How We Describe

Rubenstein Library Technical Services Style Guide
June 2021
*revised with additional examples June 2023

Welcome to Rubenstein Library Technical Services, and thank you for reading our style guide. This document is available as a [Confluence site](#) (with chapters for easy reference and quick navigation), and is also available as a "published" document on the RL Website. Please start with the Introductory Comments to learn more about getting started with inclusive descriptive practices for RL collections.

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1. Introductory comments about this guide

1.1 Why we are writing How We Describe:

- This guide codifies RLTS's local language and stylistic choices across all descriptive platforms. It intends to affirm the RLTS [Guiding Principles for Description](#) and give guidance for staff creating and editing the library's description of special collections materials.
- We acknowledge the role that libraries have played (both historically and presently) in contributing to and perpetuating harmful and biased classification and stereotypes. We see this guide as one strategy for collectively moving forward with a more inclusive, anti-oppressive approach to description.
- We understand this document is a work-in-progress. We will adjust and edit our style guide over time, as we continue to learn and improve our practices. If you have questions about this document or suggestions for its contents, please contact RLTS (email meghan.lyon at duke).

1.2 What is covered:

- This guide advises staff about how to write inclusive, anti-racist descriptions of our collections, including description of inherently racist or harmful items.
- This guide contains a list of questions for staff to consider as they evaluate the materials they intend to describe, before writing any description.
- This guide encourages description that demonstrates respect and care for the people or communities documented in our collections, particularly marginalized and historically oppressed populations.
- This guide rejects traditionally "passive" or "neutral" library description, and instead encourages staff to use active voice when describing historical figures and events.
- This guide aims to help staff write approachable description for audiences beyond our historically PWI (predominantly white institution) campus community.
- This guide outlines expectations for how staff can be transparent about known past descriptive choices, custodial practices, and RL collecting history in our library descriptions.

1.3 What is not covered:

- This guide complements (and does not repeat or reprint) existing cataloging standards. Consult the RLTS Format Standards and Workflow Decision Guidelines to determine what type of cataloging/description standards you should use for the format (mixed archival collection, collection of photographs, single manuscript, published books, etc.) you have in hand. Links to the different standards are available on the main RLTS Confluence site.
- This is not an archival processing manual. The Archival Processing Section maintains guidelines for rehousing and processing – check the AP Section documentation on Confluence.
- This guide does not contain departmental guidelines for proposing subject and name authority headings through SACO and NACO. The LC Subject Headings Manual is here. Training and guidelines for proposing new LC subject headings is a future project within RLTS.
- The style guide does not contain platform or system-specific directions. ArchivesSpace guidelines for writing finding aids are available on Confluence here; they include mandatory fields and templates for those fields. Contact the Rare Materials Section Head or Archival Processing Section Head (as relevant) for information about editing and updating bibliographic records in OCLC.
- This guide addresses how to write description of the contents in the library's collections, but does not address issues regarding access, restrictions, permissions, or use of the materials (whether online or in the reading room). There are separate administrative policies and guidelines for those topics.

2. Questions to consider before writing description

Before you write library description, review what description already exists – this could be existing finding aids, catalog records, dealer descriptions, or available boxlists. Then consider the following questions.

2.1 What are the goals of your description work?

- Are there specific elements of the collection or item – specific individuals, groups, activities, or events -- that should be highlighted or emphasized in your description?
- Why was the collection or item acquired? Is there a curatorial reason or collection development policy that would help inform your choices regarding description?
- Where does your crafting of this description fit into broader DUL, RL, or RLTS goals and activities? If an item is slated for needing new description, why?

2.2 How will someone encountering the content in your collection be informed or impacted by the language choices and tone you use when writing your description?

- Are you writing for a general audience (not just specific users)?
- What roles are assigned to the people in this collection? Who assigned those roles?
- What kinds of behaviors are documented?

2.3 Have you done your research about how best to describe the people and activities documented in the collection in an inclusive and respectful way?

- Should you consult reliable resources or experts from the communities you are describing?

3. Voice, style, and technicalities

Section 3 contains overarching guidelines regarding the language and tone you should use when writing your description, as well as local practices regarding grammar and punctuation (when not addressed by the cataloging standard you are using).

Some of the guidelines below are cited directly from the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Resources style guide.

3.1 Tell your readers what they need to know

- An overarching goal of library description is to connect the collection material to a potential researcher. The description imparts historical and contextual information about the creation, history, and content of the item, and should be succinct, direct, and accurate.
- When writing description, use active voice (Subject + Verb + Object) and avoid long, complicated sentences.
  - Review and revise your text to keep it simple.
  - Make sure your description does not have extraneous, irrelevant details.
  - Focus on describing the activities and behaviors of the individuals, entities, or organizations in the materials.
- Do not write misleading description: do not make someone request a box to find out what you could easily include in the description. Your description should help people (both your fellow staff and the potential patrons) avoid wasting their time. Do not oversell the significance of material, or imply the presence of something that is not there.
  - For example, if the collection "George Washington Papers" is actually full of photocopies, make sure to say so in the record.
- When describing Black, Indigenous, Asian, or other ethnic or national identities, capitalize the word (as recommended by the Chicago Manual of Style). But, when describing white communities or individuals, do not capitalize the word "white" except when it is part of a formal organizational name or title.
  - RL made this local decision in order to avoid associations with white supremacist groups and literature. A number of RL collections contain white supremacist content and we do not want our devised library description to be seen as an endorsement of those views.[1]
  - Do not refer to individuals or groups solely by ethnicity or race.

