



## Terminology for Museum Staff

### The Basics

Although terminology can seem like a very complex and technical area of work, in reality it is very simple – using agreed words (terms) to describe ‘stuff’.

Museums are likely to use terminology in two areas of their work:

#### *Describing objects*

Museums need to be able to describe objects they have in their collections, or have temporary responsibility for (e.g. enquiries). They also need to have information about their associations (e.g. people, places and events).

There are many published terminologies covering: object names, materials, locations, artists and makers, subjects and historical periods.

#### *Describing what the organisation does with objects*

Information is needed to describe the management of objects whilst they are in the care of the organisation (e.g. how the object was acquired, where it is, what condition it is in, or how it is being used.).

There are fewer published terminologies for this type of information. An organisation will need to construct some of their own (e.g. storage and display locations).

### How It Affects Your Work

Here are some situations where the use of agreed terminologies is useful:

#### *Volunteer cataloguing the collection*

A Volunteer is asked to catalogue a collection of similar objects. They need to know what words to type into the boxes on the computer screen. Giving them guidance through use of terminology educates them, reduces the scope for variability of recording and so improves access.

#### *Front of House dealing with a member of the public*

A member of the public brings an object to be identified. Front of House staff need to know what words to use when filling in the Entry form.

#### *Conservator condition checking an object*

A conservator, describing the condition of objects uses a set of agreed terms, which have agreed specific meanings. This will allow others to use that information accurately without having to look at the objects themselves.

#### *Education Officer writing a kids activity sheet*

An Education Officer needs to find relevant material to illustrate the sheet. Using agreed subject terminology to describe objects will make the search easier and will enable the non-specialist to understand the collection better.

There are other situations ....

### How MDA Can Help You

#### *SPECTRUM Terminology*

This is a free service which provides:

- Background information about terminology and why it is important.
- Terminologies and links to terminologies.
- Information about how to construct terminologies.

To find out more go to:

[www.mda.org.uk/spectrum-terminology](http://www.mda.org.uk/spectrum-terminology)

#### *The Future*

MDA is working with a range of partners to look at building new agreed terminologies, for example to address the needs of diverse audiences and to plug the ‘gap’ of collection management terminology.

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