

Controlled Vocabulary Assignment Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)

a. Source of terminology

LCSH derives its terminology from both user warrant and literary warrant. The basis for user warrant is the fact that subject headings are intended to help the user find information; thus, materials should be filed under headings that users will understand and use, even if that differs somewhat from the language used in the document itself. For the same reason, terms should reflect current usage, because users will tend to think in terms of words and phrases that they use and hear every day.

On the other hand, the basis for literary warrant is the Library of Congress collections themselves. Terms used in these collections are also incorporated into their subject headings, because those are the collections that the subject headings are meant to represent. Although terms used in the literature may not completely reflect terms in current usage, current usage is fleeting and changeable, whereas written works are, with few exceptions, static. A term such as “knowledge organization” may be in current usage for ten or twenty years and then pass out of favor, but it will still be present in books written during its heyday and should not be purged simply because another term has become more popular. The fads of language are too short and volatile to base a long-standing classification solely on them. LCSH, as a subject-heading system that has existed for over a century, has enough bugs and inconsistencies in it already without encouraging more through faster change.

b. Specificity of terminology

LCSH terms vary widely in specificity. Some are very broad, like “Transportation”; some are very specific, like “Dump trucks” or “Absurd Philosophy in Literature.” The guideline is to use the most specific term possible, but when the most specific concept applicable to a document is still very broad, the terms must be broad also. Terms can also be redefined by using a semi-faceted system of subdivisions. Relationships between broad and narrow headings are made explicit by cross-references.

c. Semantic relationships shown

LCSH makes use of many semantic relationships, which it calls “cross-references.” These relationships include references of equivalence (USE or UF), hierarchy (BT, NT), and association (RT). All of these allow both users and catalogers to navigate the world of subject headings from one term to another which may be more suited to the purpose, whether more current, more specific, more general, or simply more correct. In addition, these relationships provide context for terms and help to define them. This structured context is one of the ways in which a controlled vocabulary limits the ambiguity of natural language. Equivalence relationships can come about because of conflicts between user warrant and literary warrant or because of changes in current usage (for example, “Cars (Automobiles)” contains a USE reference to “Automobiles”), or simply because one term of several synonyms has been chosen as the preferred term (for example, “Raw foods” is preferred to “Food, Raw,” “Uncooked food,” and “Unfired food”). In addition, when an older heading is supplanted by a newer one, the older heading is not removed; instead the relationship is denoted by an equivalence relationship and a “[*Former heading*]” note.

LCSH marks hierarchical relationships with the abbreviations “BT” and “NT” for “broader term” and “narrower term,” respectively. The current system of making hierarchical relationships explicit has only been in place since 1984, so there are still headings established before 1985 that do not follow current principles; this is one of the disadvantages of a long-standing controlled vocabulary for a huge, all-encompassing collection. Explicit hierarchical relationships are especially good at providing context for terms. The introduction to LCSH simply says, “The code BT precedes a subject heading representing, according to current policy, the class of which the heading is a class member.” It does not define “class;” however, it seems evident that hierarchical relationships used by LCSH link terms which are roughly synonymous concepts but of which one is a subset of another. Part-whole relationships are not denoted by using cross-references.

Associative relationships include any relationship that is neither equivalence nor hierarchy but important enough to note explicitly in the catalog, for example

“Birds” and “Ornithology,” the study of birds. It is clear that someone who comes across either of those headings might find useful materials under the other, so an explicit relationship is useful. An associative relationship is no more than a catch-all, so few terms are being linked by association until the hierarchy has been totally reviewed. A hierarchical relationship is more specific and preferred to an associative one.

d. Term syntax

LCSH syntax is very complex. The introduction to LCSH uses many words like “may, “usually,” and “normally,” implying that these are guidelines more than rules and that exceptions are very common. The lack of uniformity of syntax comes partly from the fact that LCSH was first developed at a time when computers were not even a dream, and grouping related terms alphabetically was important; thus, placing the name of the class or of the most important aspect first aided in collocation by alphabetizing. Examples of these are “Railroads—Tickets” and “Insurance, Fire.” As computers have become the standard storage and retrieval medium for catalogs, alphabetical collocation has become less important and cross-references more so. Therefore, current policy is to use normal word order for most subject headings, although there are always exceptions.

e. Pre-coordination vs. post-coordination

LCSH is pre-coordinated, because assignment of controlled vocabulary terms happens before the book is put into the system rather than upon retrieval by a user. All the rules in the LCSH manual are rules for human catalogers to use when assigning terms to a document. Pre-coordination allows subject terms to express very complex, specific, and precise topics with word relationships that cannot be expressed using the Boolean operators used by post-coordinate languages. For example, the subject heading “Absurd Philosophy In Literature” contains natural-language syntactic relationships which cannot quite be reduced to the three keywords “absurd,” “philosophy,” and “literature.” Furthermore, specifying that term explicitly makes possible the relationships to the terms “Black humor” and “Theater of the Absurd,” each of which is significantly

different from “Absurd Philosophy in Literature.” Those relationships lead to the contextual strength of pre-coordinate languages. Finally, pre-coordinate languages are able to suggest search terms that users might not have thought of originally. A post-coordinate language has no such intelligence.

f. Creation of indexing terms/classes: faceted vs. enumerative

LCSH began its career as an enumerative classification system but has become more faceted over time, especially since 1974, when free-floating phrase headings were introduced. LCSH consists of main concepts such as “Massachusetts” or “Construction Industry.” Subdivisions may then be tacked onto these main headings, somewhat like facets in a specific subject cataloging system. Subdivisions, much like facets, may be topical, form, chronological, or geographic. None of these subdivisions are universal, so it is always important to consult the Manual to find out what subdivisions can be used and what the appropriate syntax is. For example, the placement of geographic subdivisions depends on what other topical subdivisions may be subdivided geographically. Although LCSH has certain aspects of a faceted classification system in that terms may be modified through the addition of applicable subdivisions, it has too many exceptions and non-standard syntax rules to be a truly faceted system.

g. Other noteworthy features

LCSH makes use of a name authority file. These names are omitted from the schedule of subject headings.