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Review of Putting Descriptive Standards to Work

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Kris Kiesling and Christopher J. Prom, eds. *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2017.

Archival description is one of the core functions of an archivist. Description standards ensure that archivists implement the tools and processes necessary to contextualize and increase discoverability of archival resources. For a thorough understanding of current descriptive best practices, consult *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work*, edited by Kris Kiesling and Christopher J. Prom, with modules written by Cory L. Nimer, Kelcy Shepherd, Katherine M. Wisser, and Aaron Rubinstein. This volume covers modules 17–20 of the Trends in Archives Practice series from the Society of American Archivists (SAA).

Description might be one of the most written-about topics in archival science according to Kiesling, but this book is a valuable addition to the literature for its discussion of the practicalities of effective descriptive practices. As Kiesling notes in her introduction, “Description is the foundation of archival work” (1). With a solid understanding of how standards enhance description, archivists can increase the accessibility of collections.

The book is designed to complement the first volume in the Trends in Archives Practice series, *Archival Arrangement and Description* (modules 1–3), by taking a closer look at the standards archivists use and how those standards work together. It familiarizes readers with each of the components necessary to create description that facilitates discovery of archival resources, from using a content standard and encoding description to providing context via linkable authority records and shareable metadata.

While the editors acknowledge that these four modules reflect American archival practices, they explain that standards such as Encoded Archival Description (EAD) and Encoded Archival Context—Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (EAC-CPF) encourage international collaboration. Standards lead to consistent descriptive practices and interoperability among tools. All four modules summarize the history surrounding the development and adoption of each descriptive standard. This background information places the standards within the proper context for understanding their purpose.

In module 17, “Implementing DACS: A Guide to the Archival Content Standard,” Cory Nimer presents an extensive exploration of Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) and that standard’s role in creating descriptive surrogates for archival materials. He highlights the flexibility of the standard and how it allows for local implementations, quoting DACS, which states that it relies on “professional judgment and institutional practice” (18). Institutions therefore should carefully document their decisions by writing policies that ensure uniformity in description. In addition, Nimer describes the importance of compatibility among standards to facilitate collaboration with other cultural heritage institutions. DACS is closely tied to the content standard for libraries, Resource Description and Access (RDA). Accordingly, Nimer not only provides examples of each DACS element but also lists how it compares to elements in RDA and poses questions for further consideration. This module will be helpful in defining implementation guidelines specific to an institution with respect to compatibility and reusability.

Module 18, “Using EAD3” by Kelcy Shepherd, addresses encoding data with EAD3, the most recent version of the XML-based metadata schema. Shepherd does not cover the basics of XML, which is important for working with EAD but has already been described in other resources listed at the end of the module. Instead, this module “focuses on decision points, overarching process, and management” (160). She discusses the significance of structured data for sharing and reusing descriptions, including usage in linked open data, which is described further in module 20. Shepherd also gives considerations for implementing the three different schema options available in EAD3, increasing the granularity of data, and migrating to EAD3 from previous versions. Her recommendations, with emphasis on preparation and planning, are useful for creating and refining workflows that incorporate EAD. The appendix for this module gives two substantial code examples that show how description is hierarchically organized.

Written by Katherine Wisser, module 19, “Introducing EAC-CPF,” outlines the companion standard to EAD, EAC-CPF. Whereas EAD describes archival records, EAC-CPF describes contextual information about the subjects and creators, or “agents,” of archival records. Although EAC-CPF is a relatively recent standard, the concept of documenting archival context is not at all new. Wisser reviews the development of archival description, including a discussion of authority control and the significance of documenting many-to-many relationships in archives. EAC-CPF supports the exchange of authority records compliant with the content standard International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (ISAAR [CPF]). Wisser also considers the basic structure of EAC-CPF and gives examples of projects that have used the standard. While this module is only a conceptual introduction to EAC-CPF and the other standards used alongside it, Christopher Prom’s case study offers a practical application with example records.

Among the benefits of implementing the standards described in this volume is the ability to collaborate with other institutions and share descriptions with the world. In module 20, “Sharing Archival Metadata,” Aaron Rubinstein looks at description not just as a way to increase discoverability of collections but as valuable data. As allied fields, such as digital humanities, increasingly rely on online data to support research, archivists need to better understand how to add value to the vast amount of structured data they have already been creating for years (300). Rubinstein covers both the concepts and technologies of the semantic web, providing vocabulary and practical approaches for sharing archival data online. Data can be shared openly in a variety of ways, depending on the resources available to a particular institution. From embedded data to linked data, he looks at practices that have worked for repositories large and small. Rubinstein’s main point is to “start somewhere” in terms of making data available on the web (341).

Overall, the book is appropriate for students of archival science as well as information professionals from allied professions who are looking for an introduction to descriptive standards and how they build on one another. But the authors delve deeply enough so that archivists at all stages of the profession can benefit from the detailed analyses of the standards. It may be helpful to read this book alongside the standards and their accompanying documentation for a more complete picture of how descriptive surrogates are formed and work together across different platforms. Although the terminology and the number of acronyms may be challenging for those new to the archival profession, there is a list of acronyms after each of the first two modules. Further readings are also available as appendices at the end of all four modules.

Along with equipping readers with the knowledge of how standards work in general, *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* offers practical examples. Encoding samples throughout the book demonstrate the ways in which standards are structured. For instance, Nimer's examples of DACS show how each element can be encoded in MARC and EAD, noting the options that have been expanded in EAD3. The case studies at the end of each module are especially beneficial in giving a sense of how the standards can be used in real-world scenarios. (These case studies are now open access and available on the SAA's website through a Creative Commons license.)

Even though standardization across the archival profession has long been an appealing ideal, it is not so easy in practice. As Wisser notes, for example, standardization may cause archivists to feel added pressure to adopt certain practices (243). This book apprises readers of the criticisms and potential challenges that result from adopting descriptive standards and formulating new workflows. It is important to understand these barriers to implementation in order to make informed decisions. Thus, this is a valuable read for archives administrators and other stakeholders involved in establishing policies and procedures. Nimer emphasizes that archivists must plan for change as descriptive methods progress (136). Keeping up with emerging trends, including those of allied professions, will allow archivists to more easily adapt current descriptive surrogates to future needs.

This volume supports better descriptive practices from multiple perspectives. It prepares readers for decision-making processes by providing the vocabulary needed to talk about standards. The case studies propose strategies for working through the challenges of implementation. Furthermore, the authors describe the direction in which archival description is trending and the currently untapped potential of structured data. "The greatest impact of a standard like EAC-CPF," Wisser writes, "is that it forces us to reexamine our understanding of archival description and the ways that that description interacts with information in systems" (277). Ultimately, the content will broaden readers' knowledge of the latest ways description is used.

With a realistic tone, the book is immediately applicable at any institution in that it encourages readers to start putting descriptive standards to work today. Readers will be more aware of how to set priorities and enhance description incrementally, even as standards continue to evolve. Description is all about presenting users with the context necessary to discover and utilize archival resources. In turn, the four modules in *Putting Descriptive Standards to Work* provide readers with the context and, more significantly, the applied examples needed to explore the possibilities of descriptive standards and make choices about the path forward.