

Official RDA and Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (RDA Edition)

a multifaceted approach to rare materials cataloguing

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ABSTRACT

Descriptive cataloguing standards for rare materials have aligned with general-purpose library metadata standards, such as ISBD and AACR2, for decades. However, the characteristics of rare and antiquarian materials and the historical contexts in which they have been produced necessitate standards that extend, or even deviate from, generalist guidelines. *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (RDA Edition)* (DCRMR) is a recent example of a rare materials cataloguing standard developed by and for its community of practitioners that remains in alignment with international cataloguing standards and principles. DCRMR supports a multifaceted approach to rare materials cataloguing in RDA, including a standalone, open-source manual for use in tandem with the RDA Toolkit and policy statements maintained by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) that offer guidance on rare materials cataloguing within the Toolkit itself.

KEYWORDS DCRMR; DCRM; RBMS policy statements; RDA

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Introduction

Descriptive cataloguing standards for rare materials have aligned with general-purpose library metadata standards for decades, just as general standards have carved out provisions for early printed resources. For example, *Bibliographic Description of Rare Books* (BDRB), published in 1981, is based on *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd edition* (AACR2), and aligned with the principles of ISBD(A): *International Standard Bibliographic Description for Older Monographic Publications (Antiquarian)* ([Library of Congress Office for Descriptive Cataloging Policy, 1981](#)). Since the time it was first published in 1978, AACR2 has included a brief set of rules for early printed monographs, which covers the description of books, pamphlets, and printed sheets ([Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 1978](#)). However, such brief provisions in generalist guidelines are not sufficient for many rare materials cataloguers. As the

preface of BDRB concedes, AACR2's "brief section on rare printed materials...might benefit from some expansion and elaboration to address...the often troublesome questions of rare book description." ([Library of Congress Office for Descriptive Cataloging Policy, 1981](#), p. v).

Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials (RDA Edition) (DCRMR) is a more recent example of a rare materials cataloguing standard developed by and for its community of practitioners that, nevertheless, remains in alignment with international cataloguing standards and principles ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026a](#)). First published in February 2022, DCRMR is a standalone, open-source manual aligned with the official RDA Toolkit and maintained by the RBMS RDA Editorial Group, a subcommittee of the Bibliographic Standards Committee (BSC) of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS) of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association (ALA). Currently, DCRMR supports the cataloguing of rare books. Eventually, it will include instructions for other formats of rare materials. To further support the description of rare materials using RDA, the RBMS RDA Editorial Group published the first release of the RBMS Policy Statements, which are based on DCRMR, within the RDA Toolkit in October 2025 ([Grzegorski, 2025](#)).

This paper provides an overview of DCRMR, including the rationale for creating the standard and a brief history of its development. As a member of the RBMS RDA Editorial Group and a former chief editor of DCRMR, I will share insights on the editorial process and community feedback which have informed the standard. This paper also gives practical guidance on using DCRMR in tandem with RDA and the RBMS Policy Statements to support a multifaceted approach to rare materials cataloguing and concludes with a summary of next steps in the development of DCRMR.

Overview of DCRMR

DCRMR is the latest instalment in the *Descriptive Cataloging of Rare Materials* (DCRM) suite of manuals. Unlike DCRMR, previous manuals in the suite were based on AACR2. The first, covering rare books, was published in 2007 as a joint effort between the Library of Congress and the RBMS BSC. Five subsequent manuals published by the BSC cover rare serials (2008), graphics (2013), cartographic resources (2016), manuscripts (2016), and music (2016) ([Knudson Davis et al., 2023](#), p.27).

After the publication of RDA in 2010, the BSC and the larger rare materials cataloguing community began to consider the future relationship between DCRM and RDA. John Attig and Robert Maxwell (2010) authored a discussion paper outlining differences between DCRM and the original RDA Toolkit, including terminology, structure, transcription practices, and recording sources of information. This paper led to the creation of the DCRM-RDA Task Force in 2011 and subsequent RBMS task forces

and editorial groups, each of which took a different approach towards aligning DCRM with RDA. Initially, these groups began to draft RDA-compliant revisions of the DCRM manuals. In 2014, they pivoted to authoring a set of policy statements for the original RDA Toolkit rather than rewriting the manuals ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026b](#)).

After a substantially revised RDA Toolkit was released in 2019, it was clear that the draft policy statements no longer fit within the Toolkit's new structure ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026b](#)). I attended the ALA Annual Conference in Washington D.C. that year and participated in RBMS discussions about the future of DCRM in light of these changes. I joined dozens of my deeply invested colleagues at the RBMS Technical Services Discussion Group meeting at which, the minutes attest, there was “standing room only.” ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Technical Services Discussion Group, 2019](#)). Indeed, many of us who have been longtime members of the RBMS RDA Editorial Group refer to this as the “meeting where we ran out of chairs”. Our community expressed a clear preference for a standalone, integrating manual incorporating all of the rare formats covered in the DCRM suite, and we pivoted once again to support their needs ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section RDA Editorial Group, 2020](#)).

