

Content Description Principles

Purpose

Words matter. Language is powerful. It conveys meaning, framing, and sets intentions¹.

The way libraries describe their collections is fundamental to how content is discovered, accessed, used and preserved, now and into the future. State Library's content description principles guide this important work. Our descriptions reflect our commitment to the enduring values of free and equitable access, celebration of diverse voices, centring First Nations peoples and their knowledge, strength and resilience, and a safe and purposeful workplace.

Background

State Library is responsible for collecting and preserving a comprehensive collection of Queensland's cultural and documentary heritage. The content that State Library acquires, manages and makes accessible allows us to meet the object of the Libraries Act 1988, "to contribute to the cultural, social and intellectual development of all Queenslanders."

Our collections are diverse and encompass Memory, Information, Public Library and Extraordinary Collections. The content description principles apply to materials in all formats, obtained from any source, which are managed in any of our systems.

The creation of descriptions aligns with our [Content Strategy](#), [Digital Strategy](#), and [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections Commitments](#).

Reparative description and inclusive cataloguing

State Library is committed to implementing reparative description and inclusive cataloguing practices for First Nations content and that of other minority and/or disadvantaged communities, including LGBTQIA+, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, Queenslanders of differing abilities, immigrants, and refugees.

Reparative description is focussed on addressing bias and harmful or offensive language that exists in our large database of legacy descriptions. To address bias and archival erasure, we redescribe existing materials when First Nations content is identified without

¹ Frick, Rachel L., and Merrilee Proffitt. 2022. *Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice*. Dublin, OH: OCLC Research. <https://doi.org/10.25333/wd4b-bs51>.

appropriate description and expand our practice of using First Nations description tools and recording Traditional Place Names in our catalogue descriptions.

Our descriptions should not cause harm to users, but we also must maintain a record of how this language was used in the past for research, transparency, and truth telling. This requires work to investigate, analyse, replace, and remove language from public display while also communicating those changes and allowing access to the original data.

Inclusive cataloguing acknowledges that no one is without bias, especially when dealing with content and people from different lived experiences. Cataloguers take a proactive approach to creating descriptions that are respectful, minimise harm, and promote effective representation and discovery of materials. When descriptions can't be changed (e.g., the title of a published work), cataloguers include appropriate cultural safety messages and contextual information. Standard statements and language/terminology guides for addressing minority and/or disadvantaged communities are in development and include opportunities for consultation. Individual cataloguers also consider questions such as

- Who or what is highlighted or left out of this description?
- How has the creator, context, or provenance of this resource affected this content?
- How might this description perpetuate or combat further marginalisation?

This is not an easy or automated solution, and it requires dedicating resources to cataloguer development and premium descriptions. State Library is committed to take action that is transparent, iterative, critical, and open to feedback. We are actively collaborating with colleagues nationally and internationally as we continue to learn.

This work is aligned with the 2022 OCLC report *Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice*¹ which charts a path toward reparative and inclusive description. This work is guided by the 2023 National and State Libraries Australasia publication *Guidelines for First Nations collection description*² which aims to facilitate a shift in description practices around First Nations content by providing support in developing and implementing new internal cataloguing practices.

*“Librarians must recognize and reflect on their own internal biases when cataloguing and make it their job to deconstruct language and decolonize the systems that perpetuate the continued marginalization of others. To remain neutral about these systems is the very opposite of what it means to be a librarian in the twenty-first century.”*³

² Raven, Tui. 2023. *Guidelines for First Nations collection description*. Deakin, ACT: National and State Libraries Australasia. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3250767341>.

³ Vaughan, Crystal. 2018. “The Language of Cataloguing: Deconstructing and Decolonizing Systems of Organization in Libraries.” *Dalhousie Journal of Interdisciplinary Management*, vol. 14, Spring 2018. <https://ojs.library.dal.ca/djim/article/view/7853/7247>.

Principles

We ensure...

1. Content is discoverable

- All content we acquire has description available at the earliest opportunity to facilitate discovery and access through the online catalogue, where possible.
- All descriptions are public, excluding any private data on persons, acquisition, or other internal administrative information.
- Users clearly see relationships between content in different formats, in the same or similar collections, on similar subjects, and by the same creators.
- Content can be found on multiple platforms, such as Trove, WorldCat, and search engines. We don't require people to come to us, but for us to be where they are.

