

What is metadata and why is it important?

What is Metadata?

Metadata is often defined as “data about data”, but it might be more helpful to think about its purpose – what it does. It can facilitate discovery of relevant information, help organize information, or support archiving and preservation of a resource.

In its simplest terms, metadata about a photograph might include the date it was taken, the location, the names of the people in the photo, and what event is pictured. Metadata is to a digital object what cataloging (a MARC record) is to a book in a library’s collection.

Some common types of metadata:

- *Descriptive* – gives information about physical characteristics of an item or a summary of its content. This usually helps people discovery information, assess its relevance or give them information about where it can be located.
- *Administrative* – determines who has access to what content, which ensures that files remain secure.
- *Structural* – defines how different files or digital objects are related to each other. This is the kind of metadata that allows an e-reader to know the order of pages in an ebook.
- *Archival* – provides preservation information about an item – for example, the provenance or file format of digital object - to ensure that it will last.

Most importantly, metadata is structured. That means that most metadata conforms to a *standard* or *schema* – a set of terms that define what kind of information is captured about an item.

For example, in the Dublin Core schema there are 15 terms, called *elements*, that are used in most Dublin Core records: Contributor, Coverage, Creator, Date, Description, Format, Identifier, Language, Publisher, Relation, Rights, Source, Subject, Title and Type. Dublin Core metadata is usually considered descriptive metadata, because most of the elements focus on describing the content in order to facilitate access and discovery on the web.

Why is it important?

- **Helps people find what they are looking for** - Good metadata records facilitate retrieval and resource discovery. It allows users find what is relevant and useful to them.
- **Helps people understand what they are looking at** - Often items in digital collections are unique or unusual in some way. Good metadata records supply the viewer with contextual information to help them interpret the item.



- **Makes your content visible to the world** - By using metadata schemas and standards that comply with the Open Archives Initiative Protocol and quality control, we ensure that our records look a lot like other records created around the world. This means that the records you create may have a life outside of your particular digital collection. They can be harvested by search engines or other digital applications, or added to larger digital collections, making your content accessible to a greater number of people.
- **Helps ensure legal use of your item** - Your content may be protected by copyright law, in which case there will be certain restrictions to its use. By giving rights information on each item, you ensure that legal use of content.

A few terms and definitions

Dublin Core – A basic set of 15 metadata elements designed to represent core fields for the description of an electronic resource. This is an international standard, which is used by Omeka.

Controlled vocabulary - a predefined, authorized set of terms used for categorization. Some examples: -
 - Library of Congress Subject Headings (<http://id.loc.gov/authorities/subjects.html>)
 - DCMI Type Vocabulary (<http://dublincore.org/documents/2000/07/11/dcmi-type-vocabulary/>) and
 - Basic Genre Terms for Cultural Heritage items (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/techdocs/genre.html>)

Element – A discrete unit of data about a resource. The Dublin Core standard uses 15 metadata elements, or topics of information, to describe a digital object. Elements may be further qualified.

Encoding scheme – A scheme that helps interpret element values. Data entered following the rules of a specific encoding scheme may therefore be interpreted according to the scheme. For example, ISO8601 is a scheme for encoding date and time.

Item – Omeka uses the term “item” to refer to the objects that are being described and added to the collection – the things about which information needs to be known or held. An item may be tangible (such as a photo or book), may be an activity or operation (such as a stage performance), or may be conceptual. In other contexts, items are often referred to as “entities” or “resources.”

Metadata – In general, "data about data;" functionally, "*structured* data about data." Metadata includes data associated with either an information system or an information object for purposes of description, administration, legal requirements, technical functionality, use and usage, and preservation.

Schema – A set of metadata elements and their rules defined to describe a specified group of digital objects. This version of Omeka uses two schemas: Dublin Core and Item Type Metadata.

Value – The data that corresponds to the metadata element.

