

# The SPECTRUM 4.0: *Retrospective documentation* Procedure

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## 1. What is the SPECTRUM *Retrospective documentation* Procedure?

[SPECTRUM 4.0](#) defines 21 Procedures, each describing how objects are managed in museums. The SPECTRUM *Retrospective documentation* procedure is one of those procedures, and is used to improve a museum's standard of information management and to capture new information about museum objects, so that the information held about them meets the SPECTRUM minimum standard. *Retrospective documentation* is a SPECTRUM Primary Procedure, which means that it is an essential component of a workable and efficient museum Documentation System. The SPECTRUM Primary Procedures are:

- Object entry
- Loans in
- Acquisition
- Location and movement control
- Cataloguing
- Object exit
- Loans out
- Retrospective documentation

Museums use the SPECTRUM Standard to benchmark the effectiveness and efficiency of the collections management procedures.

This fact sheet explores how the *Retrospective documentation* procedure might work in your museum, and is aligned to the requirements of the [Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the UK](#).

You can also download the [SPECTRUM \*Retrospective documentation\* Procedure](#), which includes a step by step workflow diagram taking you through the procedure, and describing what you might need to do at each step, and the information you might collect.

*Documentation: a Practical Guide* contains more information about the application of all of the SPECTRUM Primary Procedures and can be bought from the [Collections Trust Shop](#).

## 2. The *Retrospective documentation* Procedure and Accreditation



The [Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the UK](#) requires that specific **procedures, policies and plans** are in place in your museum.

At a procedural level, it is a requirement of the Museum Accreditation Scheme that the **SPECTRUM Primary Procedures**, including the *Retrospective documentation* procedure, are in place in your museum, and that you describe how the procedures work in your museum in a **Procedural Manual** - see [Accreditation Standard 2.7](#). For the structure and content of a Procedural Manual - see [Developing a Procedural Manual](#)

The Accreditation Scheme also requires that your museum has written **policies, or policy statements**, in place, which state your museum's policy regarding the management of the documentation of your collection. The policy required by Accreditation, which will impact on your *Retrospective documentation* procedure is:

- Your **Documentation Policy** – see [Accreditation Standard 2.3](#). This policy will contain key statements about the way your museum manages the documentation of its collection, and with reference to *Retrospective documentation* should set out your museum's intentions with regard to dealing with documentation backlogs and inconsistencies in documentation practice This should include:
  - A commitment to improving accountability for collections through the SPECTRUM *Retrospective documentation procedure*.
  - A commitment to planned approaches to improving the quality of the museum's documentation, with agreed timescales.
  - The standard of documentation expected during Retrospective work.
  - Reference to the museum's Procedural Manual for details of the museum's *Retrospective documentation* procedure and plans.

Your museum's Documentation Policy will support your **Collections Development Policy**, which may identify priorities for collections review and rationalisation. Your Collections Development Policy, also known as an Acquisition and Disposal Policy, which will contain agreed key statements about how your museum develops its collections – see [Accreditation Standard 2.2](#).

The Accreditation Scheme also requires that, if you have documentation backlogs, your museum has a **Documentation Plan** to improve its collections documentation and documentation systems – see [Accreditation Standard 2.5](#). This plan will state how you are going to:

- Ensure that the SPECTRUM Primary Procedures are in place in your museum.
- Identifies areas of your documentation where the quality of information held falls short of the SPECTRUM Minimum standard and sets out plans for tackling the backlog in prioritised areas (informed by your Collections Development Plan).

Lastly, Accreditation requires that you have an '**appropriate workforce** for the museums responsibilities and plans' – see [Accreditation Standard 1.7](#). With reference to the *Retrospective documentation* procedure and all of your collections management procedures, this requires that:

- There is a clear understanding about roles and responsibilities in your museum – for *Retrospective documentation* this implies that roles and responsibilities are understood, and adhered to, throughout the museum, and are stated in policies and job descriptions.
- There is a commitment to sustaining the skills required to support the *Retrospective documentation* procedure in training and induction.

Find out more the *Retrospective documentation* procedure and Accreditation:

- For policy requirements - see [Accreditation Guidance Sheet 2: Collections Management Policies](#)
- For procedures and plans - see [Accreditation Guidance Sheet 3: Procedures and Plans](#)

### 3. Why is the *Retrospective documentation* Procedure important?

If the *Retrospective documentation* procedure works well in your museum, you will have a planned and prioritised approach to dealing with backlogs.

SPECTRUM 4.0 lists the following Minimum Standard for *Retrospective documentation* - if your *Retrospective documentation* procedure follows the SPECTRUM standard, it will:

- Define the purposes of the organisation's documentation system. The primary purpose should be to establish accountability and access
- Define the organisation's understanding of the backlogs it has
- Work towards reducing its backlog
- Review progress on reducing the backlog on a regular basis
- Work towards an overall improvement in the quality of information held about objects and collections
- Review progress on the overall improvement in the quality of information on a regular basis.

