

Formal Object Description

In this assignment, you will select one object within your chosen archive about which to write a formal description. You may find all or most of this information already provided by the descriptive catalogue of your archival source, or you may have to do some research of your own to find more information. While most archives include formal catalogue descriptions of their archival holdings, these are not always easy to use or understand. This exercise is meant to help you familiarize yourself with the kinds of descriptions you will come across, interpret them, and translate them for your own research purposes.

Note: there are *many* different standards and formats for descriptive catalogues; at the bottom of this document I've given you some links to go deeper into current cataloguing practices & standards, if you are interested.

Assignment: Write a formal description of your object that includes two parts: Part I, the formal details of the archival object, and Part II, preliminary research questions about the object, emerging from close attention and interpretation of the information in part 1.

Part I should include:

a. The date of object, its current location, owner and provenance, medium, dimensions & weight, physical details, accompanying materials (if applicable), and extent (the technical term used for measurements of the archival materials – i.e. 23 folios, or 46 photographs)

b. The object's creator, title (if known), style or genre (if known), language, handwriting, and contents, according to folio or page number

c. any details not included above, including damage, missing materials, any mistaken or missing information in the catalogue description, or any other factual elements that you observed during your study of your research object that are not included above

Part II should include:

A series of preliminary yet informed research questions generated by the details in part 1.

To begin, you might start trying to answer the following:

- What purpose did/does your object serve? How does it/could it have impacted those who interacted with it? What is easy to miss about this object?
- Why did you choose this object? What attracted you to it? How did your attitudes toward it change with preliminary research?
- How did this object get to this archive?

And then, depending on your observation skills and research, you might generate some very specific research questions & answers. These can be anything that interests you, but they might look like:

- Why does page/folio 57 look so much dirtier than the other pages?
- What is the damage I see on the left lower corner of the object?
- Is there evidence that this object been changed/conserved since its creation?

Some guidelines to help you understand and describe your chosen object:

- If you are working with a medieval manuscript, you will want to use this assignment to learn how to understand formal bibliographical descriptions of manuscripts, such as [this description](#) of the poet Thomas Hoccleve's Regiment of Princes at the Huntington Library.
 - To help read and understand manuscript descriptions like this, a good breakdown can be found here: ["Reading a Manuscript Description"](#)
- For handwritten manuscripts that are not medieval, a good basic introduction to more contemporary hand-written documents can be found in this [Introduction to the Manuscript Division](#) on the Library of Congress page for Women's History, and various additional links
- If you are working with printed material, you will want to use this assignment to learn how to understand full catalogue descriptions, such as [this description](#) of an early book of Chaucer printed by William Caxton at the British Library.
 - A more specific explanation of physical description of early print work, as practiced by the Folger Shakespeare library and others, can be found [here](#). You might also be interested in [this blog post](#) by a cataloger who worked on the *Cataloging and Preserving the Shakespeare Collection* at the Folger Shakespeare Library
 - A more general analysis can be found here at the British Library [Collection Guide](#)
- For visual materials, a good overview of the questions involved can be found here: ["The Margins of Archivv': Archival Descriptions of Visual Materials"](#)
- If you come across a type of catalogue description not mentioned here that is difficult to parse, let me know!

Going Deeper into cataloguing practices:

If you want to do a deep dive into the various rules of descriptive cataloguing, you can find series of downloadable pamphlets at the [Rare Books and Manuscript Section](#) of the Association of College & Research Libraries. These are geared toward library sciences & archivists, rather than literary scholars, and other standards exist as well, but they give a glimpse of the kinds of cataloguing decisions being made behind the catalogue you will encounter in your research.

Likewise, this presentation from the [Getty Museum](#) describes some of the differences between resources in visual & museum collections.