Library of Congress Subject Headings: Module 5.1

Library of Congress Subject Headings
Module 5.1
Principles of Heading Assignment, Part 1

Policy and Standards Division
Library of Congress
February 2017
This unit will introduce you to the fundamental principles of subject heading assignment, which are all contained in Subject Headings Manual instruction sheet H 180. This unit will also explain the rules governing the order of headings when two or more headings are assigned to a resource. In addition to the principles themselves, we will provide numerous practical examples.

The unit will answer questions about how deeply resources should be indexed, how many headings can or should be assigned, and many other topics.
The general, or overarching, rule is to assign headings that summarize the resource as a whole. In LCSH, we do not attempt to provide a heading for every topic presented in a resource.

Put simply, we are interested in summarizing the content, rather than in-depth indexing.
For example, a resource might cover the causes of six wars of the twentieth century: the two World Wars, of course, along with the Spanish Civil War, the Korean War, the Indochinese War, and the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935-1936.

We would not assign a heading for all six of those wars.

Instead, we assign a single, more general heading: War—Causes—History—20th century.
That does not mean that we can NEVER assign headings for specific topics in resources.

We can do just that if the topic represents at least twenty percent – that is, one fifth – of the resource.

Let’s look at some simple examples.
If we have a resource that compares the relative benefits of cats and rabbits as pets, and the coverage is pretty much 50/50, we would assign a heading for each type of animal.
But what if the resource covers the merits of cats, rabbits, and goldfish?

That is three types of animals, so each constitutes 33 percent of the resource.

Each would have a heading.
Now let’s consider a resource that discusses seven types of animals, cats, rabbits, goldfish, snakes, myna birds, hermit crabs, hamsters, and ferrets as pets.

Because – assuming equal coverage – none of those animals individually constitutes twenty percent, we assign a heading that covers the resource as a whole, not a heading for each type of animal.
Not every resource is eligible for subject headings, though.

Texts of sacred works, such as the Bible, the Qur’an, the Vedas, and so forth, are not assigned subject headings to cover the topics within them.

I’m actually not even sure how you would do that!
Some resources do not have a discernable topic, and they are not assigned subject headings, either.

These are the resources that you look at and cannot determine their purpose. Or maybe it is a book of essays on random topics that do not have an overarching theme.

Or newspapers like the London Times, and the Washington Post.
Finally, subject headings are often omitted from individual literary works.

The rules for cataloging literary works are covered in several instruction sheets, and are too extensive to explain here.
The cataloging treatment also needs to be considered. Cataloging treatment refers to the way that the resource is cataloged descriptively.

Let’s explain that with an example. If we have a set of three DVDs, we could catalog it as a single unit, or, we could catalog each disc individually.

That decision has an impact on how we view and describe the resource’s aboutness.

Here are some further examples.
Let’s say that there is a set of books about the 50 states of the United States, and each state is covered in its own volume.

If it is cataloged as a set, it would be assigned a heading for the states as a whole.

Library of Congress Subject Headings: Module 5.1

Cataloging Treatment

• Assign headings appropriate to the descriptive cataloging treatment of the resource

• Collected sets

The 50 U.S. states (cataloged as a set)
U.S. states.
But what if each volume were cataloged separately?

Each volume would receive the heading appropriate for the coverage.

The volume on Ohio would have the heading Ohio.

The volume for Arizona would have the heading Arizona, and so on.
Periodicals and serials are assigned headings that reflect their entire coverage, even if they have theme issues.
The Journal of Finance does not publish theme issues and is assigned the heading that corresponds to the overall topic covered, Finance—Periodicals.
Cataloging Treatment

• Assign headings appropriate to the descriptive cataloging treatment of the resource
• Serials

The Journal of Finance.
Cataloging & Classification Quarterly.
Cataloging—Periodicals.
Classification—Periodicals.

*Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* publishes theme issues occasionally, but the headings reflect the topic of the periodical as a whole.
Every issue of *Teaching with Primary Sources* is a theme issue, but it again is cataloged with general headings appropriate to the entire run of the periodical.
Sometimes texts with commentary are cataloged as text, and the commentary is secondary. Other times, the commentary is the basis for cataloging, and the text is secondary.

The subject treatment should match the descriptive cataloging decision.
Cataloging Treatment

• Assign headings appropriate to the descriptive cataloging treatment of the resource
• Texts with commentary

Text is the basis of the description
Subject headings reflect the text

If the text is the basis for the description, the subject headings reflect the text.
If the commentary is the basis for the description, the subject headings reflect the commentary.
Take for example a resource by William Jones that includes the text of On the Origin of Species, along with Jones’ commentary about it.

The cataloger in this case decided that the text was the more important aspect, and cataloged it as an edition of On the Origin of Species.