Example:[2] Do not do this:

> Photocopy of a handwritten memoir (85 p.) begun by Harris in September, 1922. The appendix (12 p.) contains earlier and later material, primarily poetry and news stories by Harris. The memoir provides glimpses of her early childhood, of race relations, of Harris' own ambivalence about her place as a black in society, and of the importance of religion and the church in her life.

An alternative might read: "Harris's own ambivalence about her identity as a Black woman in American society..."

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[1] RL LT meeting, February 2021.
[2] Example from catalog record for Elizabeth Harris Papers.

3.2 Let the collection speak for itself

- Be clear about when you are re-using or referencing description that is drawn from the materials, versus when you have used or consulted external sources that give additional details, context, or information. Cite your sources, and indicate if portions of your description have been provided by someone outside the library.
  - For example, if you have transformed an organization's supplied box list into a finding aid without reviewing or editing the titles of the files, say so in a processing note.
  - For example, if you are using a donor's website to write a biographical note, cite it.
- Language choices and terminologies change over time, and some terms which were routinely used in the past are now considered inaccurate, outdated, or harmful. When writing description, transcribe terms (with quotes if needed) as they appear in the collection, but give context by also providing current versions of those terms.
  - Remember that many patrons search with keywords, so try to provide both the original term and more modern terms to aid researchers.
  - Follow your cataloging standard regarding transcription of titles as printed or recorded. Decide carefully whether a term considered offensive today should be included in any library-supplied narrative summary. Clearly indicate when an outdated term was transcribed from the item by adding a note or quotation marks.
    - For example: a note for historical sheet music that says "Title transcribed from the piece."
    - When retaining original folder titles for collection guides, provide in-line context when a term is known to be outdated or offensive.

  Example:[3]

  Note: materials in this collection may use outdated terms such as "mentally retarded" to refer to people with mental disabilities

- When the race or ethnicity of a person in your description is known, please include it. Avoid projecting or making assumptions about people's racial or ethnic identities in your descriptions. Include notes like "may include" or "appears to be" if you are describing unidentified individuals.
  - Including race is a way of challenging the de facto presumption of "whiteness" prevalent in library description.
  - Consult the Archival Processing Section's documentation for detailed documentation about titling/identifying images and photographs in archival collections [link coming soon].
- Respect and record how groups or individuals in your collection self-identify (regarding their names, race, sexuality, or other qualities), and reflect it in your description (with contextual or clarifying notes and quotes, if needed).
- Avoid flowery adjectives, and remove valorizing or disparaging descriptors. These are distracting, and may be inaccurate or offensive.

  Example:[4] Do not do this:

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[3] Example from Center for Death Penalty Litigation Records finding aid.
[4] Example from the C.C. Clay Family Papers card catalog file summary.
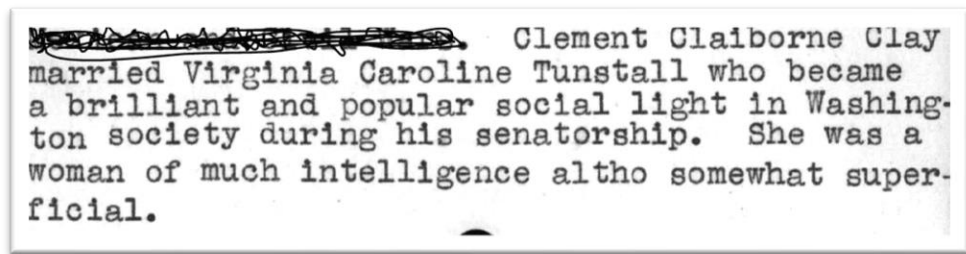
Example:[5] Do not do this:

Letters, 1785-1811, to David Campbell include those of his uncle, Arthur Campbell (1742-1811), ==famous Indian fighter and Revolutionary patriot==, containing treatises on democratic government.

Example:

Consider the difference between "regular letters" versus "family correspondence," or the unintentional merit and tone inserted in the phrase "portraits of well-known and ordinary people."

- Describe relationships of power when they are important for understanding the context of records. Racism, slurs, white supremacy, colonialism, and histories of oppression are important context.[6]
  - A future TS project will be to develop local cataloging guidelines for particular topics, including slavery, LGBTQ history, and Indigenous communities.
    - RLTS Guidelines for Description of Slavery is available (as of June 2023).

3.3 Local policies and grammar
- Use the Chicago Manual of Style unless otherwise indicated by your cataloging standard.
- Spellcheck to avoid stray errors and typos.
- Use the oxford comma when you are writing lists.
  - For example: The store sold apples, bananas==, and== oranges.
- Avoid special characters like brackets and ampersands, except when your cataloging standard requires them to be used.
- Do try to use the correct diacritics or accents when transcribing non-English words.
- Avoid library jargon in your description. Remember that your readers may not know typical lingo and it is better to write for a general audience.
  - For example, avoid "miscellany" or "ephemera" if possible.

4. Titles (of items, folders, or collections)
In this document, Titles refers to any title, from the title of a collection down to specific folder or individual titles of items. Always consult the specific cataloging standard for detailed guidance on formulating titles, including rules about capitalization, formatting, and transcription rules for the piece

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[5] Example from the Guide description of Campbell Family Papers.
[6] Quoted directly from Archives for Black Lives: https://archivesforblacklives.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/ardr_final.pdf

or collection you are cataloging. With that in mind, below are local practices for RL catalogers regarding use of creator-supplied titles vs. cataloger-devised titles.

