

# Catalog Evaluation

## Seattle University Library Catalog

### Catalog overview and context

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The first thing that struck me about the physical space of Seattle University's A.A. Lemieux Library is the awkwardness of its architecture. I entered on the first floor, which is connected to the second floor by an awesome double spiral staircase. The staircase is fun, but it obscures the view of the reference desk from the west entrance on the second floor, and it stops at the first floor. When I wanted to visit other floors in the library, I had to consult a map in order to find the staircase hidden in a back wall, behind a small, unlabeled door. (The elevator was more open, but I tend to head for stairs first.) The spiral staircase could have been a unifying structure through all four floors of the library, and instead it seems more of an obstruction. I am all the more horrified because the building was built in 1965; I have come to expect navigational eccentricity in library buildings that have been renovated and rebuilt, but one would think that they would build the stairs correctly in the first place.

As I mentioned above, the reference desk and the computer terminals around it are obscured from the outer entrance by a decorative rail around the staircase. The interior security gates are located almost directly in front of the reference desk, so patrons are forced to pass it on their way in. This location for the reference desk makes it immediate and available to users, which is very good, but I wish that the initial view from the entrance were not so obstructed and uninviting.

I was extremely unimpressed with the signage and maps. The "Leisure Reading" was more obviously labeled than anything other than the reference and circulation desks. The Dewey section was not labeled at all, other than call number ranges like all the other stacks; I imagine that library users who are unfamiliar with library classification systems would find it very confusing. Even I found it confusing, since the library's map is hideously inaccurate; according to the map, the Dewey section should be ten or fifteen feet from its actual location, and the oversized books take up much less than the space the words "Oversized Books" take on the map.

My overall impression of the library is that it does a fair job with the resources it has. I have heard rumors that the library was underfunded for twenty years because one of the past presidents thought it was not important for SU to have a library; given that sustained lack of funds, and given the small collection (about 250,000 items), I am sure that the staff provide the best access they can with their limited resources.

## Seattle University online catalog

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Seattle University's catalog backend is an integrated library system called Unicorn, by the vendor Sirsi. Web access is provided through a user interface called WebCat.<sup>1</sup> The library's informational flier claims that the catalog provides access to all the library's resources, but that may mean only physical resources; online licensed databases are not included in the OPAC and must be accessed from elsewhere on the library's website.

The lack of signage in the library's physical embodiment seems to be mirrored in the online catalog. Apart from a few very brief notes, the interface is entirely undocumented, with no additional help available. For example, there is no explanation of Boolean operators, although they are supported in the basic search and available in the advanced search. I also note that the "complex" search page, while it offers some features that are not on the "simple" search page, does not allow the option of browse or string searches.

### **Search types, access points, and arrangement**

My four search types are keyword anywhere, subject heading string, author string, and title string.

#### ***Keyword anywhere***

As implied in the search-type description, this is essentially a keyword search. The first and only level of display includes call number, title, author, publication date, and availability information (number of copies and location). The most prominent information in this display is the call number, which is bolded and displayed above the rest of the information. Although the call number is undoubtedly important, users would

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<sup>1</sup> According to WebCat's index page (<http://verdi.seattleu.edu/>), the installation was last updated in September of 1999.

generally rather select a work based on author or title rather than call number, which is only useful for finding a book on the shelf.

When using the basic search, I was unable to determine the sorting order. Not only did the interface not indicate any search criteria, but none of the displayed information fit any recognizable alphabetical or numerical sequence. Only on the advanced search page or when using the “Search again” form at the bottom of a results display could I determine that the default is no sorting. However, even when I selected a sort order, the results seemed unsorted! This confused me mightily until I saw the small (although bolded) line of text just above the results list: “Results not sorted because search retrieved more than 0.” Thinking this might be just a typo, I tried a search that retrieved only seven records; still no luck. Apparently for some reason the library staff have disabled sorting altogether, so there is no way to know how the catalog would sort the materials if it could (for example, what does its concept of relevance entail?). I can only assume that either the response time or the sorting method or both were so bad that no sorting at all is preferable.

The default Boolean operator for the keyword-anywhere search is “and.” I determined this by searching for villeret pleasence<sup>2</sup> (1 record), villeret and pleasence (1 record), and villeret or pleasence (7 records). On the other hand, in some cases I had trouble with the implied operator. Logically, villeret and vidmark and villeret vidmark should be equivalent, but the former retrieves one record and the latter none at all. I thought this might be because the words were in different fields (“publication information” (MARC 260, I assume) and “credits”), but a search for fish ed. pulls up one record, with the two query words in different fields (“edition” (250) and “contents” (505)). I fail to understand the logic of this behavior, and if I were a user of this catalog, I would be very skeptical of the results it gave me. On the other hand, I might not know that I was missing results; most users today will not bother to add Boolean operators since many interfaces do not need them, so they will not even realize that their searches might have returned different results with explicit operators.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the dotted boxes to denote my search queries, because quotation marks have a double meaning in this context.