The subject headings reflect the coverage of that resource.
What if the cataloger decided that it would be better to catalog the resource as a commentary, as in this example?

The subject headings are assigned according to the guidelines for cataloging commentaries, which say that a subject heading is assigned for the resource being discussed, along with the headings that were assigned to the original resource.
You may have noticed that some of the examples in this presentation have one subject heading, and others have more.

There is no “perfect” number of headings for every resource.

As we have already seen, some resources, such as sacred texts, are never assigned headings. At other times, one heading is sufficient to describe the contents of the resource.

Generally speaking, six or fewer headings is sufficient. At the Library of Congress, resources are assigned a maximum of ten. Excluded from that stricture, though, are special or rare materials, which may be assigned more than ten headings.
Let’s look at two similar resources and see how their cataloging differs.

The first is titled *We remember World War II*. It is a compilation of several Americans’ recollections of the war.

One heading indicating that is composed of personal narratives by Americans is sufficient.
The second is titled *World War II as I saw it*. It is the recollections of a single American who participated in the war. He served in the 6th Armored Division of the Army on the Western Front. There is a lengthy description of the Battle of the Bulge. It also includes also a significant amount of autobiographical information about the author.

The difference between these two resources can be summarized this way.

The only common element in the first resource is the fact that it consists of personal narratives by Americans. The people featured in it served in different branches of the Armed Forces and in different theaters of the war. Therefore, only one heading is assigned.

On the other hand, the second resource is about a single person, who provided numerous specific details about his experiences. Each of the topics constitutes at least 20 percent of the resource, and can be represented, therefore, in the subject headings.
Here is another example, *Hitchcock’s America*. The description says,

Hitchcock’s American films are not only some of the most admired works of world cinema, they also offer some of our most acute responses to the changing shape of American society in the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s…

The contents of the resource can be described with three headings.

- The heading for Hitchcock, himself, subdivided by —*Criticism and interpretation*
- *National characteristics, American, in motion pictures*
- And *United States—In motion pictures*. 
On the other hand, this title on cinema is sufficiently cataloged with only one heading.
The title of a resource is an important source of information when assigning subject headings.

Each concept in a title that is indicative of the subject should be assigned a heading.

Catalogers, however, should be thoughtful about including title concepts, because some titles are meant to be humorous, ironic, or even cryptic.
Each of the words in this title except “in” and “and” are important.

The concept of madness in literature is assigned Mental illness in literature.

While LCSH will not permit us to assign headings specific to the postwar period in literary history, we can assign English fiction and American fiction, each subdivided by 20th century and History and criticism.
Let’s look at a few examples where titles may not be helpful.

First, if the title is euphemistic or cryptic, it should not be represented in the subject headings.

The title *Franklin D. Roosevelt’s era* could mean numerous things. Is it about his presidency in general? Is it about World War II? Or the Great Depression and the country’s recovery? Or maybe it refers to his entire lifetime?

Roosevelt’s name heading should not be assigned automatically.

The contents of the resource should be examined to determine whether a heading for Roosevelt would be appropriate, or not.
Sometimes titles include topics that by policy cannot be brought out by subject headings. In the title “A history of Seattle in the 1990s,” we can bring out the concept of Seattle history, but not the time period. The history of local places can generally be subdivided only to the century level.
Third, sometimes the title is general but the resource is more specific. *Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Era* also falls into this category.

And finally, the topics in a title that is more like a table of contents should not be brought out as subject headings.

For example, all of the individual fruit trees listed in *Diseases and pests of apple, pear, cherry, fig, lemon, lime, and orange trees* should not be assigned subject headings. Instead, we would assign the more general **Fruit—Diseases and pests**.

Why assign **Fruit—Diseases and pests** instead of **Fruit trees—Diseases and pests**?
Library of Congress Subject Headings: Module 5.1

Because *Fruit trees—Diseases and pests* is a UF to *Fruit—Diseases and pests*. 

*Fruit—Diseases and pests* (May Subd Geog)

- UF Fruit—Pests
- Fruit pests
- Fruit trees—Diseases and pests
Catalogers should always consider the intent of the author or publisher, and assign headings without being judgmental. We avoid assigning headings that negatively label topics or express personal value judgments regarding topics or materials.
You may be aware, for example, that there are numerous conspiracy theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and that most of them relate to the film recorded by Abraham Zapruder.

The author of this resource believes that the Zapruder film is a hoax. The cataloger may or may not believe that thesis, but it does not matter because the resource was analyzed objectively. Since the author believes that the film is a hoax, headings are assigned to reflect that fact.
In very rare cases, though, there is such widespread disavowal of certain views that LCSH provides a way to bring those views out.

**Holocaust denial literature** is one of those headings.

The next module will cover more specific guidelines on the number of headings and depth of indexing for resources.