4.1 Derived, transcribed, or creator-supplied titles

- These are all ways of saying that there is a pre-existing title on the piece (or item, folder, or whatever element you are describing). Typically, printed or published items will have a formal title, and most cataloging guidelines require that title to be transcribed as part of cataloging the piece. Follow your cataloging standard regarding transcriptions of titles.
- Archival collections often include folder titles provided by the creator of the materials. Similarly, individual items in manuscript collections may include titles assigned by the creator. Typically, you will transcribe the titles as written. **When describing unpublished materials, always include a note indicating whether the title was creator-supplied or devised by the cataloger** (See also Section 4.2). This could be: "title transcribed from item," or "original folder titles have been retained," or whatever statement applies in your description. You should note this at the collection-level, with exceptions noted at the item or file-level, as they occur.
- You may encounter system limitations regarding creator-supplied titles in places like ArchivesSpace or the Duke Digital Repository; you should still plan to include a note about the origins of the titles you have recorded.

4.1.1 Transcribing supplied titles that are offensive or racist[7]

- In most cases, preserve but contextualize creator-sourced original description when the racism is an important context for understanding the record. See Section 3.2, above.
- If you are transcribing offensive or harmful titles, add explanatory notes and subject or genre headings that indicate it is racist, sexist, a caricature, a stereotype, etc. Include context surrounding the creator's actions or intentions, when known, and differentiate the creator's words from the library-supplied description you are crafting.

4.2 Devised titles

- A devised title is one provided by the staff member writing the description. Titles should be devised when there is no formal title for the materials, or potentially when the formal title is misleading or inadequate. There are different rules for different sorts of materials. Defer to your cataloging standard when deciding whether you should transcribe an original title, or devise one.
- **Always include a note indicating whether the title was devised by a library staff member, or transcribed from the materials** (whether creator-supplied or transcribed from the item). This could be: "title devised by the cataloger," or "folder titles assigned by library staff," or whatever statement applies in your description.
- When constructing titles, preference names ahead of roles or legal status, when possible.

    Example:[8]

    Bill of sale for Bett, an enslaved girl, from Lawrence Lancaster to Thomas Cook, 1757 March 18 : autograph manuscript signed.

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[7] Guidance drawn from Archives for Black Lives: "Handling Racist Folder Titles and Creator-Sourced Description"
[8] Example from catalog record, created as part of the American Slavery Documents re-cataloging project.

4.3 Additional guidelines about titles

- Punctuation, spacing, and capitalization for titles are all dictated by the specific cataloging standard you are using. Please defer to your standard.
- Make note of any former titles for the item or collection. This will help researchers find the collection if it was previously cited under a different title. Refer to Section 9 for additional guidelines regarding Administrative History notes.
- If your title's origins are unusual or odd, include a note explaining where the title came from. This could be because the dealer or creator has done something weird, or because the library's practices have evolved over time. It is okay to explain the situation in a note. There is more guidance on this in Administrative History, Section 9.

   Example:[9]

   Notes:
   Title transcribed from title page photocopy provided by print dealer.

- When creating titles, preference the content, creator, and form (following your cataloging standard's rules), and add a separate physical description note if needed. For example, avoid "Oversize" as a title.

5. Dates related to creation/production

Dates in library description can refer to both the dates of creation and the date of production of the materials. Refer to appropriate cataloging standards for formatting date statements.

5.1 Local guidelines for dates

Here are local policies and guidelines for recording dates in description (if not already covered by the cataloging standard):

- In archival description, record date expressions in date fields and note fields in the following format: YYYY Month DD.
   - *For example*: 2017 August 19
- Do not abbreviate names of months or terms like circa, approximately, or no date.
   - *For example*: Do not use "cir. 1900." Use "circa 1900."
- Do not include an apostrophe
   - *For example*: use 1860s, NOT 1860's
- Do not include spaces around the dash
   - *For example*: 1860-1870, NOT 1860 - 1870
- When a collection or series has ongoing accruals, you should still provide an end date for the most recent material. Update the end date as new accruals are incorporated into the collection.
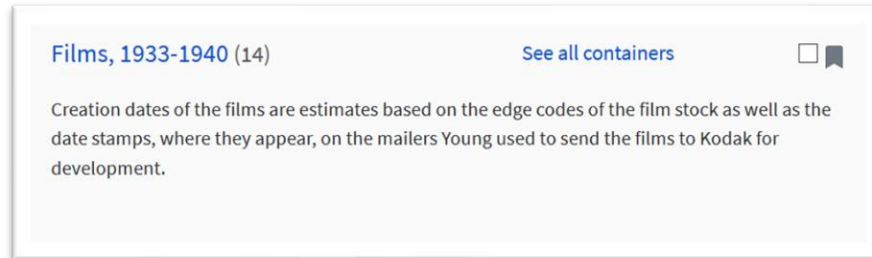   - *For example*: 1950-2021, NOT 1950-ongoing

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[9] Humming birds, painted by Elizabeth Symonds, https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE010949119

- Avoid using "undated" if at all possible. In most cases, it should be possible to provide an educated guess for a date range within a 50-year span (circa 1850s-1890s).
- When necessary, provide a note to clarify how you estimated dates.
    - *Example*:[10]

> Films, 1933-1940 (14)   See all containers   ☐ 🔖
>
> Creation dates of the films are estimates based on the edge codes of the film stock as well as the date stamps, where they appear, on the mailers Young used to send the films to Kodak for development.

5.2 Dates of facsimiles, reproductions, or copies

- If an item is a copy or a facsimile, refer to your cataloging standard's guidance for noting dates. Add a note indicating that the item is a facsimile and clarifying the difference between the date of intellectual creation versus its production (or reproduction). Remember that reproductions can also exist as born digital or electronic records – this can skew the dates of the collection in ways that might be misleading. Be aware of your audience, and make sure it is clear that this is not an "original" item – even as many of our facsimiles are also items with high research value.

