



World Digital Library Expert Descriptions: Nominal Process

Question: What is an Expert Description on the WDL?

Answer: It is a summary that explains each item and highlights its significance. It illuminates the material in a way that is accurate, succinct, and engaging. It is developed by working with information provided by partners, subject specialists, and other authoritative resources.

Producing Descriptions and Evaluating Relevance and Quality

When evaluating draft descriptions supplied by partners (and “partners” also includes the custodial divisions of the Library of Congress, which generally do not have ready-made descriptions suitable for the WDL), the WDL team follows the process outlined below.

Content contributing partners can produce better quality descriptions and avoid extensive rewriting and back-and-back communications with the WDL team if they understand this process and follow a similar process (and above all ask themselves the same sorts of questions) as they draft their descriptions.

I. Do we have adequate information from the partner, both metadata and what the partner has provided as descriptions, to produce the descriptions we need for the WDL?

What do the descriptions look like? Do they explain the significance of the object? Do they give a brief historical, cultural, religious, etc context that will enable a non-expert visitor to have some sense of what the object is? Do they answer obvious questions that a non-expert user might ask about the work? Is there anything in the description that encourages the user to actually open the work and look at it on the WDL? In sum, does the description answer the following questions: “What is this object and why does it matter?”

If at first glance the description seems inadequate, is there information in the other metadata fields that can be used to produce the description (e.g., items in note fields, or even long subtitles, which can be quoted or paraphrased to produce a description)

Are there contradictions between the description provided and the rest of the metadata, either factual or formal (spellings, transliteration, etc).

If the answer to Question I is YES, the description is in good shape. Proceed to editing.

WDL prefers the optimum length for a description to be 1100 characters. But there may be a perfectly good description that runs to 2,000 or 2,500 characters that has been professionally edited and has stood the test of time on the Partner Institution’s or another institution’s Web site. It does not make sense for Partners to chop down this description to make the WDL word limit. In this case, WDL prefers to take what Partners provide, edit it as needed, and run it by them later for review.



II. If the initial description (and metadata) are inadequate to create a usable WDL description, is there additional information on the Partner Institution's Web site directly linked to this item that could be used to do so?

In many cases, partners have item-level descriptions on their own sites. This may not be initially known because there may be different people involved in creating the metadata than were involved in creating these sites.

We need to look, systematically and early in the process, at how the partners display/describe their own content. In some cases this may not be suitable for the WDL, but in many cases it is, and has stood the test of time with users.

III. If the answers to I and II both turn out to be "no," i.e., the Partner Institution does not have a description that can be used, is there an existing, authoritative source (online or in hard copy) that contains a usable description for the item or items in question, or the raw material to create such a description?

For certain classes of material, the answer to this is, in most cases, almost certainly "yes." For example, Library of Congress top treasures usually will have been described in finding aids, exhibit labels, the old LC acquisitions bulletin, etc. Certain other categories, e.g. pre-1501 rare books or medieval manuscripts, are extensively documented in standard reference works (Sabin, John Carter Brown.) For Arabic works, a great resource is, of course, Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*. These works need to be checked first before any "original" research is done.

Description writers need to remember that they are dealing with digitized versions of real objects, many rare and unique. Description writers are trying to highlight the significance of these objects and provide context. They shouldn't write just about the objects (as in the bibliographic literature) or just about the context (as in general sources such as Wikipedia), but must do a bit of both, relating one to the other.

The traditional bibliographic/bibliophile approach states something like: "The work relating to Henry VIII is the only copy in the world, although a similar copy exists at the British Library. This version belonged to so and so. It has a 19th century binding, and six pages at the end or missing." In short, everything except what the work is about and why it matters. The other extreme is simply to write a little historical essay on Henry VIII, and ignore the work.

One needs to thread a path through these extremes: taking the object as a starting point, explaining what it is and why it matters, how it relates to the historical figure of Henry VIII, and perhaps what the WDL user should look for when they actually open the object. This is a difficult path to thread, but it is best done by starting with standard sources, and not just jumping in to research the subject to which the object relates – which is more appropriate for something like Wikipedia.



IV. If the answers to I, II, and III are all “no,” we have no alternative but to produce a new description from scratch. This can either be done by going back to the Partner Institution and asking them to produce a new description, or, if for some reason the partner cannot produce a description (it may not have available staff or language expertise, for example) to engage WDL staff and expert contractors to do the description and then run by the partner for comment/approval.

In either case, at this point it becomes important to decide on a research strategy for producing the new descriptions:

Examples of such strategies that WDL description writers have used include:

1 – (for photochromes) get quotes from contemporary sources (Baedeker) to create lively, interesting descriptions that match text with picture

2 – (for Carpenter photos) go back and look at Carpenter’s books and find what he said about the photos

3 – (for General Collection books) look at the table of contents, read the preface and intro, look at the index, the foldouts and maps, and try to say something interesting and informative

4 – (for Chinese books and Islamic manuscripts) engage a recognized expert with linguistic skills to examine the documents page by page and do original research to produce description

These are all viable strategies that have worked for WDL; no doubt there are many others. However, one should not simply begin without a strategy and start writing something based on what is found in Wikipedia, Google Book Search, etc.

V. What do we do about mixed cases?

In reality, the answers to questions I, II, and III are often not simply “yes” or “no,” but “yes, but” or “no, but.” In other words, there may be some content that is useful for a description, but it’s not quite up to WDL standards. The question then becomes, “What needs to be done to get this description into good shape for WDL purposes?” This in turn involves analyzing what is wrong with it:

Is it too short?

Too long?

Is context missing that is needed for international users or to take account of the fact that the item will be displayed and indexed individually, and not as part of a collection?

Are there obvious questions about the item that a user might ask that are not answered?

In these cases, one should identify what is right and what is wrong about the description, and apply the proper strategy to remedy it.