

Original RDA and Official RDA

one standard

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the Chair of the RDA Board provides an overview of the decision-making behind the creation of Official RDA.

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At first glance, Original RDA and Official RDA look so different from each other that it is natural to wonder whether they are two separate standards. Original RDA and Official RDA are the same standard but can be seen as two stages in its evolution.

From the outset, the development of RDA was guided by four major goals:

- to create metadata for the digital age
- to build a standard that was a web-based tool
- to support use in many environments – from traditional cataloguing to digital projects, for use by libraries and by other cultural heritage institutions
- to be adaptable for use around the globe

The wording and shape of RDA may have changed between Original and Official RDA, but the intent has been consistent from the beginning. It is easy to lose sight of this continuity when focusing on the list of changes one needs to know when transitioning from Original to Official RDA. The differences can feel overwhelming: new entities, a new structure, a reconfigured RDA Toolkit. But stepping back and looking at RDA's progression from early days until now, the continuity may be more evident

To understand this evolution, it may help to revisit the context in which RDA first emerged. The late 20th century was a period of intense change in publishing and information technology. Electronic publications proliferated, new forms of content appeared, and digital delivery mechanisms transformed how information was created, shared, and accessed. It was difficult to apply traditional cataloguing rules, rooted in print-based assumptions, to new types of resources and new delivery systems.

At the same time, a major conceptual shift was beginning. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published *Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records* (FRBR) in 1998 ([IFLA Study Group on the Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records, 1998](#)). FRBR introduced a new way of thinking about bibliographic information. Until then, there had been no clearly expressed conceptual framework to form the basis for cataloguing standards and guidance. The FRBR model provided a shared vocabulary and a theoretical foundation for rethinking resource description in a digital environment. It quickly became the common, shared language for discussions of cataloguing and cataloguing revision, and the basis for new research and new applications.

IFLA subsequently developed two additional models so that there would be a fuller conceptual framework covering all the key aspects of resource description: *Functional Requirements for Authority Data* ([IFLA Working Group on Functional Requirements and Numbering of Authority Records, 2013](#)), and *Functional Requirements for Subject Authority Data* ([IFLA Working Group on the Functional Requirements for Subject Authority Records, 2010](#)). Sometimes the three are called the FR models.

With the FR models providing the underlying theoretical framework, the discourse in cataloguing communities started to change. Now people were talking in terms of entities, their attributes, and relationships. The FR models were developed using the entity-relationship modelling technique that was well-known in computer and data sciences. It now also became easier to explain library bibliographic information to those outside the library domain and to envisage connections between the data of different domains. FRBR was opening a door: it was changing our thinking as well as making it easier to orient towards the digital environment, towards creating data that could be efficiently and accurately processed by computers.

From the start, RDA has been an implementation of the IFLA bibliographic conceptual models. The origins of RDA can be seen at the decision point in 2005 when cataloguing leaders on the Joint Steering Committee decided to fundamentally reorient their work on a new standard that was already under development and to align it closely with the FRBR model (and subsequently with the other two FR models) ([Joint Steering Committee for the Development of RDA, 2005](#)). This alignment shaped Original RDA. A glance at Original RDA's table of contents shows how it was organised according to the FRBR entities.

Original RDA incorporated this new understanding of bibliographic information as data, rather than as strings of characters. The new focus was on distinct and well-defined data elements that were compatible with machine processing, with networked online environments, and designed to function in both current and newly emerging technological environments such as linked data. It created pathways for functioning within a digital environment, for describing new types of resources, and helped us to move beyond 20th century practices.

Official RDA does not break with any of this reorientation. It takes us further ahead but on the same path. For example, in Official RDA, one sees much more clearly the building blocks that enable use of RDA data in a linked data environment.