6. Narrative Summaries

Most narrative summaries in RL description appear in scope and content notes, or in biographical and historical notes. This section addresses overarching guidelines for how staff should compose any sort of free text or narrative field. Consult your cataloging standard for specific guidance on what content or topic belongs in which descriptive fields, and consult local documentation for system-specific policies relating to formatting.

See also Section 7.2 for additional guidelines for Names in Narrative Description.

6.1 Clear is kind: Be direct

- When describing the contents of a collection, directly address what the collection is about. Consider how someone might use this collection and use your description to help them get to the material that might be relevant to them. (Or, to help them move on to the next record.)
- Avoid euphemisms and passive voice; keep your tone factual, but use accurate and strong language (consider, for example, the difference between "A man died" vs. "The crowd lynched a man."). Clearly explain what the collection or item documents, even if that means describing a traumatic or violent event.
- Relatedly, do not use vague "content warning" language if the collection contains potentially upsetting references or pictures. Be specific about what users will encounter, rather than saying the material contains "sensitive content" or "explicit images."

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[10] Example from the finding aid for the Isaac Jones Young Films.

Scope and Content:
Images depict scene of murder, including deceased persons

6.2 Record the feelings

- Be specific when relaying the opinions or viewpoints documented within the collection. Include the emotion or perspective conveyed by the item (whether positive or negative, pro- or anti-). Use quotes to indicate that these are the viewpoints presented by the materials (and are not reflective of the opinions or interpretation of the library or the cataloger).
  - For example: Don't say: "Soldier wrote about the weather," when instead you could say "Soldier complained about the rain."
    - But, remember Section 3.2: Let the collection speak for itself. Try not to project your views or opinions about the person's actions. For example, do not say: "Soldier whined about the rain."

Example:[12]

This description for the Thomas Clawson Papers gives no indication that Clawson was avidly pro-Democrat during the Wilmington Massacre of 1898, and that his first-hand account claims that white rioters were not a mob, but a "Wilmington army of vindication of Wilmington's social security." Details about Clawson's views on these events would make this record more accurate, plus would offer researchers important information about this collection as it relates to those events.

| 545 | __ | **a** | City editor of the Wilmington Messenger (Wilmington, N.C.) and editor of the Wilmington Morning Star (Wilmington, N.C.). |
| 520 | 8 | **a** | Collection chiefly contains material concerning the Wilmington, N.C. race riot of 1898, as described as a first hand account by Colonel Thomas W. Clawson. Also included are "Recollections and Memories," written by Clawson ca. 1942; "Exhibit A," consisting of a copy of a controversial editorial in the Wilmington Record on Aug. 18, 1898, and a few other papers. Also includes a letter where L.T. Moore mentions an interview Clawson held with General U.S. Grant. |

Example[13]:
This description for Benjamin Hedrick implies that Hedrick was pro-abolition, but does not explicitly say. It should be more direct.

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[11] Example from Center for Death Penalty Litigation Records finding aid.
[12] Example from catalog record for the Thomas Clawson Papers.
[13] Example from finding aid for Benjamin Hedrick Papers.

- Record the presence of hate speech, stereotypes, caricatures, or racial slurs if they occur in the materials being described. Indicate who used the derogatory language, when possible, and if you are transcribing offensive terms, use quotes to indicate they are from the primary source.
  - Always consider the impact of your description on the community represented or documented in the collection. Is transcribing offensive speech in your narrative description necessary and useful for patron access? If so, how are you attempting to contextualize these words?

6.3 Write for today's readers

- Write for modern audiences, some of whom might be unfamiliar with the history you are sharing. Describe people and events/activities as current community members or stakeholders would look for them, as well as by their "historical" or "academic" name.
  - Contextualize this distinction using quotes (when original or historical terms are used) or explanations in your narrative text.
- Some terms have evolved over time, and have new meanings. See Section 3.2 for more guidance on transcribing or quoting outdated language that appears in collection materials.

7. Names

This section discusses description involving legal or formal names of individuals or groups (often called corporate names), and has guidelines for using and assigning names as controlled access points (creators or subjects) and for listing or using names elsewhere in library description (such as when composing narrative texts). There is overlapping content between Names, Titles (Section 4), Subjects (Section 8), and Narrative Description (Section 6), so please consult all four sections.

7.1 Names in headings (Authority records)

DUL participates in the LC Name Authority Cooperative Program (NACO), and RLTS staff should routinely contribute name authority records to the Name Authority File (NAF) as part of their descriptive work.

- Review, edit, and update (if needed) any of the established name authority records that you are using in your description. Accept this responsibility as an important component of inclusive, cooperative cataloging.
  - This includes updating or creating new NACO records with new names as entities change over time.
- Any name (whether personal or corporate) being added as a creator/contributor or subject heading to a bibliographic record should be added as a NACO name authority record to the Name Authority File (NAF).

- o If you are not trained on creating or editing name authorities, contact your supervisor, who can advise you on next steps. You are still expected to gather information for NAF records, and support RLTS contributions to this departmental effort.
- Control any authorized names in OCLC in order to enable DUL vendor services for headings.
- Use relator terms or narrative fields to contextualize why a name has been given a heading in your record. Relator terms are required under RDA for main entries and added entries. In general, if a name appears as a subject heading, it should be referenced or elaborated on in your narrative fields (Section 7.2)– always try to help users understand why a heading is present.

7.2 Names in narrative description

Including names in free text narrative description fields, like scope and content notes, is an opportunity to add more information into a record for patrons who tend to rely on keyword search and discovery. But, this approach is no substitute for the importance of authority work. Individuals and organizations that are substantial or predominant creators, contributors, or subjects in your collection should be added as authorized headings, as outlined in Section 7.1.

