Library of Congress >> MARC >> Understanding MARC

WHAT IS A MARC RECORD,
AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

It is impossible these days to read a library journal, attend a library conference, or even have an informal chat with other librarians without hearing the phrases "MARC format," "MARC records," or "MARC-compatible." Many library professionals have not had an opportunity to take formal courses explaining the important topics of library automation and the role of MARC, yet automated library systems may be important parts of their libraries.

This booklet will explain -- in the simplest terms possible -- what a MARC record is, and it will provide the basic information needed to understand and evaluate a MARC record.

Part I:

What Does MARC Mean?

What is a MARC record? A MARC record is a MA chine-Readable Cataloging record.

And what is a machine-readable cataloging record?

Machine-readable: "Machine-readable" means that one particular type of machine, a computer, can read and interpret the data in the cataloging record. The following pages will explain why this is important and how it is made possible.

Cataloging record: "Cataloging record" means a bibliographic record, or the information traditionally shown on a catalog card. The record includes (not necessarily in this order): 1) a description of the item, 2) main entry and added entries, 3) subject headings, and 4) the classification or call number. (MARC records often contain much additional information.)

1) Description: Librarians follow the rules in *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules*, 2nd ed., 2002 revision to compose the bibliographic description of a library item. This "description" is shown in the paragraph sections of a card. It includes the title, statement of responsibility, edition, material specific

details, publication information, physical description, series, notes, and standard numbers.

2) Main entry and added entries: AACR2 also contains rules for determining "access points" to the record (usually referred to as the "main entry" and "other added entries"), and the form these access points should take. Access points are the retrieval points in the library catalog where patrons should be able to look up the item.

In other words, the rules in AACR2 are used to answer questions such as: For this book, should there be entries in the catalog for more than one author or more than one title? Should the title of the series be noted? How should the author's name be written? Is this a "title main entry" item (no author)?

3) Subject headings (subject added entries): The librarian uses the *Sears List of Subject Headings* (Sears), the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* (LCSH), or some other list of standard subject headings to select the subjects under which the item will be listed. Use of an approved list is important for consistency, to ensure that all items on a particular subject are found under the same heading and therefore in the same place in the catalog.

For instance, the subject heading list indicates that all books about cats should be assigned the subject CATS. Using this authorized heading eliminates the possibility of listing some books under CATS and others under FELINES. Even if a book is called *All About Felines*, the subject heading will be typed CATS. That way, all books on that subject will be listed in one place in the catalog for the patron to find. The patron does not have to imagine all the possible synonyms for the word he is looking for.

4) Call number: The librarian uses a Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress classification schedule to select the call number for an item. The purpose of the call number is to place items on the same subject together on the same shelf in the library. Most items are sub-arranged alphabetically by author. The second part of the call number usually represents the author's name, facilitating this subarrangement.

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Part II:

Why Is a MARC Record Necessary?

Why can't a computer just read a catalog card? The information from a catalog card cannot simply be typed into a computer to produce an automated catalog. The computer needs a means of interpreting the information found on a cataloging record. The MARC record contains a guide to its data, or little "signposts," before each piece of bibliographic information.

The place provided for each of these pieces of bibliographic information (author, title, call number, etc.) is called a "field." The records in simpler computer files sometimes have a fixed number of fields, and each field contains a fixed number of characters.

However, to allow proper cataloging of books and other library items, the best file structure allows for records with an unlimited number of fields and unlimited field lengths. This flexibility is necessary because not all titles are the same length (*The robe* versus *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*). Some books are part of a series, requiring a field for that information, while others have no series statement. And audiovisual items have much longer physical descriptions (5 filmstrips : sd., col. ; 35 mm. + teaching manual) than do most books (403 p. : ill. ; 22 cm.).

The computer cannot expect a certain type of information to begin and end at the same position in every bibliographic record. The statement of responsibility will not always begin with the 145th character of the record and end at the 207th position, for example. Therefore each MARC record contains a little "table of contents" to the record, according to a predefined standard.

Data "signposts:" The computer must have assistance if it is to read and interpret the bibliographic record. The box charts on the right illustrate the information these "signposts" need to convey.

If a bibliographic record has been marked correctly and saved in a computer data file, computer programs can then be written to punctuate and format the information correctly for printing a set of catalog cards, or for displaying the information on a computer screen. Programs can be written to search for and retrieve certain types of information within specific fields, and also to display lists of items meeting the search criteria.

Why one standard? You could devise your own method of organizing the bibliographic information, but you would be isolating your library, limiting its options, and creating much more work for yourself. Using the MARC standard prevents duplication of work and allows libraries to better share bibliographic resources. Choosing to use MARC enables libraries to acquire cataloging data that is predictable and reliable. If a library were to develop a "home-grown" system that did not use MARC records, it would not be taking advantage of an industry-wide standard whose primary purpose is to foster communication of information.

Using the MARC standard also enables libraries to make use of commercially available library automation systems to manage library operations. Many systems are available for libraries of all sizes and are designed to work with the MARC format. Systems are maintained and improved by the vendor so that libraries can benefit from the latest advances in computer technology. The MARC standard also allows libraries to replace one system with another with the assurance that their data will still be compatible.

MARC 21: The Library of Congress serves as the official depository of United States publications and is a primary source of cataloging records for US and international publications. When the Library of Congress began to use computers in the 1960s, it devised the LC MARC format, a system of using brief numbers, letters, and symbols within the cataloging record itself to mark different types of information. The original LC MARC format evolved into MARC 21 and has become the standard used by most library

computer programs. The MARC 21 bibliographic format, as well as all official MARC 21 documentation, is maintained by the Library of Congress. It is published as *MARC 21 Format for Bibliographic Data*.

A comparison of the same record with textual information and with MARC tags illustrates the compactness of the MARC 21 format. It's a matter of storage space. Look at the box charts below . The MARC 21 format uses "260" "$a" "$b" and "$c" to mark the field that holds imprint data instead of storing the words "publication area," "place of publication," "name of publisher," and "date of publication" in each record. This convention makes more efficient use of computer storage space.

Record with textual "signposts"

"SIGNPOSTS"	DATA
Main entry, personal name with a single surname: The name:	Arnosky, Jim.

Title and Statement of responsibility area, pick up title for a title added entry, file under "Ra..."
    Title proper:
 	
    Statement of responsibility:
	Raccoons and ripe corn /
	Jim Arnosky.

Edition area: Edition statement:	1st ed.

Publication, distribution, etc., area:
    Place of publication:
    Name of publisher:
 	
    Date of
	New York :
	Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, c1987.

publication:	

Physical description area:
    Pagination:
    Illustrative matter:
    Size:
	25 p. :
	col. ill. ;
	26 cm.

Note area: Summary:	Hungry raccoons feast at night in a field of ripe corn.
Subject added entries, from Library of Congress subject heading list for children: Topical subject:	Raccoons.
Local call number:	599.74 ARN
Local barcode number:	8009
Local price:	$15.00

Same record with MARC tags

"SIGNPOSTS"	DATA
100　1#　$a 245　10　$a 　　　　　$c 250　##　$a 260　##　$a 　　　　　$b 　　　　　$c 300　##　$a 　　　　　$b 　　　　　$c	Arnosky, Jim. Raccoons and ripe corn / Jim Arnosky. 1st ed. New York : Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, c1987. 25 p. : col. ill. ; 26 cm.

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