6-1-2003

How to Create a Bibliography

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Recommended Citation

JOE

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Abstract
Getting relevant information to our clients is critical for effective outreach. A librarian gives practical tips on creating bibliographies. The three parts cover why to create a bibliography, how to do it, and how to distribute it.

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Introduction

Information dissemination is fundamental to Extension work, and compiling relevant information is something Extension agents do regularly (Conway, Corcoran, Duncan, & Ketchum, 1997; Kittredge, 1992; Hilderbrand, 2001). Creating a list of useful information sources and sharing it with those needing that information sounds simple, but it takes skill to do well. In a world of information overload, understanding how to compile a bibliography adds another tool to the Extension agent's toolkit. Here are practical tips in three parts:

- Why create a bibliography,
- How to create a bibliography, and
- How to distribute a bibliography

Why Create a Bibliography

The first question to ask and answer is "Who needs this information?" You might need to know what's been done on a subject to justify a grant application. However, if the intended audience extends beyond your office, spend time finding out about and describing that audience, its needs, and its preferences for access. The following, derived from practical experience and the expertise of librarians (Bates, 1976; Harmon, 1998; Jacsó & Lancaster, 1999) addresses key considerations of a well-crafted bibliography.

Consideration 1: Your Audience

For some projects, the audience and its needs may be obvious, while for others, describing the audience and deciding what it needs may be a challenge. Assess the potential audience before investing too much time.

- Who is your audience?
- What level of material will work for them?
- How will they access the information?

Consideration 2: Current State of Information

This seems obvious, but it is worth investigating.

- Has the information already been collected? If so and it solves your need, stop and use that information.
- If not, is there enough information available to justify your effort?

Consideration 3: Scope and Coverage

Once you have decided that the need and the information exist, consider the scope and coverage of your bibliography. Your expertise is crucial as you ferret out "the valuable in the mass of the mostly worthless or uninteresting" (Wilson, 1968, p.1.)

- What topic, time period, and geographic area will be covered?
- Where will you look for information?
- Will you be comprehensive or selective?
- Will you include all formats?

Consideration 4: Content and Style

Finally, you need to make practical decisions on the style of the content.

- What pieces of information will you include about each item?
- Will you add keywords, annotations, or abstracts?
- How will the bibliography be organized?
- What software will you use to create the bibliography? (3 x 5 cards are not recommended.)
- How will you distribute the bibliography?
- Will you maintain and update it?

How to Create a Bibliography

Once you have decided and described why and how you are creating this bibliography, you are ready to start building your masterpiece. Here are the practical steps where you find the information, then document and authenticate it.

Identify and Locate Material

You can start with your own files or with a simple search in your library's catalog. Keep track of where and how you searched. This is especially important if you are searching across databases and with varied search strategies. Eventually, people who use your bibliography or resource list may want to know where all you looked.

Once you identify material, get copies of the items. If it's a Web page, print off the first page, or bookmark for your working file.

Document the Material

Enter the basic citation information into your database or your list of resources. Bibliographic software packages such as ProCite® and EndNote® will walk you through the fields of information. Be consistent in how you enter dates and names, and complete an entry before moving to the next. Software also allows you to download citations from databases or import lists from your computer files. Be sure to check each downloaded entry for errors and completeness.

Describe the Content

Your users will want to know more than the basics. Use your expertise and succinctly describe the material using keywords, annotations, or abstracts. If you use keywords, find a thesaurus that provides words that your audience will use. Examples include *Water Resources Thesaurus* or *Pollution Thesaurus.* Creating your own terms may make sense to you, but probably will not do so to others.

Whether you use keywords, annotations, or abstracts, be consistent in your application. Annotations characterize the material, giving the users a clue about its value. For instance, is it a scientific article or one written for the general public? An abstract summarizes the content. It's useful if people are solely interested in the content and not the level of the writing or how it might relate to other material. Abstracts may be copyrighted, so get permission to use them.

Give a Location

Users will be frustrated if they cannot actually get the item you describe. So give a location, whether it is a URL, the library, or a contact at the Extension office. Linking to the complete article from the citation is a laudable goal, but copyright restrictions and time may limit how much you can provide in electronic format.

How to Distribute a Bibliography

The Web makes distributing your bibliography simpler, yet more complex. In both of my projects, I used an inexpensive software called Reference WebPoster® that provides a very basic Web search engine to any databases compiled in ProCite®, EndNote®, or Reference Manager®. See "Yaquina Bay Bibliography" at <http://osulibrary.orst.edu/guin/yaqbib.htm> for one example, or read "Bibliographies as an Extension Outreach Tool: An Old Method in a New Age," in this issue.

Other methods of distribution may be more effective for your audience. Possibilities include:

- An email attachment to a targeted list,
- A print list of citations formatted into an Extension Bulletin,
- A cogent short report linking the various citations, and
- A simple Web page on your home page or on an Extension office Web site.

Final Advice

From my experience as a librarian working on Extension-related projects, three parts of the process pose the most problems:

- Evaluating your audience's real need,
- Deciding on how you will select items to include, and
- Configuring your keyword and enhancement scheme.

Spending time puzzling over these will save you time later and help you create the best possible resource for your users.

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