7.2.1 Including and formatting names

- When writing narratives, try to include names if known, except in cases where listing individual names on the Internet might cause harm to a living individual. Use your judgment as you review the materials and develop description.
  - o Be cognizant of the likelihood that names included in your description will be discoverable on digital or online platforms beyond Duke's campus. For example, some collections contain names of undocumented immigrants or other potentially sensitive information (beyond typical FERPA or HIPAA-related restrictions). These situations should be flagged by Collection Development but you should always check if you notice something that could have been missed.
  - o Consult with the curator and your supervisor if you worry that publishing names would be unethical or dangerous to an individual documented in our collections, and document any decisions in the accession record or Collection Control File (as appropriate).
  - o The library's contributions to scholarship and research do not override the importance of individuals' health and safety. Names should be formatted to respect the personal preferences of the person being described. Do not purposefully deadname or otherwise disrespect the personal preferences of an individual whose life is documented in our collections. When there are questions about this as it relates to library description, consult with your supervisor and the curator who is the point of contact for the person in question.
- How to structure people's names in a narrative:
  - o When first mentioned, use [Dr., or other title, optional] First name [Middle and Maiden names if known] Last name
    - An exception would be for cases when their preferred name differs, in which case, use the preferred name.
    - An exception to the exception would be when you are describing a married woman who corresponded or adopted her husband's name (Ex: Mrs. John Doe).

In these cases, include a mention of her full name (Jane Maiden Doe) in your narrative, when known.

- o In subsequent references in your narrative, drop the honorific and use only their last name.

Example:[14]

Franklin Marvin Fisher (1934-2019) was an American economist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1960 until he became professor emeritus in 2004. The collection includes materials documenting Fisher's professional life as an economist and professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

- When writing about someone or something that is commonly referred to by shorthand, nickname, or acronym, include the complete name or title at least once, as well as the abbreviation.

Example:[15]

There are significant materials relating to Segrest's work with the following organizations: The NC Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality, North Carolinians Against Racist and Religious Violence (NCARRV), The Center for Democratic Renewal (CDR), The North Carolina Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCCGLE), National Women's Studies Association (NWSA), The World Council of Churches/Urban Rural Mission (WCC/URM), and The National Women's Studies Association/Southern Women's Studies Association (NWSA/SWSA).

- If there are too many separate names to reasonably list in your description (particularly for large collections), alert the reader to the presence of names and where in the collection those names can be found. Refer to the RLTS Guidelines for Description of Slavery for additional examples for names in slavery-era collections.

7.2.2 Name changes over time
- If an individual's name has changed over time, use their latest or preferred name in your description. If the primary source being described refers to them with in an earlier version of their name, contextualize that information. If you are uncertain what version of the name is best, consult with your supervisor or Collection Development.
- If names have changed over time and your source uses earlier versions of a name, make sure the NACO heading is current and correct, and then please contextualize the NACO heading within your narrative text. Follow NACO guidelines for determining whether to edit a current heading, or establish a new heading.

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[14] Example from the finding aid for the Franklin M. Fisher Papers.
[15] Example from the finding aid for the Mab Segrest Papers.

> **BIOGRAPHICAL / HISTORICAL:**
>
> The University Planning Committee was constituted in October 1962. This committee served as the successor to the University Committee on Long-Range Planning. In October of 1964 the University Planning Committee combined with the University Policy Committee, forming the University Policy and Planning Advisory Committee (UPPAC). This new committee was responsible for University matters dealing with academic policy and physical planning. The UPPAC was in existence until 1969. In 1971, the University Planning Committee (UPC) was constituted by then-President Terry Sanford. The UPC was to assume the roles of the previous planning committees in that it was to "look at the past and make projections for the future in areas of enrollment, physical facilities, space, revenue sources of operating funds for the Medical Center, faculty retirement, campus plans, development, etc." The UPC was disbanded in 1973, and reappeared the next academic year as the University Planning Commission.

8. Subjects, genres, and forms

Section 8 outlines the application of subject, genre, and form headings. These guidelines are not meant to replace subject and genre guidelines and processing plans for specific collections or core collecting and subject areas.

We commit to the ongoing work needed to support inclusive metadata for historically under-described, mis-described, or underrepresented people(s) and topics. RLTS aligns with our colleagues in DUL Technical Services regarding Subject and Genre Headings as outlined in the Statement on Inclusive Description. We acknowledge that we work within the parameters of Library of Congress subject (LCSH) and genre headings (LCGFT), but in the meantime, we will propose changes, apply headings from alternative thesauri, and explore temporary solutions such as suggesting alternative terms for display in the catalog interface.

8.1 General application of controlled vocabularies

- Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) are the main source of subject access points for RL collections. There are extensive rules around their application by topic and how to correctly format subdivided headings.
    - o For correct application of LCSH and creation of multi-component subject headings, please refer to the Subject Headings Manual (SHM), available via Cataloger's Desktop. Contact the Head of Rare Materials for institutional access to Cataloger's Desktop.
    - o In general, if a term is being used as a subject heading, it should not be a mystery as to why. If needed, refer to the subject and elaborate on its relevance in your narrative fields.
- Generally, choose the most specific subject or genre term, and only add broader terms from within the same hierarchy in cases where access at the broader level is needed for discovery.

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[16] Example from University Planning Committee Records finding aid.

