

Definition

Managing the information that gives your collections meaning, not as an end in itself but to record and retrieve what is known about your objects.

Scope

Most museums create some kind of structured catalogue record for each object, or group of objects, either on computer or cards. Such records give an at-a-glance summary of key facts and they can be indexed so you can find information when you need it. Catalogue records should also cross-refer to other relevant information held on file (eg in another part of your computer-based system or in a filing cabinet of object history files) or published elsewhere.

Catalogue records are more than the inventory-level minimum that tells you an object exists and where it is. If you have met the **Inventory** requirements you know the numbers and locations of everything in your collection, but the names might be very general (eg pot, postcard, drawer of butterflies). Inventory-level records cannot tell you which pots are Roman, which postcards show your town in the 1920s, or which butterflies were collected by a noted Victorian naturalist.

Cataloguing fleshes out those bare bones with as much, or as little, extra information as you need. It gets down, in writing, knowledge your team already carries in their heads, and gives you somewhere to store new facts as they come to light. No museum has finished cataloguing, because there is always more to learn.

You may need to catalogue high-value objects to a standard specified by your insurers. The ObjectID standard, which requires photographs too, is used internationally to help recover stolen items.

Once you have met at least the minimum **Inventory** requirements, think less about 'tackling the backlog' than how you can capture the knowledge you will build through exhibition research and other projects. See **Documentation planning** for more advice on how to break cataloguing down into manageable chunks.

This is a Spectrum primary procedure. UK museums must meet the standard set out below to fulfil the requirements of the Museum Accreditation Scheme.

Note that Spectrum does not specify any particular level of cataloguing beyond the minimum needed to meet the **Inventory** standard. It does, however, ask you to think about the 'core' catalogue information you need and how you will achieve that.

The Spectrum standard

You should have a **policy** on cataloguing. This could either be a standalone document or part of a wider collections management policy. Either way, in deciding your policy you will most likely need to consider these questions:

- What is your broad approach to cataloguing different parts of your collection (eg some parts catalogued as individual objects and others at group-level only)?
- Are you aiming to meet any external cataloguing standards (eg using templates, classifications or terminologies agreed within subject specialisms)?
- Beyond the inventory-level minimum, what should be in a 'core' catalogue record for different parts of your collection?
- If you have not already met your 'core' standards, what are your priorities for doing so?
- How will you ensure names, dates, places and other keywords are recorded consistently?
- What catalogue information will you make available to your users, and how?
- How will you protect confidential information, including personal data?
- For new accessions, what is your target time for creating the agreed 'core' catalogue record?
- How will you make sure that new information arising from other procedures is referenced in catalogue records?

You should have a written **procedure** that explains the steps to follow when cataloguing objects. Spectrum's suggested procedure is a useful starting point, but however you do it, your own procedure should meet the following minimum requirements:

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
You have a catalogue system in place that allows you to record the minimum information needed for the Inventory procedure and, beyond that, supports your cataloguing policy.	You have a basic framework to which you can add more significant information over time in line with your cataloguing policy.
Catalogue records are linked to the objects they describe via unique accession numbers that are securely associated with the items themselves.	You can always link objects to the information in their catalogue records.

Minimum requirement	Why this is important
Catalogue records cross-refer to relevant information held in your system (whether on paper or digitally) or available elsewhere.	All the relevant information about an object is available for its management and use. You do not spend time researching an object unaware of previous work.
Your system can reliably retrieve relevant catalogue information to meet the needs of users.	Your users can easily access information about your collections. You do not waste time trawling through search results that are not what you wanted.
You capture relevant information resulting from other procedures in a timely way.	Your catalogue records are up to date. You can re-use exhibition text to improve your online collection database.
You keep an up-to-date backup of your catalogue records.	You do not risk losing many years' work in the event of a fire or other disaster.

Suggested procedure

Creating catalogue records

Create a record for each object, or group of objects, accessible by object number.

See **Note 1** for guidance on the form that catalogue records might take and **Note 2** for more on object history files. Your cataloguing policy should set out the kind of information to be recorded for each type of collection, but as a minimum the record should either contain or be linked to the core inventory information for the object or group:

- A unique object number (from which it should be clear whether the object is from your accessioned collections, on loan, or has some other status such as a handling item) - **Object number** (use a standard format).
- An object name - **Object name** (use a standard term source).
- The number of objects (if a group) - **Number of objects**.
- A brief description (or image) - **Brief description**.
- The current location - **Current location**. This should be a **Location reference name/number**.

