

Content Description Principles

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1. Authority

These principles are applied by the authority of the State Librarian and CEO (SLCEO).

2. Responsibilities

State Library of Queensland 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 \(Qld\)](#) to contribute to the cultural, social and intellectual development of all Queenslanders.

Director, Content Management is responsible for strategic direction and oversight of the arrangement and description of State Library's collections.

Lead, Metadata is responsible for maintaining the *Content Description Principles* and leading the Metadata team in undertaking arrangement and description of State Library's collections.

All staff are responsible for adhering to the *Content Description Principles* when undertaking any arrangement or description of collections.

3. Principles statement

State Library has been describing library collections for over 100 years, utilising contemporary descriptive standards and subject expertise to help users discover, access, understand and use our content. We recognise that these descriptive efforts are done at a point in time and strive to ensure that descriptions continue to meet community needs and requirements.

State Library's *Content Description Principles* outlines the vision and mission of how and why we describe our collections. It explains the core principles that guide our decision making when creating descriptions and details the metadata standards and levels of description these principles are applied through.

It acknowledges the way libraries describe their collections is fundamental to how content is discovered, accessed, understood, used and preserved, now and into the future.

It centres our commitment to reparative description and inclusive cataloguing practices for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and that of other minority, disadvantaged, and/or previously mis-characterised communities.

It also reflects our commitment in the [Strategic Plan 2026-2030](#) to the enduring values of free and equitable access, celebration of diverse voices, centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their knowledge, strength and resilience, and a safe and purposeful workplace.

4. Purpose

The purpose of the *Content Description Principles* is to provide a consistent framework for content description across State Library, ensuring our practices support discovery, accessibility, and long-term stewardship.

5. Scope

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 Technology Strategy](#), and [First Nations Strategy 2024-28](#).

6. Definitions

Word	Definition
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.
Artificial intelligence (AI)	Software programmed to find complex patterns in data and form rules, which allows it to perform tasks that typically require human intelligence like visual perception, language processing, and decision-making.
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.

Word	Definition
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.
Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)	The traditional knowledge, cultural expression, and cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples. The protocol to recognise the ICIP rights of First Nations people to be seen as primary guardians, interpreters and decision-makers of their heritage. Any item, regardless of format, that embodies, refers to, depicts or describes traditional knowledges or cultural practices is considered to contain ICIP.
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.

7. 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, disadvantaged, and/or previously mis-characterised communities. These may include LGBTQIA+, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, Queenslanders of differing abilities, immigrants, refugees, and women.

Reparative description is focused on addressing bias and harmful or non-preferred language that exists in our large database of legacy descriptions. To address bias and archival erasure, we redescribe existing materials when content by or about these communities is identified without appropriate description. We continue to expand our use of self-determined language in the catalogue through description tools identified with preferred language for these groups and recording Traditional Place Names in our catalogue descriptions.

Content Description Principles, September 2026

3

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Our descriptions should not include harmful language, but we also must maintain a record of how this language was used in the past for research, transparency, and truth telling. This requires investigation and consultation on identified harmful terms before acting to contextualise or mediate language in public display. The content of a collection is never changed, and mediation of harmful terms in descriptions is registered and communicated to users with access to the original data.

Inclusive cataloguing acknowledges that no one is without bias. We all come from different families, homes, regions, and experiences that influence how we see the world. 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 context.

Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property identified in content is acknowledged in line with State Library's [*Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property \(ICIP\) Principles*](#). Standard statements and language/terminology guides for addressing other minority, disadvantaged, and/or previously mischaracterised 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 international and national efforts which chart a path toward reparative and inclusive description by providing support in developing and implementing new internal cataloguing practices.

8. Principles

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.

Content is accessible

- Users clearly see which materials are available online and onsite, how the content can be used and reused, and if there are any restrictions.
- 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.

Descriptions use inclusive language

- Bias and harmful or non-preferred 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, LGBTQIA+, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, Queenslanders of differing abilities, immigrants, refugees, women, and other communities are described and represented using their own terms.

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.
- Any exploration in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to create new opportunities to describe collections or to engage with content will ensure safe and robust processes are applied, in line with State Library's [Use of Generative AI Principles](#).

Descriptions include an appropriate level of detail

- All content is described to support discovery, understanding, 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.

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 community consultation, exhibitions, priorities, resourcing, and long-term preservation and access needs.

9. 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.

Content is primarily described in English but may include additional language data from vendors, donors, or communities when content in languages other than English is acquired.

State Library also uses other authoritative cataloguing guidelines on specific content to inform descriptions, as appropriate, including [Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials](#), [Guidelines for First Nations collection description](#), and [Cataloging of resources generated using Artificial Intelligence \(AI\) software](#). 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](#)), [Subjects](#), and [Place](#)
- Australian Pictorial Thesaurus (APT)
- [Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus](#) (AAT)
- [Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms](#) (LCGFT)

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:

- [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. For maps, we follow [Boggs and Lewis map classification](#) to organise by geographic area.

10. 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, poster sets, copy prints, school publications, and ephemera publications.

- Described at the **Standard level**
- 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**
- 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 title-level index records for databases, unprocessed materials, individual items within large collections, and order data.

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

11. Human rights

Section 28 of the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld) states that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples must not be denied the right to enjoy, maintain, control, protect and develop their identity and cultural heritage, including their traditional knowledge, distinctive spiritual practices, observances, beliefs and teachings; and to enjoy, maintain, control, protect, develop, and use their language, including traditional cultural expressions.

When applying these principles, State Library will act and make decisions in a way that is compatible with human rights and consider all human rights, as required by the *Human Rights Act 2019* (Qld), and our commitments with respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander collections in our [Content Strategy](#) and [Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property \(ICIP\) Principles](#).

12. References

These principles are supported by

Queensland Government

[Libraries Act 1988](#)

State Library of Queensland

[Strategic Plan 2026-2030](#)

[Content Strategy](#)

[Digital Technology Strategy](#)

[First Nations Strategy 2024-28](#)

[Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property \(ICIP\) Principles](#)

[Use of Generative AI Principles](#)

[Collection Access Policy](#)

[Comments Policy](#)

[Content Acquisition Policy \(internal\)](#)

[Reconsideration of library collections policy](#)

Other

[Reimagine Descriptive Workflows: A Community-informed Agenda for Reparative and Inclusive Descriptive Practice](#)

[Guidelines for First Nations collection description](#)

13. Approval

Approved by the State Librarian and CEO on 9 September 2026.

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