- As advised for Narratives (Section 6), assigned headings should avoid euphemisms – for example, if the item is a racist, white supremacist text, the heading should not just say "Race relations," broadly applied.
- Application of Genre terms should be based on the genre/format of the item itself.
  - For access to textual genre and form headings, first prefer terms from LCGFT then the RBMS thesaurus (E.g. Science fiction; Comic books)
  - For access to artistic and object specific genre and form headings (other than book bindings), prefer the Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus.
    - See the RL Visual Materials Access Points document for required and recommended headings for sound and visual materials.
  - For access to book bindings and their qualities, prefer the RBMS thesaurus, then Ligatus.
- Subject, genre, and form terms often appear more informally in scope and content notes and in folder and item descriptions in collection guides. Consistency on term-use is important across data points.

8.2 Alternatives and next steps beyond LCSH

There are a few options to consider when the "best" LC subject heading for your material is unsatisfactory for whatever reason (perhaps it is harmful or offensive, perhaps it is outdated or inaccurate, or perhaps there is no heading that matches what you want to describe!).

8.2.1 Alternative Thesauri

RL has gathered a list of alternative thesauri to consult when terms recommended in LCSH are not acceptable for the resource you are describing. We plan to develop additional guidance for when to use these external sources as a future inclusive description initiative.

- Consult the RLTS Alternative Thesauri Page and apply a term from an alternative thesaurus instead of or in addition to using the LCSH term. Be advised this site is a work-in-progress.[17]

8.2.2 Proposing changes to LCSH

LCSH are currently maintained by Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO). There is extensive training documentation for individuals wanting to propose or edit headings, and there are experts in DUL Collection Services who can assist.

You can submit suggestions for new terms or to change terms via active SACO Funnels, which exist for a number of topics and geographic regions. Several RLTS staff are active participants in various funnels.

8.2.3 Local Headings

Local headings are subject headings applied only to local Duke records, and not in OCLC.

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[17] as of May 2021.

- These are applied strategically to collocate resources considered to be part of a particular collection strength for the RL. Refer to the RL Local Headings list for currently used local headings.
- We should apply these when applicable, if we have been unable to find a term in one of the other controlled vocabularies.
- We should also acknowledge the future of linked data in our work and determine which of these terms should be submitted for inclusion in controlled vocabularies, and thus published as linked open data.

8.2.4 TRLN Discovery Subject Re-Mapping

Suggestions for changing the display of problematic terms can be made as a more immediate measure to remove harmful terms from the TRLN Discovery layer (which is the online public access catalog for DUL, at library.duke.edu). This overlays the terms, but does not change the original term in the underlying MARC record. We commit to pursuing long-term, permanent revisions to LCSH terms (See 8.2.2 above) alongside this strategy.

- General info on this program here.
- Google form to see or send suggestions.
- Contact the TRLN Metadata Interest Group (metadataIG@trln.org) for broader questions of problematic hierarchies affecting multiple terms.

9. Provenance notes

The majority of this style guide discusses how to describe the content and the creators of a collection or an item held by Rubenstein Library. Section 9 pivots to address how to describe the library's role and activities as they relate to that item or collection's provenance. "Provenance" is the material's record of ownership, and can refer to its physical and descriptive status, both in advance of and following its transfer to Rubenstein Library (or the library's earlier iterations).

9.1 Immediate source of acquisition

How did Rubenstein Library get this item? Always include the following details related to how RL or UA acquired the item or collection, if known and applicable:

- Type of acquisition (gift, loan (deposits), purchase, transfer)
- Donor/vendor's names
  - o Strive to include donor and vendor information unless privacy concerns supersede need for transparency (e.g. sensitive topics). Standardize names across systems.
    - If the immediate source of acquisition is unknown, include "Source is unknown" rather than leaving this blank.
    - When creating description for University Archives institutional records, recording the originating office is usually fine (rather than the names of individual Duke staff members who assisted with the transfer). If directed

otherwise in the accession record, defer to the collector's guidance in the accession record (or ask the collector what they would like to happen).
- o Do not include any information regarding purchase price.
- Date(s) of acquisition
  - o For collections with multiple acquisitions, provide individual dates of accession separated by commas.
  - o For collection with multiple acquisitions that are numerous and difficult to parse, you can provide dates as a range.
- Accession numbers (all of them, when known)

Examples

Catalog records

541 ## |c Transfer; |a Transfer from Duke University Department of Religion to Duke University Library; |d circa 1984.

541 ## |c Transfer; |a Duke University Archives copy 1: Transfer from Duke Divinity; |d 20210422.

541 ## |c Purchase; |a Rubenstein Library copy 1: James Cummins, Bookseller; |d 20210422.

541 ## | c Gift; | a Source is unknown;| e 2012-0123 | d 2012.

Finding aids

ACQUISITION INFORMATION:
The Mary Peblow letters to Lillian Aubery were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library as a purchase from Tavistock Books in 2020.

PROCESSING INFORMATION:
Processed by Meghan Lyon, May 2021

Accessions described in this collection guide: 2020-0031

9.2 Administrative history of the material

Strive to document the history of Duke's stewardship, including any physical representation on material when it exists. When including these data points, consider:

- When material arrived; where material was transferred from; and what library administrative organization accepted the material.
- When material arrived or was transferred at the Rubenstein Library (or what is now the Rubenstein Library).

9.2.1 Centers, collectors, and selector names

Always include RL center names when describing material acquired on behalf of a particular collecting body. If these are added as 710s in the record, use the controlled heading. RL center collectors prefer to record the affiliation with the collecting center, rather than individual

curator names.[18] Consult with the specific staff member if you are not sure whether they are opting in or out of listing their name in the administrative history section of the description.