Of the main MARC fields that we were supposed to check for indexing (100, 245, 250, 260, 300, 500, and 650), only the 245 ‡c and 260 ‡c subfields are questionable. The 245 ‡c subfield is not even listed in the individual record display, and the catalog interface does not give access to the MARC record, so there is no way of knowing. My guess is that it probably is not indexed, simply because retrieving records based on non-displayed information would be confusing to users. On the other hand, a search for `includes index` returned nearly 80,000 records, and none of the records I checked showed those words, so maybe 245 ‡c is indexed after all.

It was difficult to determine conclusively whether the 260 ‡c subfield is indexed, because publication date is included in the LC call number, and call numbers are indexed. For example, a keyword-anywhere search for `DC201 .L44 1965` retrieves that unique record. I surmounted this hurdle by finding a book with a Dewey call number: 940.5315296 M319I, *The incomparable crime; mass extermination in the twentieth century; the legacy of guilt* by Roger Manvell. A search for `manvell and 1967` retrieved the record; therefore 260 ‡c is indexed. (I note that this is another instance where the screwy implied-operator behavior tripped me up; neither `1967 manvell` nor `manvell 1967` return any records. If I had not tried expressing the operator explicitly, I would have concluded incorrectly that the 260 ‡c subfield is not indexed.)

### ***Subject heading string***

WebCat refers to left-anchored searches as “browse” searches. When I entered the word `water` in the basic search box, changed the radio selection to “browse,” and clicked “subjects,” I was presented with an unstructured, strictly alphabetical list of subject headings. I know that it is unstructured because “Water quality” is listed after “Water—Purification” and before “Water—Religious aspects; if the list were structured, all the “Water—Subdivision” headings would be grouped together, and the subjects with main headings that included other words would be grouped afterwards. The subject heading list not only eliminates subdivision indicators but is completely capitalized, which makes headings very difficult to read. Headings would make more sense and be easier to read if there were some clues as to the subdivisions.

The list of subject headings is the first level of display and it includes the name of the subject heading as well as the number of records assigned to it. The second level of

display lists the records attached to the specified subject heading and is similar to the first level of display for a keyword search, except that it is automatically sorted by publication date, with the most recent books at the top. There is no secondary search criterion such as call number, author, or title. Unlike the keyword search, there is no “Search again” form at the bottom of the page and thus no possibility of limiting, resorting, or otherwise editing one’s search, even though the “Limit Search” button is still at the top of the page and pops the user down to the bottom, where no form exists. The user must click on the “New Search” button or on one of the links in an individual record in order to perform a new query.

The subject heading search type includes the name-as-subject fields. For example, when I searched for , I saw a reference for “SCIAMA DENNIS WILLIAM 1926.”

### ***Author string***

The levels of display for left-anchored author searches are exactly the same as for subject headings, except that the author searches are apparently unsorted, neither by title proper nor by uniform title nor anything else. I can find no rhyme nor reason to the arrangement. Although some titles include uniform title, like one edition of *Pericles*, there are no other editions grouped near it. Since even records with exactly the same displayed title (title proper) are not grouped together, I highly doubt that there is anything sophisticated going on with uniform title, even if it is in the MARC records.

The author search type includes corporate authors. For example, when I browsed for “American Medical Association” under authors, the first level of display included the heading “AMERICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION [15].”

### ***Title string***

It seems that the difference between the “browse” and “exact” search options is that an “exact” search will go directly to the second level of display if there is a full title (or subject or author) match, whereas “browse” searches will always go through the first level of display. I concede that this level of differentiation can be useful, because I have occasionally been frustrated by having to click twice on a link in an authority index when I know the title I want, but I was also confused by the evident difference between the two searches, when I thought they should be the same. In my opinion, this is an unnecessary and confusing duplication of search options.

Once again, the first and second levels of display for title string are the same as for subject and author. Titles in the first level of display are filed in numerical order; thus, *9 Great American Myths* is filed before *10 Good Reasons to Be a Catholic: A Teenager's Guide to the Church*. It was difficult to find a title which had a large number of records; even "holy bible" only had four records. Therefore, it is difficult to determine conclusively the sorting of records in the second level of display, but from those four records, it seems that the sorting order is by publication date, from newest to oldest.

It seems that the catalog will not drop the initial article of the title automatically; in fact, if I enter "the" in a title browse search, I get a list of a few titles beginning with "the" that have not even themselves been stripped of articles.

### ***Evaluation of search types***

Despite the confusion of "browse" and "exact" searches and the lack of subdivision indicators, the catalog could be quite good if there were any sorting whatsoever. Even strict title-proper sorting for author string searches would be better than no sorting at all. It appears to me that SU staff have disabled sorting for some unknown reason, and I find that to be an egregious lack. Also, the inability to choose an alternative sorting order for a record set, whether selected by title or author or subject, severely inhibits collocation.

