

BIBLIOGRAPHIES, CHECKLISTS, AND CATALOGS

The core of a collector's reference shelf

The audience for bibliographical reference works is a diverse one, and consists mainly of collectors, booksellers, librarians, researchers, and students. Most users want to know when, where, and by whom a book they're looking up was first published, but many researchers are looking for more. Scholars often want extensive information about the texts described, as well as specifics on how these texts have differed in their published or unpublished versions. Other users, including librarians, booksellers, and some collectors, want detailed information on the bibliographical characteristics of each edition, impression, issue, and state of a book, while others are interested only in a short list of what an author wrote, or the distinguishing characteristics—or points—that will enable them to identify books as first or important editions.

Although those seriously interested in books usually think of a bibliography as something on a more elevated and detailed level, according to common usage, and the current Merriam-Webster definitions, almost any list of books qualifies as a bibliography:

1. the history, identification, or description of writings or publications
- 2a. a list often with descriptive or critical notes of writings relating to a particular subject, period, or author; b. a list of works written by an author or printed by a publishing house
3. the works or a list of the works referred to in a text or consulted by the author in its production."

The bibliographies that readers encounter most frequently are the ones described in definition 3, in which an author lists the books that he or she used or cited in an essay or book. Unfortunately, these lists are often limited to basic information about the cited work, with no details about whether or not the book cited is a first edition, a facsimile reprint of an early edition, or an edited or reworked text.

While this basic information is sometimes all that we want or need to know, when we're trying to identify and evaluate a book, we usually need more, and this additional information can be found in descriptive bibliographies (sometimes called analytical or critical bibliographies) and their less-detailed relatives, checklists.

In *Principles of Bibliographical Description*, which was published in 1949 and is still the Bible of bibliographical description, Fredson Bowers discussed what a bibliography needed to include before it could properly be termed a bibliography:

It should have a unified subject, a definite purpose expressed in its arrangement and in its treatment of the books described

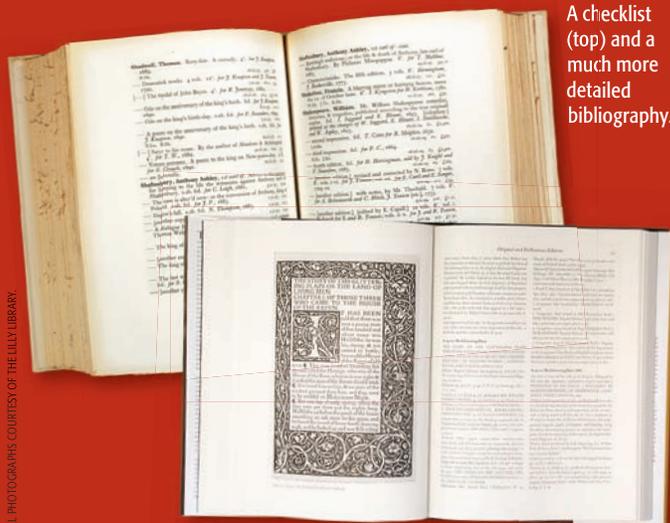
so that a shaping intelligence guides the work. It should be complete and authoritative within the limits chosen for the subject. Its description should be contrived according to sound principles of bibliographical notation; and, after certain basic requirements have been met, should be adjusted to the expressed purpose of the bibliography. Interpretation should be made of any features of the description which bear on the method of printing and publication of the entire book or any part of it, with the main purpose of revealing the composition and the transmission of the text. More general annotations may be concerned with explicating the literary and textual history of the subject.



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It's not easy to compile a descriptive bibliography according to the directives set forth by Bowers. These bibliographies

include the identification of separate editions, along with their issues and states, the collational formulas describing each book's makeup and physical structure, and pagination statements and other appropriate descriptive elements. Bibliographers often spend many years putting together a detailed descriptive bibliography and examine multiple copies of the books described, along with a variety of supporting and documentary evidence. It's only in these detailed



A checklist (top) and a much more detailed bibliography.