Examples:

561 ## |a Acquired as part of the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture. |5 NcD

710 2# |a John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American History and Culture.|5 NcD

ABSTRACT:
This collection consists of zines, primarily authored by women, acquired as donations from multiple collectors or purchased from book stores, zine fairs, and zine distributors. Acquired as part of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture.
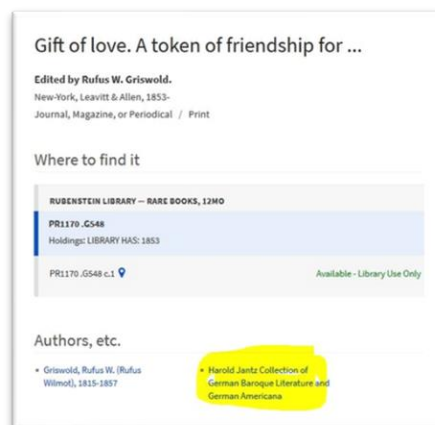
9.2.2 Other physical representations of provenance

In most cases, document physical representations of previous owners (e.g., bookplates, inscriptions) which appear on the materials being described. Documentation may be related to the immediate prior owner (potentially the source of acquisition) or to earlier owners of the material.

9.2.3 Affiliations and related materials cataloged separately

If material forms part of a larger collection, record the name for the collection in a note. Add the name of larger collection as access point. Read more about separated materials in Section 9.4.

Example:

Gift of love. A token of friendship for …

Edited by Rufus W. Griswold.
New-York, Leavitt & Allen, 1853-
Journal, Magazine, or Periodical / Print

Where to find it

RUBENSTEIN LIBRARY — RARE BOOKS, 12MO

PR1170 .G548
Holdings: LIBRARY HAS: 1853

PR1170 .G548 c.1   Available - Library Use Only

Authors, etc.

• Griswold, Rufus W. (Rufus Wilmot), 1815-1857   • Harold Jantz Collection of German Baroque Literature and German Americana

9.2.4 Accruals from different places, or in memory of someone

In cases where a collection consists of material originally donated by an individual (i.e. part of a personal collection) and material collected in memory of same individual (i.e. material

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[18] As discussed at an RL CD staff meeting in April 2021; UA confirmed that affiliation with University Archives is more important than the individual curator/collector's name.

purchased as part of collection), strive to provide transparency about how the material came into the RL collection.

Example[19]: Catalog records

541 ## |c Gift; |a Gift of Tina Muro in memory of Ernest A. Muro, Jr.; |d 2008

561 ## |a Rubenstein Library copy 1: From the library of Sabih Ustel. |5 NcD

561 ## |a Gifted from Fuad S. Ashkar and Albert Gilson to International Center for the Study of Christian Origins, Department of Religion, Duke University, 1979-1981.

Example[20]: Finding aid

ACQUISITION INFORMATION:

The Elizabeth Fry portraits, note, and copied poetry were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book Manuscript Library as a purchase from Lisa Unger Baskin in 2015.

The Elizabeth Gurney Fry Papers were acquired as part of the Trent Manuscripts collection. They were transferred to the History of Medicine Collection in Rubenstein Library in 2011.

The materials were merged into a single collection, Elizabeth Fry Papers, in 2022.

9.3 Description history

This section contains guidance for recording staff labor and contributions to library description as it relates to the stewardship and provenance of the item or collection. Refer to Sections 3, 4, and 6 for how to acknowledge and record the presence of dealer or donor-supplied description.

9.3.1 Staff-authored description

If the description in the record was developed and written by RL staff, strive to record the preferred name of cataloger/processor as a means of crediting the labor and contributions by that staff member. (This includes you! Did you write this description? Record your name.)

However, there may be situations that arise where staff may wish to opt-out of recording their names publicly in description appearing online. Consult with your supervisor and/or RL Technical Services Management Team about "opting-in/opting-out" when you encounter the following situations:

- Collections which contain materials which may lead to/result in inappropriate contact for staff.
- Stewardship of material includes established, preferred communication channels for feedback.
- General desire for privacy expressed by the staff member.

There are often situations where a collection has been described by many people over a long period of time, making it difficult to trace every describer. It is also possible that names of

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[19] From examples of Ashkar-Gilson Greek Manuscripts, such as:
https://find.library.duke.edu/catalog/DUKE006078610
[20] Elizabeth Fry finding aid

earlier staff contributors are unknown. Before opting-out of recording names in those situations, consider the nature of the edits being made:

- Are you re-describing the material in its entirety? (Meaning, is this a new record, basically? If so, you may not need to record the earlier authors.) Refer to Section 9.3.3 for situations involving description remediation or reparative description.
- Are you making edits to multiple sections of the description or to only a single area? (If so, you could clarify that in a processing note.)
- Are you correcting a typo? (Meaning, are you making minimal edits? If so, you may leave your name off the list of contributors.)

After answering these questions, if you are still uncertain whether to record your name, consult with your supervisor.

Example:

PROCESSING INFORMATION:
Processed by RL staff, 1959-1975. Reprocessed and description updated by Meghan Lyon, October 2020.

9.3.2   Non-staff contributors

If description was authored by library-affiliated non-staff members (e.g., student workers, volunteers, library staff outside of RLTS), always ask if the describer would like their name included in the item or collection record. Do not add names if describer opts out. This does not pertain to boxlists supplied by donors or other external parties. Guidelines for what to do in those scenarios can be found in Section 4.

9.3.3 Collection description history and remediation

If you are revising or drastically changing an item's existing description, make a note (consult the parameters outlined in 9.3.1). If part of your revision includes re-titling or otherwise changing the name of a long-held collection or item, record its earlier title in a note (See 4.3).

Example:

Notes
Formerly known as: Cancelled bond for one slave: John, $752.25, cancelled by court because John had disease

and died, Livingston County, Ky.

If you are remediating collection description that was originally racist, offensive, or otherwise harmful, please add a note explaining what sort of edits were made, and when.

