general, and history/local history. The judges' decision will be based on the quality of the books including content and production. Peter Ross and Angelo Loukakis will judge the fiction and poetry. Winners will be announced at the Australian Publishers and Authors Bookshow 2004 at 9.30 a.m. on Saturday, 20 November 2004 at

the New South Wales Writers' Centre. Each prize winner will receive \$500 and a trophy containing their book, framed in acrylic.

The short list in each category will be announced in the October 2004 issue of *Newswrite*. The winning entries will be on display throughout the Bookshow weekend of 20–21 November 2004. An entry form can be obtained by sending a stamped and self-addressed envelope to the NSW Writers' Centre, PO Box 1056, Rozelle NSW 2039, or the form can be downloaded from the internet at [www.booksandwriters.com.au](http://www.booksandwriters.com.au). For further inquiries regarding the competition conditions, phone (02) 9555 9757.

### **Newcastle Poetry Prize: Closing date 29 October 2004**

Formerly known as the Mattara Prize (1981 to 1991), this prize is considered a major event in the Australian literary calendar. The 2004 competition will have three sections—The Newcastle Poetry Prize (\$8000), the Newcastle Poetry Prize New Media Award (\$2000) and the Newcastle Poetry Prize Local Poets Award (\$500). The judges for the 2004 competition are John Bennett, Judy Johnson and Lizz Murphy. Closing date for entries is 29 October 2004.

Conditions of entry and entry forms are available at the Hunter Writer's Centre, [www.hwc.mockfrog.com.au/](http://www.hwc.mockfrog.com.au/), or by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to The Hunter Writer's Centre, PO Box 71 Hamilton 2303. For more information contact Newcastle City Council's Sponsorship and Grants Officer Ruth Edwards on (02) 4974 2836, Brian Joyce, Coordinator of the Hunter Writers' Centre on (02) 4940 0003 or Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brian English on (02) 4921 5114.

### **Daphne du Maurier Short Story Competition (UK): Closing date 30 November 2004**

This competition is organised by Restormel Borough Council in Cornwall, which also coordinates the Daphne du Maurier Festival of Arts and Literature each May, in and around Fowey in Cornwall. This year's theme

is 'A Haunting'. The story should reflect the unusual, unexpected and unconventional nature of Daphne du Maurier's own short stories. The competition is sponsored by Ottakar's and is open to anyone 18 or over. There are prizes for first place (£2000), second place (£750) and third place (£250).

Full details and entry forms are available by writing to the Daphne du Maurier Short Story Competition, Daphne du Maurier Festival Office, Restormel Borough Council, 39 Penwinnick Road, St Austell PL25 5DR. For further information about conditions of the competition, inquiries can also be emailed to [dumaurierinfo@restormel.gov.uk](mailto:dumaurierinfo@restormel.gov.uk).

### **Asham Award (UK): Closing date 30 January 2005**

The biennial Asham Award, Britain's only prize for short stories by women, was set up in 1996 by the Asham Literary Endowment Trust and is named after Asham House in Sussex, former home of Virginia Woolf. The next award will be launched in October 2004 and the closing date for entries is 30 January 2005. The competition is open to women who have not yet had a novel or anthology published. There is over £3000 in prize money to be won and the winning stories will be published by Bloomsbury. For details and an application form, send an A5 stamped addressed envelope to: The Asham Trust, Town Hall, High Street, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2QS. The twelve winning stories will be published by Bloomsbury in April 2004 in an anthology entitled *Shoe Fly Baby*. Further information can also be found at the following website [www.wordup.co.uk/awardsandprizes/old/asham.htm](http://www.wordup.co.uk/awardsandprizes/old/asham.htm).

### **Australia-US Free Trade Agreement: Culture & Trade Industry Briefings**

The Australian Writers' Guild, the Australian Screen Directors Association, the Screen Producers Association, the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance and the Australian Society of Authors are providing this

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information session on where the state of the negotiations are at and how people trade away our cultural future. Speakers include Jock Given, senior research fellow at the Institute for Social Research, Swinburne University of Technology; Richard Harris, Executive Director, Australian Screen Directors Association, and Megan Elliot, Executive Director, Australian Writers' Guild. The talks begin at 6.30 p.m., on Tuesday, 11 November at the Tom Keneally Room, Hotel Marriott, 30 Pitt Street, Sydney. Drinks will be held afterwards. To RSVP or to find out more details about the evening, send your emails to <admin@awg.com.au>.

## **Call for papers: Australian Society of Indexers 18 to 19 March 2005**

Expressions of interest in presenting a paper at the next conference of the Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI) in Melbourne are now being invited. The theme of the 2005 conference will be 'Indexing: engage, enlighten, enrich'. Areas of interest include indexing for museums, pictures, sound and moving images, history, the web, newspapers, databases, back-of-book, and children's literature. Papers may be presented as full conference papers, in workshops or round table discussions. To obtain an expression of interest form or to register for the conference see the Indexers Society's website <www.aussi.org/conferences/2005/papercall.htm>. You can also contact the Australian Society of Indexers on (03) 9500 8715 or email: <mindexer@optusnet.com.au>.

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PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007; Voicemail: (02) 9294 4999  
<www.editorsnsw.com>.

### **Blue Pencil**

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Your comments and contributions are welcome. Mail them to the Editor, *Blue Pencil*, Society of Editors (NSW) Inc., PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007, or email Catherine Etteridge@<cje\_editing@hotmail.com>.

