

Introduction to Bibliography

Scott Ellwood, Jonathan and Megumi Hill, Karla Neilsen, Aaron Pratt

OVERVIEW

Total Class Time: 3.5 hours, including breaks. Optional “Coda” 15 minutes. Can be broken up across multiple days/lesson periods if necessary.

Ideal Class Size: 9-15 (3 groups of 3, 4, or 5). Could be done with as few as 3 students, and as many as 18 but would advise keeping groups to 5 students or fewer

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. The materials and physical condition of text objects can be “read” to understand the production processes and historical/cultural factors that created them.
2. Understand the anatomy of a book, or text object, and the importance for material traces for understanding the significance of a book in terms of technology, culture, art, &c.
3. Habits of close looking and description are fundamental practices for learning from text objects and developing research questions.
4. Bibliography depends on the kinds of questions asked of a book, and the kinds of questions asked depend on bibliographic experience/training, professional setting, audience, and personal background.
5. There are many bibliographic practices, each situated in its own traditions and priorities.

PRE-WORKSHOP

Students need to have examined digital surrogate (or, if in-person a reserved book at library or bookstore) and take notes of observations for “Close Looking” activity.

PART 1: BOOK ANATOMY (1 Hour)

These exercises focus on teaching the anatomy of a book, and thinking about the anatomization of text objects in general. It can be done by getting inside a book and seeing what’s there and how it’s put together, or by putting together a booklet as a class. The two example activities below are options for teaching by getting inside books.

1a. FALLING-APART, FRANKENBOOKS, AND FRAGMENTS

In this exercise, the instructor brings together a range of books in various states of dilapidation and disrepair that illustrates the anatomy of a book from different places and time periods. As the instructor leads students in examining the items, they discuss historically important materials, production processes, structures, human agents, and cultural influences. Additional objects, videos, and photographs can be useful.

Topics to consider for discussion

- Vocabulary for parts of the book

Introduction to Bibliography

Scott Ellwood, Jonathan and Megumi Hill, Karla Neilsen, Aaron Pratt

- Who are the people making each part of the book, how are they making them?
- The connections between natural environment, economic context, and materials used in book-making
- The variety of binding structures and their connection to cultures and time periods.
- Case study for the importance of looking at many copies to understand the historical significance of materials and structures
 - For example: Pratt, Aaron T. "Stab-Stitching and the Status of Early English Playbooks as Literature." *The Library: The Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*, vol. 16 no. 3, 2015, p. 304-328.
- The concept of *format*, why it matters for understanding a book, and its limitations as a concept for certain book structures (scrolls) or production processes (continuous paper roll printing).
- The value of fragments, isolated, reconstructed, and in new historical contexts.

1b. BOOK DISSECTION

In this exercise, the instructor, or a guest conservator, dissects a book for the class to illustrate first-hand the parts of a book and how they are put together. During an in-person setting, the instructor can have students do some of the cutting themselves under supervision. The instructor models for students how to photograph, describe, and preserve the material along the way. The photographs, and (in the case of a book owned by the instructor) the remains of the book can be distributed to students as packets afterwards. Additional objects, videos, and photographs can be useful.

Materials

1. A book to dissect
 - select a book in need of heavy conservation like re-binding, or a falling apart book that loses little by being broken apart.
 - i. when selecting a book to break apart, do your due diligence: google the book, look it up in ViaLibri, WorldCat, JSTOR, &c.; make sure it isn't valuable, important, or rare
2. X-acto knife (or the sharpest, most precise blade you can get) and cutting mat
3. Enclosures
4. Pencil and paper
5. Camera and flashlight

Logistics

The instructor or guest conservator leads students through breaking apart the book from the outside in. Take the opportunity to discuss materials, production processes, structures, and human agents who made everything. At each stage, the instructor documents for students to have a record afterward.

Sample Procedure:

Introduction to Bibliography

Scott Ellwood, Jonathan and Megumi Hill, Karla Neilsen, Aaron Pratt

1. remove, photograph, and file any dust jackets;
2. cut along the inside of hinges, documenting any supports sewn into the binding, remove and file the covers and spine;
3. document the spine lining before removing it;
4. document how pages are held together;
5. document registration marks printed on the spine folds of gatherings, if present
6. document the order of gatherings or pages, and the placement of inserted plates or leaves, if present;

Topics to consider for discussion

See “Falling-Apart, Frankenbooks, and Fragments” activity (1a) above; also:

- What historical evidence was not accessible before we dissected the book? What historical evidence has been erased?
- Motivations for people to break a book.

15 minute bathroom break & leg stretch

PART 2: DESCRIBING BOOKS (45 Minutes)

This session has two parts: (2a) close looking through a text object as a group followed by (2b) small groups of 2-5 students describing the text object together.

2a. Close-Looking (25 Minutes)

Students examine a physical book or digital facsimile **before the workshop**. The instructor selects a text object within their expertise or within the scope of a larger course (ideally related to what students would encounter in Part 1 exercise). Students examine the book or digital surrogate ahead of time with the aid of a basic guiding prompt from the instructor, which should have a clear deliverable, like “bring to class three things that stuck out to you or seemed unusual in this book.”