2. Content is accessible

- Users clearly see which materials are available online and onsite, and how the content can be used and reused.
- Descriptions follow metadata standards to ensure interoperability with other systems.
- Descriptions support preservation and long-term access to content by detailing acquisition, condition, format, housing, provenance, rights, and history of changes.
- Descriptions can be reused by third parties, including application developers and researchers, to build new stories and create new knowledge.

3. Descriptions use inclusive language

- Bias and harmful or offensive language in existing descriptions is under active repair. State Library is committed to review data describing our collections. Content with history and origins in settler colonialism is prioritised for reparative description.
- Inclusive and respectful language is used for effective representation and discovery of previously neglected or mis-characterised people, events, and experiences.
- First Nations, LGBTQ+, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, Queenslanders of differing abilities, and other minority communities are described and represented using their own terms.

4. Descriptions have meaning and impact

- Layers of connected descriptions for titles, names, places, formats, and topics provide users with robust information on and beyond State Library's collections.
- Added tools empower digital experimentation and create rich, connected digital experiences, including transcription, geotagging, and delivering collections as data.

5. Descriptions include an appropriate level of detail

- All content is described to support discovery, access, and preservation.
- Cultural or historical significance, uniqueness, value, use, condition, or engagement potential of content leads to more detailed descriptions.
- Collection guides may be added to enhance discovery with item level detail.
- Large collections of material that do not require individual descriptions for discovery are described together as a whole.
- Core level descriptions facilitate discovery to otherwise inaccessible content.

6. Descriptions evolve over time

- Descriptions are not static, but dynamic representations of content that are enhanced, amended, and updated regularly by systems, staff, and users.
- Community feedback and user comments are added to descriptions, as appropriate.
- Descriptions are upgraded in response to exhibitions, priorities, resourcing, and long-term preservation and access needs.

These principles are applied through...

Metadata standards

State Library adheres to international, national, and local standards when describing resources for its collections to ensure that all metadata is compatible with external systems, easily able to be migrated to a new standard, readily used for open data sets, and adaptable to linked open data usage. State Library commits to creating and sharing our unique Queensland and Australian descriptions online for other institutions to benefit.

Format standards

State Library follows [MARC 21](#) format standard for structuring its bibliographic, holdings, item, and authority records in the library management system.

Hierarchical descriptions of archival materials are structured in a custom-built system based on [Encoded Archival Description](#) (EAD) format standard.

Technical metadata of files in our digital preservation system is structured following the [Dublin Core](#) format standard and the [PREMIS Data Dictionary for Preservation Metadata](#).

Descriptive standards

For newly described content, State Library follows the international descriptive standard [Resource Description and Access](#) (RDA) for published materials and [Describing Archives: A Content Standard](#) (DACS) for archival materials.

State Library also uses other authoritative cataloguing guidelines on specific content to inform descriptions, as appropriate, including [Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials](#). The most current version of each standard is in use.

Legacy descriptions in our catalogue were created following the superseded Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules. Legacy descriptions are not prioritised for redescription unless they fall under the reparative activities described below.

Authorised access points

State Library uses international, national, and local authority files, thesauri, and controlled vocabularies to use and create authorised access points for name, place, topical, and form headings. These interoperable headings link descriptions within a catalogue and link related works outside the catalogue.

- [Library of Congress Name Authorities](#) (LCNA)
- [Library of Congress Subject Headings](#) (LCSH) and [Australian extension to LCSH](#)
- AIATSIS Pathways Thesauri – Language ([AustLang](#)) and [Place](#)
- Australian Pictorial Thesaurus (APT)
- [Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus](#) (AAT)
- [Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms](#) (LCGFT)
- [Guidelines on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, etc.](#) (GSAFD)

State Library uses a variety of sources to ensure the headings used best fit our content and the way our users search. We do not have to follow Library of Congress terms when they do not meet user needs. This list of thesauri is not comprehensive. As cataloguers work together internationally to create linked data on specialist topics, State Library will implement other authoritative sources, as appropriate. For example:

- AIATSIS Pathways Thesauri – [Subjects](#) – topical headings reflecting Indigenous perspectives from Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- [Homosaurus](#) – international linked data vocabulary of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) terms

Classification Schema

State Library follows Dewey Decimal Classification to organise physical materials by subject in the open stacks and repository. For maps and atlases, we follow [Boggs and Lewis map classification schedules](#) to organise by geographic area.

Levels of description

State Library manages content in four collections with different objectives and different descriptive requirements: Memory Collections, Extraordinary Collections, Information Collections, and Public Library Collections. Different levels of description, priorities for description, and processes involved in description apply depending on the category and format of material being described.