Indicate in a note when redescription was made possible through an external grant or occurred as part of a formal inclusive description project. Follow specific project guidelines for formatting these notes.

The steps to remediate offensive or harmful collection description are evolving, and RLTS will be developing additional documentation on how to best account for this activity and provide transparency in our records about our own stewardship and management of description.

9.4 Material cataloged separately

Although we strive to keep material in a collection together, there are times when material in specific formats is removed from a larger collection and cataloged separately. This holds true across collecting interests and centers.

When material is separated out from a larger collection, document the separation in the following ways (if applicable):

- Document the removal of the material from the collection via notes across all relevant encoding standards (e.g., "Separated materials" section in finding aid).
- Add the collection name as an access point to the record of the separated material. (See Section 9.2.3 for an example.)
- Add two-way links to other records (link to finding aid in catalog record; link to catalog record search in finding aid) associated with the collection, or, include directions for users to recreate that search to find the separated materials.

Example: Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project collection, 1940s-2020

Finding aid notes

SCOPE AND CONTENT:

The SPLC Intelligence Project Collection includes printed materials, serials, organizational literature, pamphlets, clippings, catalogs, fliers, and correspondence from a variety of groups monitored by the SPLC and its contacts between the 1980s and 2010. Included within the collection are many groups falling within the SPLC Klanwatch and Militia Watch projects. Organizations represented in this collection typically promoted anti-Semitic, white supremacist, racist, separatist, or anti-Communist views and politics. Other organizations promoted Second Amendment rights, right-wing Christian and American nationalism, Y2K and survivalist preparations, and the rise of the Confederacy. SPLC's interests expanded across the political spectrum to include both right-wing and left-wing extremist literature.

The manuscript portion of the collection includes 11.0 lin. ft. of materials; the remainder of the collection, consisting of serials collected by SPLC from various organizations, has been separated for individual cataloging.

Check the library catalog link for a list of separated serial titles: Separately cataloged serials

ARRANGEMENT:

Collection is divided into two series: Organizations and SPLC Research, Subjects, and Clippings Files. There are also over 450 serial titles which have been separated from the collection and are available for request through the library catalog.

Catalog record notes, for separated item records

541 ## |a Rubenstein Library copy 1: Gift of the Southern Poverty Law Center; |d 2013; |e 2013-0048. |5 NcD

561 ## |a Rubenstein Library copy 1: Received as part of the Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project Collection. |5 NcD

710 2# |a Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project Collection. |5 NcD

856 42 |y For more information on this or related materials, please consult the Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Project Collection Guide. |u http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/splc/

10. Concluding comments

10.1 When description has errors

There are many factors that shape library descriptive projects. We recognize that we are continually learning and that we may make mistakes. There are also significant processing and cataloging backlogs in the Rubenstein Library, and we have serious resource and staffing constraints that require us to make compromises or choices that impact our description.

With that in mind, we encourage readers to report factual errors and alert us to harmful language so that we can prioritize re-description as it becomes feasible. As outlined in our Guiding Principles of Description, RLTS welcomes feedback and input from our colleagues, our donors, the research community, and the general public regarding the description we create and publish about our collections. Currently, the best way to comment or make suggestions about RL description is through the RL Ask website (external users) or the RLTS Helpdesk (RL staff).

10.2 When someone disagrees with library description

There will undoubtedly be occasions where stakeholders, users, or other library staff disagree with RLTS staff's interpretation of historical events or figures. When feedback is focused on the reputation or historical legacy of an individual or organization (especially in cases when a living donor disagrees with RLTS's description), we will rely on our curatorial colleagues to mediate and navigate this relationship on behalf of RL. In addition, RLTS expects that any subsequent changes to library-supplied description will abide by RLTS Guiding Principles for Description. When donors provide (and RL agrees to accept) their own historical narratives or interpretations of their materials, we will note those contributions with quotations, and when additional context is necessary, add independent, library-supplied description. When RLTS staff receive this sort of feedback, they should contact their supervisor or the Head of RL Technical Services if they have questions or concerns about how to address these comments.

10.3 There is always more to do

This guide is a product of its time (last reviewed June 2023). RLTS local decisions and strategies will continue to evolve as we implement the approaches and policies outlined above. We commit to ongoing review and revision of our style guide as we continue to reflect on our past practices and learn from our patrons, our community, and each other.

Resources cited

There were many contributors to this document: every member of RLTS participated in some aspect of authoring and developing this guide, and many RL and DUL colleagues participated in developing and reviewing its content. We also relied on guidelines published or developed by other groups and institutions, including:

- Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's Anti-Racist Description Resources.

- Bolding, Kelly, et al. "Toward Culturally Competent Archival (Re)Description of Marginalized Histories." Society of American Archivists conference presentation, 2019. Slides: https://schd.ws/hosted_files/archives2018/b4/s101_slides.pdf.
- Lellman, Charlotte, et al. "Guidelines for Inclusive and Conscientious Description." *Center for the History of Medicine: Policies and Procedures Manual* (May 2020). Center for the History of Medicine, Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine, Boston, Mass. https://wiki.harvard.edu/confluence/display/hmschommanual/Guidelines+for+Inclusive+and+Conscientious+Description.
- UNC Wilson Library's Archival Processing style guide and other documentation developed and share by UNC Libraries.
- Westbrooks, Elaine L. "Representing the Others: Preserving Evidence and Knowledge for Equity." Keynote address, Digital Commonwealth Conference, April 7, 2020. Slides: https://digitalcommonwealth.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/Conference/2020%20Conference/Digital%20Commonwealth%202020%20Conference%20Keynote%20Westbrooks%20Slides.pdf