FURTHER READING

In addition to *Principles of Bibliographical Description*, Fredson Bowers discussed bibliographies in a published lecture, “Purposes of Descriptive Bibliography, with Some Remarks on Methods,” in *The Library*, fifth series, vol. 8, pp. 1–22. The requirements of descriptive bibliography have also been discussed in detail in a number of articles by G. Thomas Tanselle, many of which were published in *Studies in Bibliography* (available online at <http://etext.virginia.edu/bsuva/sb/>) and all of which are well worth reading.

bibliographies that complete descriptions of books can be found.

Not everyone, however, is interested in full bibliographical descriptions. Some people who work with rare books have never learned enough about descriptive bibliography to be able to read and understand the descriptions fully, while others want only quick answers to their identification questions, which are usually about first editions. Rather than full descriptions produced according to Bowers, these readers are looking for basic bibliographical information and identifying “points” (see *FB&C* #29) of the kind that they can find in Merle Johnson’s *American First Editions: Bibliographic Check Lists of the Works of 199 American Authors* (third edition; New York: R. R. Bowker, 1936); Gary M. Lepper’s *A Bibliographical Introduction to Seventy-Five Modern American Authors* (Berkeley: Serendipity Books, 1976); or in the five volumes of *First Printings of American Authors: Contributions Toward Descriptive Checklists*, edited by Matthew J. Bruccoli (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1977–1987). While these works fall under the broad dictionary definition of bibliography, they don’t qualify as descriptive bibliographies under Bowers’s definition, but are rather what their authors and Bowers would term “checklists.”

Checklists are very useful for a quick overview of an author’s works, or a list-

ing of generally accepted points, and there are far more published checklists than there are descriptive bibliographies. It’s important to remember, however, that while some checklists are the result of serious and knowledgeable bibliographical work, others are hastily compiled, sketchy, and inconsistent or inaccurate. It’s also important to remember that checklists are no substitutes for bibliographies, and until full bibliographical investigations have been made for a particular author, publisher, or subject, it’s not unusual for previously unsuspected editions, issues, states, or points to be discovered.

Bibliographies and checklists, as the terms are commonly used today, present their readers with information gathered by examining various copies of the books described. This is different from the information presented in a catalog, which contains descriptions of the books in a particular collection or library. Although Bowers’s definition of catalog extends to include listings of books “in a certain field, such as a specific period, a particular type of literature, a definite subject, or an individual author,” most collectors, booksellers, and librarians today usually regard a catalog as a publication that describes specific copies of books that have been brought together at least long enough to produce the catalog. Catalogs generally have more copy-specific information than bibliogra-

phies or checklists, and they often include descriptions of provenance, binding, manuscript annotations, or condition. A bookseller’s catalog is expected to include these notes, and a description of a book for sale would be considered to be incomplete without them. Since, however, booksellers now base their catalogs on databases of their stocks, it’s not unusual for a purchaser to be surprised, pleasantly or unpleasantly, by the receipt of a copy of a book that doesn’t match the catalog description, because the description was actually that of a copy that was cataloged and sold several years ago.

Sometimes catalogs go beyond the listing of specific copies and contain additional bibliographical information beyond that necessary to describe the specific copy under discussion. These catalogs, which are often termed “bibliographical catalogs,” serve as more than a mere record of the books in a collection at a particular time. Examples of bibliographical catalogs include *The Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection: English Literature, 1475–1700*, by Emma V. Unger and William A. Jackson (three volumes; first edition privately printed in New York in 1940; reprinted by Oak Knoll Press, 1997), and *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Milton Collection in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand*, by K. A. Coleridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). Bibliographical catalogs such as these are standard works of reference, and they’re frequently cited in other bibliographical and catalog descriptions.

Most readers of *Fine Books & Collections* have consulted bibliographies, checklists, and catalogs, without worrying too much about their definitions or differences. In using reference works, however, it’s useful to know how they were compiled and how authoritative they are. Though we don’t do it as much as we should, a careful reading of the prefaces, introductions, and acknowledgements sections can give a good idea of how best to use these reference works, and how seriously to regard the information we get from them. ☐