

To: ALA/ALCTS/CCS Committee on Cataloging: Description and Access

From: John Attig

RE: General reflections on the concept of *common usage*

The concept of *common usage* is central to the discussion of SMDs. However, no definition of the concept has been offered. In the course of our discussions, we have discovered to our sorrow that *common usage* is not an easy concept to deal with, and we have been tempted to reject it altogether because of the many difficulties that it presents.

Nevertheless, we feel that there is something in the concept that is important and that we can arrive at a working understanding concerning its use in developing and maintaining the terminology used in AACR, particularly the SMDs. First, however, we need to present some of the difficulties we have encountered.

1. **Conventional vs controlled:** Early in the process, we had to deal with the relation between terms in common usage ("conventional terminology") and the specified terms listed in the rules for SMDs in AACR. Although it was tempting to see such terms as an alternative to the specified terms, it was decided that this was *not* what was desired. Instead, it was felt to be important to maintain a specified list of terms that would cover the vast majority of cases, with perhaps an "escape" rule allowing use of terms in common usage for "new media." Thus common usage was somehow to be applied to the list of specified terms.
2. **Warrant:** If the criterion of *common usage* was to be applied to terms in the list of SMDs, how was it to be applied? How was *common usage* to be judged? Should the concept of *literary warrant*, widely used as the standard for subject terminology, be applied here? If so, where should one look for warrant?

One possible answer is to look to the usual reference sources: dictionaries and encyclopedias, explanations of terminology maintained by relevant technical organizations. However, such usage isn't really *common*. The other alternative is to attempt to assess what the users of library collections actually call these things; this is difficult to do systematically, but is at least more likely to be truly *common usage*.

This question may be unanswerable, and we will return to it in some of our comments on specific terms. For the moment, we will move on to other aspects of *common usage*.
3. **Common usage as natural language:** The more we rely on the language of our users, the more our terminology suffers from the liabilities of natural language. As Elaine Svenonius remarks (*The intellectual foundation of information organization*, p. 14), "Natural languages are rife with ambiguities and redundancies. ... The most colossal labor of all involved in organizing information is that of having to construct an unambiguous language of description — a language that imposes system and method on natural language and at the same time allows users to find what they want by names they know."

It is true that we are not trying to construct a retrieval language in the case of the SMD. However, “finding what they want by names they know” — i.e., recognizing the terms in the description and easily determining whether they describe what they are looking for — is a pretty good way of characterizing how *common usage* should be applied to constructing the specified list of SMD terms. To put it another way, the principle of standardization (a specified list of terms) should be applied with regard to the principle of user convenience (common usage).

Having established this, let’s look at some of the specific difficulties with common usage.

4. **Ambiguities:** Common usage does not make clean distinctions and uses terms that overlap or have very fuzzy boundaries. In the case of sound recordings, the term “disc” is commonly applied to both analog and digital technologies. The more common term for digital discs is “compact disc” or simply “CD” but we also need a term for analog discs; at the moment, the preferred term seems to be “vinyl disc” — which brings us to the next problem:
5. **Instability:** Common usage keeps changing. The case of analog sound discs is a perfect example. The terms “record,” “album,” “LP,” and “vinyl disc” have all been common usage at one time or another. To apply the criterion of common usage retrospectively would lead to an endless succession of changing terms for the same things, all of them leaving their traces in our descriptions. ALA feels rather strongly that common usage should not be used to justify such constant updating of established SMD terms. Once a term has been established for a particular type of carrier, based (among other factors) on common usage at the time, that term should not be changed. The fact that this term may not always be recognized by future users is perhaps an argument for applying the common usage criterion with extreme care in the first place.
6. **Endless distinctions:** Common usage, particularly when guided by the warrant of “official” technical definitions, makes endless distinctions. For example, digital music (usually in MP3 format) is often stored on either CD or DVD discs; technically, these discs should be described as CD-ROM, CD-R, CD-RW, CD-I, and on and on. These distinctions, primarily based on encoding standards, may or may not make a difference to users; sometimes, special equipment or software is required. However, the differences are truly endless and the list of SMDs will require continual maintenance if all such distinctions are made.

Ironically, what makes a term in common usage really useful is oddly a quality of sufficient generality. A good common term covers a reasonably broad category of materials and has achieved a certain level of stability — if the fine distinctions based on encoding details can be ignored. ALA suggests that we look for such general terms, and use other techniques (such as the other physical details or the system requirements note) to cover any important distinction.
7. **Hidden distinctions:** On the other hand, common usage, particularly the language of our users themselves, often contains hidden distinctions. In the case of sound recordings, a user will usually ask for a compact disc or a CD without

specifying that it contains music (or at least audio data). In fact, the request is ambiguous because a compact disc can also contain video or computer data and any given user may be thinking (but not speaking) in those terms. We can accept these hidden meanings, attempting to assess how the term is most commonly used; for example, it could be argued that users most commonly consider *compact disc* to be an audio disc. However, it is probably better to abandon common usage and *always* to include explicit identification of the inflexion (or sensory character), such as using the word “sound” or “audio” with SMDs in chapter 6, “film” or “video” with SMDs in chapter 7 and “computer” with SMDs in chapter 9.

8. **Trade names:** Common usage routinely employs trade names as if they were generic, even applying them incorrectly. AACR has traditionally avoided the use of trade names (except in technical notes). However, the criterion of common usage almost demands that we take a more relaxed attitude. ALA recommends that trade names be included in SMDs when their use seems to be truly generic, as is the case with Zip discs (a trademark of the Iomega company, but used generally for magnetic disks of a certain size and configuration). In addition, it seems reasonable that a rule dealing with new media should allow use of trade names on the grounds that there is often no other name; the case of “digital flash memory” is an example of this, there being about a dozen competing versions under different trade names.
9. **Summary:** Based on these points, we offer the following statement regarding the application of the concept of *common usage* to the list of SMD terms.

Specific material designations shall be specified in rule X.5B1 in each chapter. The terms should be readily identifiable by our users, even if they do not always exactly reflect current popular or technical terminology. The terms should identify reasonably broad categories and have achieved a certain level of stability. Changes in terminology based on changes in usage should be made only in the most urgent cases. Provision should be made for using found terminology (including trade names) for new media for which stable terminology does not yet exist.