Society of Archivists Data Standards Group

A Guide to Archival and Related Standards
Standards applicable to archives; for the digital delivery of repository guides, finding-aids, and images of material from collections.

**Title:**
Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)

**Name of Standards Developing Organisation**
The Society of American Archivists

**Current version**

**Replaces**

**Abstract**
Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) is the current US content standard for the description of archival collections and their creators

**Description**
DACS is a product of the CUSTARD (Canada-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description) project, the hope of which was to produce one agreed archival description standard for North America. This ambitious attempt foundered on various issues, some philosophical and some practical, and produced two new standards: A revised edition of the Canadian Rules for Archival Description (RAD2)\(^1\) in 2008 and DACS, a standard for the US alone.

While Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM) is clearly a direct ancestor, DACS is much more than an updating of the previous US standard for archival description. While APPM was primarily concerned with the creation of 'library' type catalogue descriptions, the new standard introduces the concept of archival hierarchy and aligns the US descriptive world with international standards such as the General International Standard for Archival Description (ISAD(G))\(^2\) for the first time.

The standard has a much wider scope, however, and archival description only accounts for *Part 1*. It is argued that for users to fully understand archival material, it is necessary to describe the context of creation and *Part 2* covers
identifying creators, rules for administrative histories and biographies and the formation of Archival Authority Records, the rules for which are in line with the second edition of the International Standard Archival Authority Records for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR(CPF))\(^3\). Finally, Part 3 sets out rules of the formation of authorised versions of personal, family and corporate names as well as geographic names ‘that may also be the name of corporate bodies’. This part is heavily based on the relevant chapters of Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2\(^{nd}\) revision (AACR2)\(^4\) with some slight amendment for the archival context.

In effect then, when related to the UK standards environment, DACS equates to ISAD(G), ISAAR(CPF) and the NCA Rules for the Construction of the Personal, Place and Corporate Names\(^5\) all rolled up in one handy volume. While the areas covering archival authority records and the format of authorised names may be seen as basically a re-packaging of ISAAR(CPF) and AACR2 in a form useful for US archivists, the rules developed for archival description develop and extend ISAD(G). This section then may be of most interest to archivists in the UK.

With one or two changes of detail, DACS suggests the same data elements as ISAD(G). The main exception to this is level, where DACS shies away from standardising level names in line with ISAD(G). It admits that this is partly a pragmatic response to the lack of consensus in the US about the name, and one suspects, the nature of the levels of archival description. The injunction that archival systems should ‘employ some means of linking together the various levels of description’ should at least ensure that data is interoperable.

While there is a good fit with ISAD(G) then perhaps of more interest is the fact that DACS is a ‘content’ standard in the true sense as it actually states the form and content that should be given in any element. The rules for the title element for example, take up no less than 6 pages, with detailed rules for the mandatory name segment and note of the format of the material.

Finally, the volume also comes with the usual apparatus one would expect. Introductory sections provide information about the genesis of the standard, and a statement of principles reiterates the underlying framework for archival description in terms of provenance, original order, and the rules of multi-level description. Appendices include a glossary and mappings to related content standards such as APPM, ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) and to structure and data format standards such as MARC21\(^6\) and Encoded Archival Description (EAD)\(^7\). Indeed examples are given with each rule in these two standards.

DACS is currently undergoing a revision process by the Technical Sub-Committee of the Society of American Archivists (TS-DAC) which it is hoped will be completed in the summer of 2013 to coincide with the publication of the next revision of EAD\(^8\).

**Next month**

Next month we will look at the open standard for office documents - Open Document Format for Office Applications (OpenDocument) v1.0 which is the

Bill Stockting
British Library
6 Official MARC 21 Web site: <http://www.loc.gov/marc/>
7 Official EAD Web site: <http://www.loc.gov/ead/>