- If not your museum, a record of who owns the object - **Current owner** (and, if your museum does own it, a record of where it came from).
- A note of who recorded this information and when - **Recorder** and **Recording date** (use standard formats).

If you do not have this information for each object (or group of objects) go to **Inventory**.

Add other important information.

Based on your cataloguing policy, and according to the type of object and the information available, record as many of the following as you need. For newly-acquired objects you should do this as soon as possible, rather than building up a backlog.

Object identification information

- Other historical reference numbers - **Other number** with an **Other number type** (use a standard term source).
- **Title**.
- **Comments**.
- **Distinguishing features**.
- Curatorial responsibility - **Responsible department/section** (use a standard term source).

Object description information

- **Age**.
- **Colour** (use a standard term source).
- Content and subject information:
 - **Content - activity** (use a standard term source).
 - **Content - concept** (use a standard term source).
 - **Content - date** (use a standard format).
 - **Content - description**.
 - **Content - event name** (use a standard term source).
 - **Content - note**.
 - **Content - object type** (use a standard term source).
 - **Content - organisation** (use a standard form of name).
 - **Content - other** (use a standard term source).
 - **Content - people** (use a standard form of name).
 - **Content - person** (use a standard form of name).
 - **Content - place** (use a standard form of name).
 - **Content - position** (use a standard term source).

- *Copy number.*
- *Dimension*, including:
 - *Dimension measured part* (use a standard term source).
 - *Dimension value.*
 - *Dimension value date* (use a standard format).
 - *Dimension measurement unit* (use a standard term source).
- *Edition number.*
- *Form* (use a standard term source).
- *Inscription content.*
- *Inscription description.*
- *Material* (use a standard term source).
- *Object status* (use a standard term source).
- *Phase* (use a standard term source).
- *Physical description.*
- *Sex* (use a standard term source).
- *Style* (use a standard term source).
- *Technical attribute* (use a standard term source), including:
 - *Technical attribute measurement.*
 - *Technical attribute measurement unit* (use a standard term source).

Object history and association information

- *Associated activity* (use a standard term source).
- *Associated concept* (use a standard term source).
- *Associated date* (use a standard format).
- *Associated event date* (use a standard format).
- *Associated event name* (use a standard term source).
- *Associated object.*
- *Associated organisation* (use a standard form of name).
- *Associated people* (use a standard form of name).
- *Associated person* (use a standard form of name).
- *Associated place* (use a standard form of name).
- *Association type* (use a standard term source).
- *Object history note.*
- *Related object number.*

Field collection information

- *Field collection date* (use a standard format).

- **Field collection event name** (use a standard term source).
- **Field collection method** (use a standard term source).
- **Field collection number.**
- **Field collection place** (use a standard form of name).
- **Field collector** (use a standard form of name).
- **Geological complex name** (use a standard term source).
- **Habitat** (use a standard term source).
- **Stratigraphic unit name** (use a standard term source).

Object production information

- **Object production date** (use a standard format).
- **Object production organisation** (use a standard form of name).
- **Object production people** (use a standard form of name).
- **Object production person** (use a standard form of name).
- **Object production place** (use a standard form of name).
- **Object production reason** (use a standard term source).
- **Technique** (use a standard term source).

Object owner's contribution information

- **Owner's personal experience** (any previous owner).
- **Owner's personal response.**
- **Owner's reference.**
- **Owner's contribution note.**

Reference information

- **Reference.**
 - **Reference author/editor** (use a standard form of name).
 - **Reference association** (use a standard term source).
 - **Reference details.**
 - **Reference note.**
 - **Reference number.**
 - **Reference publication date** (use a standard format).
 - **Reference publication place.**
 - **Reference publisher.**
 - **Reference title.**
 - **Reference type** (use a standard term source).
- **Catalogue number.**
- **Document location** (use a standard term source).

Amendment history (information about changes to the catalogue)

- *Unit of information added* (use a standard term source).
- *Amendment history authoriser* (use a standard form of name).
- *Unit of information scheme* (use a standard term source).
- *Information source* (use a standard form of name).
- *Recorder* (use a standard form of name) and *Recording date* (use a standard format).