More detail about the objectives, collection management priorities, and collecting intentions are outlined in the [Content Strategy](#).

Standard level – This standard full description is applied to most archival and published materials in the Memory, Extraordinary, and Information Collections.

- RDA core element set
- Full fixed field information
- Full descriptive and subject access points
- Full classification numbers
- Individual item descriptions for each item

Collection level – Single descriptions to describe a group of related materials that do not call for individual catalogue descriptions. This includes archival materials, posters, copy prints, school publications, and ephemera publications.

- Described at the **Standard level** (above)
- But, with individual item descriptions for serial issues only

Premium level – This premium description is applied to highly significant, impactful, complex, or valuable material. This includes oral histories, digital stories, rare books, limited editions, significant archival materials, and high demand content.

- Described at the **Standard level** (above)
- Plus, comprehensive added detail like reparative description, transcripts, linked catalogue entries, or hierarchical inventories in curated series with full access points

Medium level – This medium description is applied to most materials in the Public Libraries Collections as they have shorter lifecycles.

- RDA core element set
- Full fixed field information
- Less detailed descriptive and subject access points
- Shortened classification numbers

Core level – Brief descriptions with a set of minimum core data to make otherwise inaccessible content available to users in the catalogue. This includes material like unprocessed materials, individual images in large collections, and on order data.

- RDA core element set
- Limited fixed field information
- 1-2 points of descriptive and subject access points
- Minimal classification numbers

Definitions	
Access points	Distinct data elements indexed to allow for faster and more exact searching (e.g., author, title, subject) in a library catalogue.
Archival erasure	Neglecting or mis-characterising people and experiences outside the dominant historical narrative, especially minority communities.
Archival materials	Materials created or compiled by people and organisations as a by-product of their work and life, usually unpublished and unique.
Authorities	Distinct, established headings to describe a person, place, thing or concept consistently to link content within and between catalogues.
Bibliographic record	Catalogue entries which describe material or a group of materials and allow users to discover and access the content.
Catalogue	Database of all described materials held by State Library that can be searched by users at https://onesearch.slq.qld.gov.au/
Classification	Alpha-numeric system for arranging and ordering physical materials in the library by grouping related materials together.
Collections (2)	1) A group of materials described together on a bibliographic record on the catalogue, e.g., a collection of family papers. 2) Groups of State Library's content that serve to meet specific needs and purposes, e.g., Memory Collection, Information Collection.
Collections as data	Preparing and providing digital materials for computational reuse in machine learning, visualisation, text mining, and more.
Fixed fields	Data fields in a catalogue entry where every character is pre- coded and defined to set the parameters for the record.
Geotagging	Adding geographic coordinates to content descriptions.
Hierarchical description	Describing a group of materials by starting with the whole, then describing components in order of specificity (e.g., series, subseries, items).
Inclusive cataloguing	Description that respects diversity in ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and more. It avoids perpetuating stereotypes or marginalising any group.
Item record	Catalogue entries which detail how to access or retrieve a specific item linked to a bibliographic record.
Linked open data	Open data structured for the Web (e.g., HTTP, URI), interlinked with other data and extended for automatic reuse by computers.
Metadata standards	Rules for writing descriptions and structuring records consistently and accurately for reuse by other systems and libraries.
Open data	Data that is openly accessible, re-usable, editable and shared by anyone for any purpose.
Preservation	Actions to care for and protect physical and digital content from loss to ensure survival of material and information over time.
Provenance	History of ownership of materials as a record of authenticity.
Published materials	Materials created to be made available to the public, including text, visual, and audio material in a physical or digital medium.
Reparative description	Cataloguing to acknowledge and repair the harms of exclusionary descriptions of misrepresented people, places and events.
Settler colonialism	Where a people settle and take over a territory, displace the Indigenous population and impose their own cultural, economic, and political systems.

These principles are supported by the following State Library and external legislation, policies, and standards.

[Libraries Act 1988](#)

[Strategic Plan 2023-2027](#)

[Content Strategy](#)

[Digital Strategy](#)

[Open Data Strategy 2022-24](#)

[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections Commitments](#)

[Comments Policy](#)

[Content Acquisition Policy](#)

[Digitisation Policy](#)

[Preservation Policy](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Intellectual Freedom Policy](#)

State Library Storage Principles

Approval

Vicki McDonald, State Librarian and Chief Executive Officer
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