### **Record display issues**

To the best of my knowledge, the individual record display includes 100, 110, 240, 245, 250, 260, 440, 500, 600, 650, 710, and 710 fields. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine exactly which MARC fields and subfields are displayed, because the catalog does not display the MARC record, and some of the SU records have borne no resemblance to the MARC records in the UW or KCLS catalogs. There is no option of an abridged or extended display; although there is a link labeled "jump to location/availability information," it merely jumps down the page, which is usually short enough that the entire contents display in one window without scrolling.

The labels for each field are fairly clear and concise. My only criticism is that the 100 and 700 fields are labeled with the same text, "Personal author," but located in different places. The main-entry author is at the top of the record, whereas the others are

grouped at the bottom. As a librarian and reader of MARC, I understand this, but normal people would find it very confusing.

My major criticism is that some indexed fields are not displayed, which can lead to confusion on the part of the user. A catalog record should contain enough information to tell the user why that record was retrieved, and this inconsistency prevents that. Indexed records should be displayed.

### **Authority control and vocabulary control**

The SU catalog contains both name and subject cross references, interfiled with the preferred headings in alphabetical order. In the first level of display, the language for all kinds of references, for both names and subjects, is the same, for example: “see related headings for: LEWIS CECIL DAY– 1904–1972.” Clicking on that link takes me to a page reading:

For the author **LEWIS CECIL DAY– 1904–1972**  
1) search under: DAY LEWIS C CECIL 1904–1972

Clearly these are fields from the MARC name authority record, non-preferred (400) and preferred (100) names. The preferred heading for Cecil Day Lewis leads to a list of his works, with a very small note at the top:

There are also cross references.

The cross references link leads to another set of headings from the authority record:

For the author **DAY LEWIS C CECIL 1904–1972**  
1) search also under: BLAKE NICHOLAS 1904-1972

In this case, the headings are 100 and 500 fields. I find it laudable that the cross references are available, but although “see” references are very explicit, “see also” references are fairly hidden. It would have been more helpful if the non-preferred term and both preferred terms had been displayed on the same page, so that I knew what my options were. Even more confusing and problematic is the fact that if I browse directly for “Blake, Nicholas,” I am directed to “search also under” Cecil Day Lewis, without any ability to search for titles by Nicholas Blake. That is perfectly reasonable, given that the SU library does not own any works by Mr. Blake, but the note for cross references is still there, even though the link to Blake’s name leads only to a page saying “Sorry, no items were found using the cross reference you picked.” I have even had it happen that there were no cross references at all. Such failures on the part of the system are in my opinion

unacceptable, since it is perfectly feasible to check whether cross references or associated records exist before displaying a message to that effect. A user of this catalog would swiftly become distrustful of cross references that lead nowhere.

Subject cross references work roughly the same way, except that much more information is available. The text of references directs users to broader and narrower terms, which can be very helpful. For example, the cross references page for “motion pictures” includes the descriptive text:

more information: Here are entered general works on motion pictures themselves, including motion pictures as an art form, copyrighting, distribution, editing, plots, production, etc. Works on the technical aspects of making motion pictures and their projection onto a screen are entered under Cinematography.

Unfortunately, that text is hidden at the bottom of a long list of references. It would be more useful at the top of the page, before the references, so that the user knows what s/he has found and what other, different headings are available. Many users may not ever scroll down far enough to see the description.

This catalog uses LCSH, but I only know that because I recognize the subject headings and because there is not much else they could use. There is no information in the catalog that identifies the subject vocabulary.

The catalog’s support for authority control is only about halfway there. It has a good start, but it makes the user click and scroll and poke around a little too much for results and information that might or might not be there.

### **Ease of use**

I only understand this catalog somewhat because I am a catalog administrator, and I know a lot about what goes on in the backend of these catalogs. Even so, I do not understand why some searches work without explicit AND operators, and some don’t. I do not understand why the catalog says there are cross references when there aren’t. I do not fully understand why it retrieves records with keywords such as includes index that I cannot find in the displayed record. I am a trained librarian and a catalog administrator, and if I do not understand, no poor uninitiated freshman is going to have a chance.

Yes, pretty much anyone can type words in a box and get something out of the catalog, but as far as refining their searches to retrieve exactly what they want, the

interface neither supports that functionality nor provides enough documentation to allow the user to make the fullest possible use of the functionality that is available.

## **Conclusion**

The SU catalog's strengths are the simplicity of its interface and the completeness of its cross-references. Unfortunately, those strengths also contribute to its weakness, as the interface's bareness limits both functionality and documentation, and many of the cross-references lead to dead ends. In addition, the occasional inexplicability of the implied AND operator will at least occasionally cause users to miss results that they might otherwise have had. The SU catalog will allow users to find *something*, but it will not necessarily allow them to find what they really want. In my opinion, it meets the finding objective but only partially meets the collocation and selection objectives. It will collocate titles by subject, author, or title but not sort them usefully (sub-collocating them); it displays most of the MARC fields but not even all of the indexed fields, and there is not enough information on the second level of display for useful comparison between the displayed records.

I am just glad that I'm not a SU student and never have to use this catalog again.