The current release of DCRMR maps instructions from the DCRM(B) manual, which covers rare books, to relevant RDA elements. In response to community feedback, the standard uses language that is familiar to cataloguers while incorporating new terminology from RDA, organises elements in workflow order (i.e., in order of ISBD areas of description), provides clear and prescriptive instructions regarding the description of rare materials, and employs detailed citation numbering. DCRMR is published as an open-access resource hosted on GitHub. Licensed with a Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial Share Alike (CC BY-NC-SA) license, DCRMR is available online at no cost, and users may adapt or translate the text to meet their organisational or community needs ([Knudson Davis et al., 2023](#), pp. 29, 31).

Using DCRMR with RDA

DCRMR facilitates multiple approaches to cataloguing rare materials with RDA. It is foremost a cataloguing manual accessible outside of the RDA Toolkit that supports all RDA implementation scenarios, including flat file (e.g., MARC) and linked open data ([RDA Steering Committee, 2020b](#)). However, DCRMR concerns itself primarily with manifestation- and item-level elements to support the rare materials cataloguing objective of describing the artefactual characteristics of a resource. The construction of access points and the description of agents, for example, are outside the scope of DCRMR ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026d](#)). In one sense, DCRMR is a detailed

RDA metadata application profile for the description of rare materials. It is more prescriptive for certain elements than RDA is but leaves decisions regarding elements outside of its scope to individual cataloguers, organisations, and communities of practice. In this way, DCRMR is designed to be used in tandem with the RDA Toolkit to create a full metadata description.

The RBMS Policy Statements provide another avenue for cataloguing rare materials. These statements provide concise guidance on the application of options in the RDA Toolkit. Every RBMS Policy Statement includes hyperlinked citations to pertinent instructions in DCRMR, which cataloguers may consult for more detailed information. ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2025](#)). This facilitates the work of cataloguers who work primarily within the Toolkit rather than in DCRMR. The Policy Statements also provide flexibility for communities that may want to incorporate some DCRMR instructions into their workflows or application profiles but not necessarily create fully compliant DCRMR descriptions.

DCRMR expands upon, or deviates from, RDA in important ways. As a general cataloguing standard, RDA does not directly address thorny issues of description and transcription that many rare materials cataloguers face. Among these issues are the transcription of complex publication statements and the construction of statements of extent for manifestations ([Burns, 2019](#), pp. 12-15, 25). For example, it is not uncommon for an early printed resource to include multiple sequences of numbered and unnumbered pages and errors in pagination. Following RDA instructions for recording extent without square brackets “can produce cumbersome statements of extent” that are difficult for end users to parse ([Burns, 2019](#), p. 12). Fortunately, RDA permits communities to adapt the standard to their needs in many ways. The RBMS Policy Statements, for example, follow the option in RDA to “apply any transcription guidelines” and direct cataloguers to DCRMR's extensive chapter on transcription ([RDA Steering Committee, 2022](#)). DCRMR similarly retains the practice of using square brackets for unnumbered pagination sequences and for corrected numbering in the case of pagination errors on the manifestation ([RDA Steering Committee, 2020a](#)).

Future development of DCRMR

The RBMS RDA Editorial Group continues to maintain and develop DCRMR, responding to changes in RDA and evolving descriptive practices within the rare materials cataloguing community. We are currently mapping instructions from the DCRM(G) manual covering rare graphics into RDA to incorporate into DCRMR. Once this editorial work is complete, we will provide several opportunities for review from stakeholder communities at the international level, just as we did for the initial release of DCRMR. Another project includes improvements to sections in DCRMR on the transcription of early letterforms and brevigraphs ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026e](#)). We also continue to develop and revise the RBMS Policy

Statements. We expect to add a substantial number of Policy Statements upon the publication of instructions for rare graphics in DCRMR.

In the spirit of open access, we encourage other communities of practice to build upon DCRMR to meet their needs. Anyone may copy and then adapt and modify the codebase in the DCRMR GitHub repository for other projects ([Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Bibliographic Standards Committee, 2026c](#)). DCRMR's Creative Commons license also permits, with attribution, the non-commercial use and adaptation of the standard for other purposes. One example of this use is the RDA DACH manual for German-speaking countries, which has translated and adapted instructions for early printed resources from DCRMR for the RDA extent of manifestation element ([Alte Drucke, 2025](#)). In this way, RDA builds the scaffolding for an international language for resource description but provides space for communities of practice to customise the structure to their needs.

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