Provide access to records via indexes.

Access to catalogue information should be provided by indexes and/or free-text retrieval. It should be appropriate to the nature of the collection, and might include access by, eg:

- Object name.
- Subject (eg using a standard classification scheme).
- Artist, maker or manufacturer.
- Source (eg donor or vendor).
- Production date.
- Associated people.
- Associated places.

Maintaining catalogue records

Maintain links or cross-references to relevant information recorded during other procedures.

It is important to be able to access relevant information generated during other procedures when looking at an object's catalogue record. Such information need not be copied into the catalogue in full, but there should be a cross-reference to it so that you and others know it exists and can find it in future. This may take the form of a reference number and, at its simplest, the collections management information in a catalogue record may comprise a series of reference numbers linking to records elsewhere.

Keep the catalogue secure, including digital backups and paper copies.

The museum catalogue is the most complete account of the history of each item, so it is essential to keep this information secure.

If a catalogue is computerised, backups should be made, with the frequency, method and responsibility defined in your policy and procedures. It may be difficult to back up a manual catalogue system; some museums use photocopying.

Improving catalogue records

Add information from documentation projects.

Results from *Documentation planning*.

Add information from a collections review.

Results from *Collections review*.

Add information arising from research, interpretation or other use.

Results from *Use of collections*.

Guidance notes

Note 1: Catalogue records

Catalogue information can be held in a series of individual records:

- In a computerised database.
- On pre-printed catalogue cards.
- On loose-leaf sheets, which are filed numerically.

There is usually one record for each object (or group of objects). In computerised and manual systems, information within each catalogue record is sorted into a set of 'pigeonholes' known as 'fields'. Each discrete piece of information such as the date an object was made or the name of donor, is held in a separate field. Information placed in these fields can be written in a consistent manner to aid indexing: rules can govern the words used, the order in which they are entered and any punctuation which may be required.

Computerised databases

There are a number of commercial computerised systems available which support the **Cataloguing** procedure (as well as many of the other Spectrum procedures). These are often referred to as 'collections management systems' (CMS). On the Collections Trust website you can find details of CMS software from the Spectrum Partners, suppliers who are committed to the development and promotion of Spectrum and are licensed to use it commercially. Many of these systems are Spectrum Compliant, which means they have been validated by Collections Trust and have a place to record every unit of information that users might need during any of the Spectrum procedures.

Pre-printed catalogue cards

Some museums use Collections Trust catalogue cards either as the basis of their main catalogue record, or for temporary inventory projects, where the data collected is later transferred to a CMS.

Catalogue records should be on good quality card or paper. If printed, a laser printer should be used. If hand-written, use a permanent black ink.