Original RDA was an important stepping stone from 20th century cataloguing practices to 21st century metadata creation. But one of the goals for Original RDA was also not to create a complete break with the past because of the huge amount of legacy data that existed. The framework was entirely new, but many past practices were brought over and incorporated into this framework. Also, there were no encoding systems that could record RDA data in as full and accurate a way as the RDA data elements did. Implementations also tended to choose a conservative path through RDA that came close to past practices.

The new ideas were there, but not fully unleashed. On the other hand, there were also questions whether Original RDA had moved sufficiently forward at the time of its publication in 2010, and whether there were still areas requiring more work. However, cataloguing communities desperately needed to have an up-to-date standard, since the previous standard, AACR2 (*Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd edition*) had not been revised since 2002.

While Original RDA was being implemented, a new change was coming. The expansion to three FR models had yielded a fuller conceptual framework covering all the major areas of bibliographic data. But it also brought out issues with the boundaries of entities, inconsistencies between the models, questions about underlying concepts, and the need to shape one coherent bibliographic conceptual model that could be applied more easily and consistently. Out of the three FR models came the *IFLA Library Reference Model* (IFLA LRM) ([Riva, Le Boëuf, and Žumer, 2018](#)). It was more than just a knitting together of three disparate models. The consolidation created a high-level umbrella framework that encompassed all the important aspects of bibliographic data while also creating a stable and flexible foundation that communities could implement consistently and extend further as needed.

The close tie between RDA and IFLA's bibliographic conceptual models meant that RDA had to pass through a similar evolution as the models did. Just as IFLA LRM marked a series of forward steps in terms of its modelling, so also did RDA need to evolve further.

Firstly, once the FR models became obsolete, it was imperative that RDA align with the new, valid IFLA bibliographic conceptual model, IFLA LRM. RDA had to maintain its close alignment with the internationally approved model. All parts of RDA had to be brought to a uniform and consistent interpretation of IFLA LRM. Radical changes to the structure of RDA were also needed to accommodate the new IFLA LRM entities.

Secondly, the RDA Toolkit had to move forward and become a real web tool. Its structure and internal workflows were updated to match the needs of a digital environment.

Official RDA preserved the essence of Original RDA. But its wording, structure and look changed completely when it was reshaped to better meet the needs of a 21st century metadata standard.

The Countdown Clock

Original RDA was first published in 2010. This marked the beginning of a period of change as cataloguing communities began to transition from 20th century thinking to a more data-oriented understanding of bibliographic information. Official RDA was first published in 2020, in a new, more efficient RDA Toolkit. It was a fuller realisation of the original goals for RDA and better attuned to the demands of the digital environment.

Due to the generosity of ALA Digital Reference, two RDA Toolkits have been made available to subscribers for what will have been a period of seven years when the Original RDA Toolkit is removed on May 11, 2027. This long transition was intended to give users of Original RDA sufficient time to implement Official RDA. The transition entailed a shift from an early version of RDA to a more fully developed version of RDA. But the RDA Board understood that there were a lot of changes for frontline cataloguers especially if cataloguing communities decided to embrace a fuller implementation of RDA rather than trying to replicate earlier practices. This time, there were also encoding options available that supported an accurate use of RDA in systems based on entity management. So, the long transition also allowed for changes to new ways of encoding, storing, and sharing data.

In 2023, when the RDA Board agreed on the removal of the Original RDA Toolkit, there was also the idea of a countdown clock for the year before removal. On May 11, 2026, the countdown clock begins and it acts as a reminder that the time for transition is at hand.

For those who never used Original RDA, they will begin with Official RDA. In future years, it may be interesting to study whether it would have been easier to jump into the deep end of the pool by implementing Official RDA directly. Or whether it was easier to inch towards the deeper end of the pool by implementing Original RDA first and then transitioning to Official RDA. But, either way, we are now in a new era where it is normal to talk about resource description in terms of entities and entity management, data elements, relationships, domains and ranges, namespaces, etc.

The countdown clock also reminds us of the extensive work required to build this pathway to 21st century metadata creation and to keep our profession relevant and influential in the information ecosystem.

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