### **Copy deadline for the December issue is Wednesday, 10 November 2004.**

The views expressed in the articles and letters, or the material contained in any advertisement or insert, are not the responsibility of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

### **Advertising rates**

Full page, \$150; half page, \$80 (horizontal only); one-third page, \$50 (vertical or horizontal); quarter page \$40 (horizontal only); one-sixth page, \$30 (half of one column). Inserts: \$75 per hundred for DL-sized or A4 pre-folded to DL size. Circulation: approximately 375.

### **Membership**

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor for publication (print or electronic documents), and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 2004 fees are \$65 for new members (\$40 if joining after 30 June) and \$60 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9294 4999, write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007, or download an application from the society's website at <http://www.editorsnsw.com>.

### **Listing in the Editorial Services Directory**

The society's Editorial Services Directory is available online at <www.editorsnsw.com/esd/>. New listings and updates can be added quarterly as follows:

- online only: July (deadline 30 June); October (deadline 30 September)
  - print and online: January (deadline 31 December); April (deadline 31 March).
- The cost is \$40 per year (\$20 for new listings received from April to September) in addition to the fee for membership of the society. New listings should be submitted using a template file available from Cathy Gray at <cgray@mpx.com.au>.

### **Committee meetings**

All members are welcome to attend the society's committee meetings. Contact a committee member for details if you wish to attend the next meeting.

## 2004 COMMITTEE

**President: Pauline Waugh**

*Email:* paulinewaugh@ozemail.com.au  
*Phone:* (02) 9968 2644 (h)  
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**Vice president: Shelley Kenigsberg**

*Phone:* (02) 9130 6752  
*Email:* skenigs@bigpond.com

**Secretary: Bruce Howarth**

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**Treasurer: Janice Beavan**

*Phone:* (02) 9660 0335 (h)  
*Fax:* (02) 9660 9375 (h)  
*Email:* JBeavan@bigpond.com

**Membership secretary: Bruce Howarth**

*Phone:* (02) 4731 5406 (h)  
*Email:* brhed@pnc.com.au

**General members:**

**Robin Appleton**

*Phone:* 0414 645 103 (message)

**Peter Arnold**

*Email:* parnold@ozemail.com.au

**Sharon Bridgett**

*Email:* penguins@bigpond.net.au

**Moira Elliott**

*Email:* theelliotts@optusnet.com.au

**Terry Johnston**

*Email:* pnayp@ozemail.com.au

**Julie Stanton**

*Email:* juliestan@bigpond.com

**Newsletter editor: Catherine Etteridge**

*Phone:* (02) 9555 4071  
*Email:* cje\_editing@hotmail.com

**Publicity coordinator: Terry Johnston**

*Email:* pnayp@ozemail.com.au

**Meetings coordinator: Deborah Edward**

*Email:* deb\_pageturner@optusnet.com.au

**Professional development**

**Coordinator: Pauline Waugh**

*Email:* paulinewaugh@ozemail.com.au

**Assistants:**

**Sheena Pettigrew**

*Email:* SheenaPetti@bigpond.com

**Russell Thomson**

*Email:* ruspet@bigpond.net.au

**Julie Harders**

*Email:* julieharders@bigpond.com

**Website coordinator: Jo Healy-North**

*Email:* jhn@bigpond.com

**Editorial Services Directory coordinator:**

**Cathy Gray**

*Phone:* (02) 9331 4731  
*Email:* cgray@mpx.com.au

**Catering officer: Julie Stanton**

*Email:* juliestan@bigpond.com

**Copy deadline for December issue:**  
Wednesday, 10 November 2004

## Professional development

### Onscreen editing: a project approach

**Presenter:** Bruce Howarth

**Date:** early 2005

With all the problems and pleasures of working onscreen, it's easy to forget that the actual editing is similar to hard-copy editing. In this workshop, we'll go through the main steps of a project to see how the computer can help (or occasionally hinder) the process.

We'll discuss basic onscreen-editing techniques, including styles, templates, find and replace, tracking changes and comments, outline view, version management, coping with big documents—and more.

To help you master the techniques and tricks of editing onscreen, the workshop will have discussion and practical sessions. Each participant will have a computer.

### MS Word: advanced editing skills

**Presenter:** Bruce Howarth

**Date:** early 2005

To help you work more efficiently, Bruce will show you how to use a few of Word's powerful, complex tools. He will introduce each topic and participants will then have time to work through examples. Each participant will have a computer.

**For more information about the society's workshops, please email Pauline Waugh at <paulinewaugh@ozemail.com.au>.**

### INDEXING MEDAL

#### Australian Society of Indexers (AusSI)

AusSI is again offering its annual medal for the most outstanding index to a book or periodical compiled in Australia or New Zealand.

The medal will be presented to the indexer responsible for the best work submitted and the publisher will be presented with a certificate.

To be eligible for the award, the index must be in print and must have been first published after 2001. It must have been compiled in Australia or New Zealand, even though the text to which it refers may have originated elsewhere.

For the award, indexes are judged at the level of outstanding professional achievement, thus sufficient material is required, both in quality and quantity, for appraisal. The index should be substantial in size, the subject matter should be complex and the language, form and structure of the index should demonstrate the indexer's expertise as well as serving the needs of the text and the reader.

Publishers, indexers and all interested persons are invited to nominate indexes which meet the above criteria, and which they regard as worthy of consideration. Indexers are encouraged to nominate their own works.

Please send recommendations, with bibliographic details, together with a copy of the book (which will be returned if requested) to:

John Simkin  
Australian Society of Indexers Medal Competition  
PO Box 680  
Belgrave, Victoria, 3160

Please send submissions as soon as possible but no later than Monday 13 December 2004. For further information, please contact John Simkin at the above address or by email <simmo27au@yahoo.com.au>.