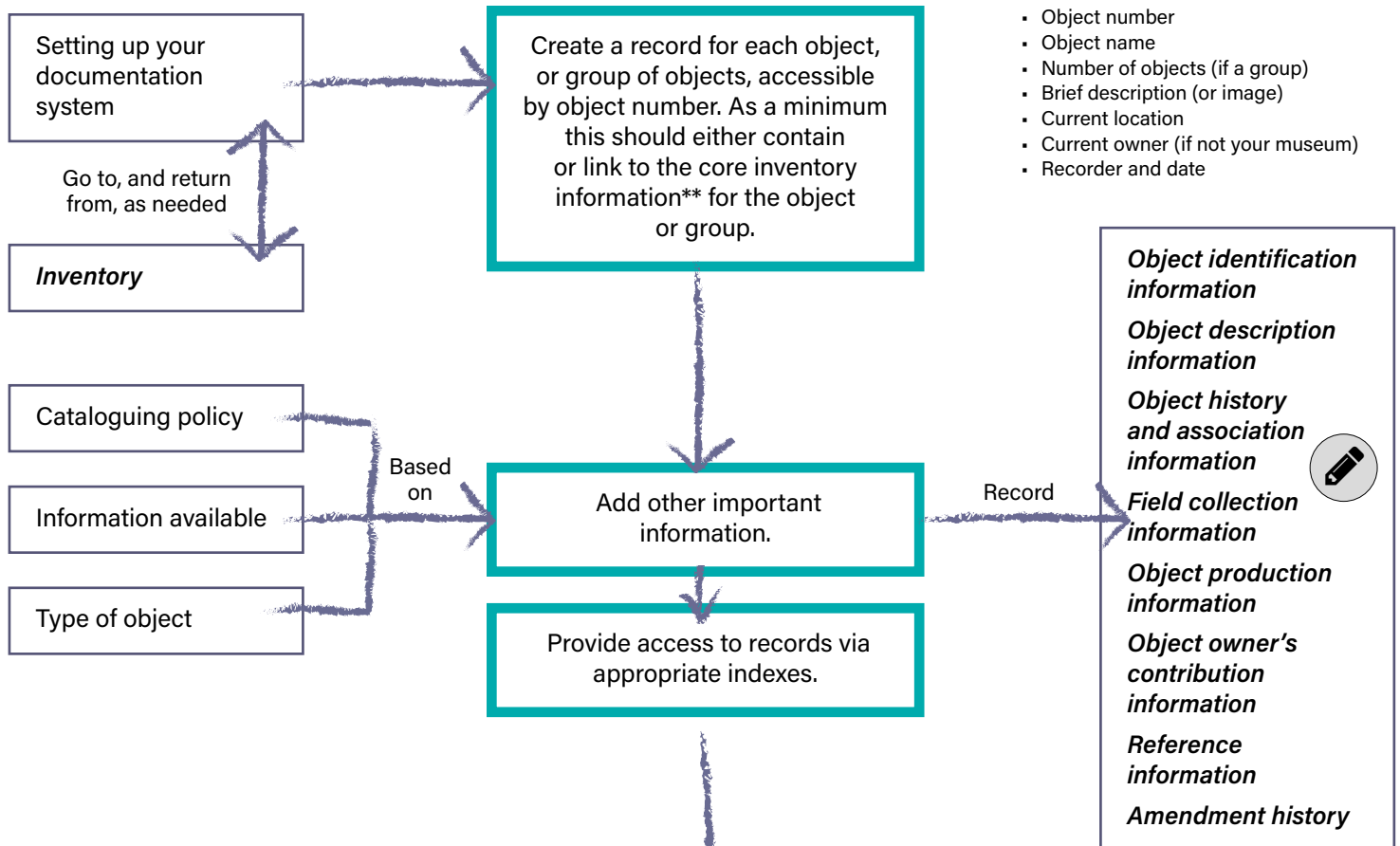
Note 2: Object history files

Not all your knowledge about the objects in your collections need be recorded in their catalogue records; indeed, in many cases, this would be almost impossible. Additional information (eg correspondence, notes, press cuttings, reports) can be held in object history files. Each folder should be marked with the relevant object number and filed in that order.

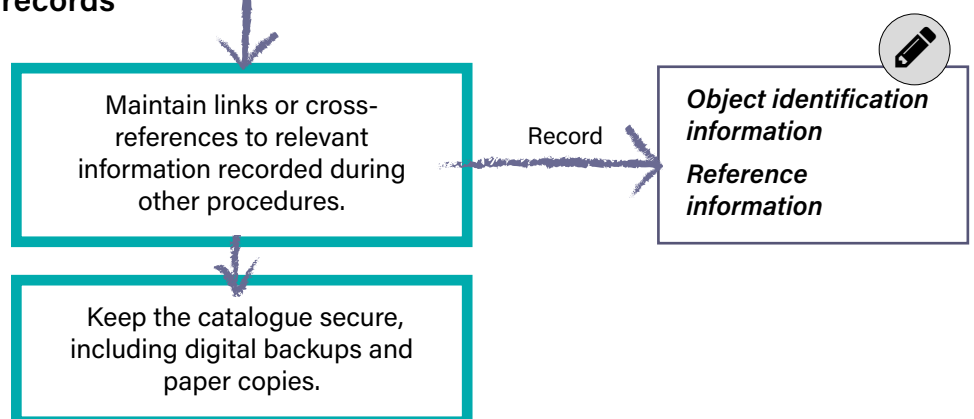
It can be helpful to draw attention to particularly useful information held in object history files (eg when making an acquisition note, 'For full history see the informative letter from the donor in the object history file').

Cataloguing

Creating catalogue records



Maintaining catalogue records



Improving catalogue records