In the workshop, the instructor takes students through an exercise of close-looking at the object, discussing what they initially noticed, the questions they had, and additional features the instructor wants to highlight. This works best when students share their thoughts, impressions, and questions more than the instructor lectures. The instructor should highlight some connections between material traces and meaning, whether economic, cultural, textual, &c.

2b. Group Descriptions (20 Minutes)

After close-looking, the instructor divides students into small groups to work together to write a description of the book. Give students a clear deliverable, such as “describe three features of the text and/or physical book.” The instructor can guide students further: to think about the features that they think matter most; to list the questions that their descriptions could answer about the book (e.g.. how many pages does it have? Is it printed or manuscript?); to consider the

Introduction to Bibliography

Scott Ellwood, Jonathan and Megumi Hill, Karla Neilsen, Aaron Pratt

book as a physical and/or intellectual object; and to include further questions they aren't able to answer yet--how might they go about answering them?

15 minute bathroom break & leg stretch

PART 3: RE-DESCRIBING BOOKS (1.25 Hours)

This session has three parts: (3a) Reading professional descriptions; (3b) small groups of 2-5 students re-describing the text object together; (3c) small groups presenting their descriptions to the class.

3a. Reading Descriptions (25 Minutes, or as homework)

Instructor chooses 3 brief descriptions that will be mostly intelligible to the students. Ideally, the selection illustrates a range of professional practices, e.g., a WorldCat record, a thematic bibliography entry, and a bookseller's catalogue description.¹ They should center on the same or similar objects to the book examined in Part 2.

The instructor leads students through the descriptions, highlighting important features and formulas to the descriptions. The instructor should put emphasis on how bibliography depends on the kinds of questions asked of a book, and how the kinds of questions asked depend on bibliographic experience/training, professional setting, audience, and personal background.

3b. Re-Describe (15 Minutes)

Students go back to their small groups to edit and/or add to their descriptions of the book, incorporating new aspects from what they saw in the description examples just discussed. The instructor can adjust the deliverable and guiding considerations for the students, if they wish. Again, students should include the questions they still have about the book.

¹ It can be difficult to gather these three descriptions. The best place to start may be with a bookseller catalogue because their descriptions will often cite one or more thematic bibliographies and even note if the edition is in [OCLC/WorldCat](#). Instructors can even browse a bookseller's catalogue to find a suitable book for the Part 2 activities. If instructors are not familiar with bookseller catalogues, they can search the [ABAA](#), [ABA](#), and [ILAB](#) websites by subject specialization to find appropriate sellers. To identify a bibliography or catalogue from a seller's brief citation, use RBMS's online [Standard Citation Forms for Rare Materials](#). When searching for a book in WorldCat, be aware that there may be several records for the same edition, especially when searching for material not written in the Latin alphabet (search both by transliterations (more than one!) and the original language's script). WorldCat can lead instructors to libraries' copies that have been digitized, whether on their own repository, [Internet Archive](#), [HathiTrust](#), or a smaller consortium. If working in a special collections library, books might have their original bookseller descriptions laid inside or retained in an object file (ask the reference librarian), and their OPAC catalogue records will likely have an OCLC number (look in the "Staff," "MARC," or "Technical" view of the record and see field 035 to find the OCLC number; field 019 contains obsolete redundant records) to find their record in WorldCat (a good comparison to the library's own record to demonstrate the value of local copy notes, which are not in WorldCat records).

Introduction to Bibliography

Scott Ellwood, Jonathan and Megumi Hill, Karla Neilsen, Aaron Pratt

3c. Share and Compare (45 Minutes)

Small groups share their descriptions with the class, explaining their priorities for what they included, what they left out, and sharing the questions they want to explore further. The instructor can ask students the main way their descriptions changed and why. The instructor and entire class discuss ways each group could go about researching those further questions and improving their descriptions based on their stated priorities.

Optional: CODA (15 Minutes)

The instructor may want to end the workshop by sweeping the rug out from under their students by bringing in a second copy or related book that complicates how students understand the book they just examined and described.² The bibliographer Michael Winship has a bibliographical proverb: “Look at one copy, you know everything. Look at two copies, you know nothing.”

POST-WORKSHOP

The instructor can provide students with post-workshop materials, especially if it is a stand-alone workshop. Useful materials would be a “field guide to books in the wild” to introduce students to the variety of places where they can access rare books and the norms to expect there. An introductory reading list, with a glossary or dictionary like John Carter’s *ABC’s for Book Collectors*, an introduction to bibliography like Sarah Werner’s *Studying Early Printed Books 1450-1800: A Practical Guide* (Wiley Blackwell, 2019), and a handful of relevant booksellers, auction houses, or libraries that regularly issue digital and printed catalogues.

² For example, Megumi Hill suggests the instructor could be using a Japanese xylographic book, then show a second copy that looks the same at first glance, but when carefully measured, are different sizes because they were printed from two sets of woodblocks. This happens because paper is printed wet, then shrinks as it dries. So the printing of one set of woodblocks shrinks, then is used to cut another set of woodblocks, which print the second copy of the text that shrinks smaller than the first copy.