If your *Retrospective documentation* procedure does not achieve the above, or does not exist in your museum at all, you may find that that you have documentation problems in your museum, such as:

- *A recently accumulated documentation backlog*  
Recent (and sometimes not so recent) entries to the museum that are awaiting accessioning, labelling and marking and/or cataloguing. These will be items where you have all the relevant acquisition details and know that they have not been accessioned. In some cases there may be objects with entry numbers that date back many years although no decision to formally acquire them has ever been made.
- *Objects with no numbers*  
There may be objects in your stores with no accession numbers. These could be objects which have not been accessioned or they could be objects that have been accessioned, but have lost their numbers.
- *Objects and documentation that don't match*  
There may be objects with numbers that match the documentation for those numbers. For example, numbering sequences that don't match accession registers, objects that don't match the description in the accession register or collections that have been renumbered several times so that objects have more than one number.
- *Documentation where you cannot find the objects*  
There may be records for objects in your accession registers or catalogue records that you cannot find. These items may have gone permanently missing, they may be in your collection but have lost their numbers or your location and movement control may be very poor.
- *Inadequate storage or display location information*  
If location information has not been updated when objects have been moved you will not be able to locate objects.

## 4. When is the *Retrospective documentation Procedure* carried out?

*Retrospective documentation* is carried out as a planned project, which seeks to remedy shortfalls in a museum's documentation system or quality of information held about collections. A *Retrospective documentation* project will always be informed by the museum's organisational purpose, policies and Forward Plan. It should always be Smart (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timed).

## 5. What happens during the *Retrospective documentation Procedure*?

Once an area for Retrospective documentation has been identified, there are several steps in a *Retrospective Documentation* project, which can be split into four sequential stages:

**Stage 1, Review of the existing situation:** ensure that all of the Primary Procedures are in place in the museum, as described in your Procedural Manual, and are operating effectively. If the Primary Procedures are in place you will not be adding to your backlogs, if they are not in place, you will be accumulating backlogs and making the situation worse.

If Primary Procedures are not in place, putting them in place, and describing them in your Procedural Manual, is the first step of any Documentation Plan.

**Stage 2, Make an inventory of the objects in your backlog project.** Making an inventory (a list) is a relatively quick and easy way to establish accountability and make collections useable. By the end of the process you will know what you've got and where it is.

- *Decide the format for your inventory records.*  
You can create your inventory directly onto a computer database or spreadsheet. Some museums use manual catalogue cards, and transfer the data to their computerised systems at the end of the project.
- *Assign a unique name or number to each display and storage location.*  
If your Location and movement procedure is established, your museum will already have a system for describing locations. This must be of sufficient and appropriate detail to locate any object precisely and this may be expressed as a hierarchy (e.g. building/room/case, etc.) A greater amount of location detail may be required for smaller objects e.g. fossils on a tray or letters in a box.
- *Work systematically through the objects in your project.*  
Record the location of every object. If an object has an accession number make a record using this number. If the object is not marked with the original number, then use a temporary identity number. This could be a simple running number sequence prefixed by a T. You will probably need to record some material in bulk at this stage, for example boxes of papers or photographs.

A basic inventory must contain the following information:

- Record number
- Object name
- Brief description
- Location and date
- Recorder and date

At this point you have established a basic level of accountability for the objects in your project. If however, at this point you do not implement a [Location and movement control procedure](#) and inventoried objects are moved without records of the movement, you will lose objects again and run the risk of wasting much of the time you have spent on your project up to this point.

**Stage 3, Reconcile inventory with existing documentation.** You will now have objects with accession numbers that match information in the accession registers, objects with temporary numbers.

- *Enter all objects from your inventory with accession numbers into your documentation system.*  
It is likely that these objects will appear in your Accession register, and all you will need to do is amend the catalogue record with the updated location, or, at most, create a new catalogue record if one does not exist.
- *Reconcile objects with Temporary numbers with existing documentation.*  
Go systematically through existing documentation and try to match objects with a corresponding entry in the new inventory.

Existing documentation that may need to be searched:

- Accession records
- Transfer of Title forms
- Catalogue records
- Correspondence
- Entry records
- Exhibition catalogues
- Field collection notes
- Financial records
- Indexes
- Labels
- Loan agreements
- Reports and minutes
- Newspaper cuttings
- Research notes
- Staff memories

If you are able to match an object with a Temporary number to an existing record for an Accessioned object:

- Remove the Temporary number and attach the existing Accession number to the object. Update the catalogue record with the location and add any new information from the inventory.
- Make sure that you attach the Accession number to the object following good practice guidelines (search for 'labelling and marking' on [Collections Link](#)), and following the guidelines in your Procedural Manual.

**Stage 4. Tying up loose ends.** When all reasonable avenues have been explored, you will find that you are left with some objects which have probably never been accessioned and decisions will be need to be made the future of these objects. All decisions will be informed by your museum's Collections Development Policy.

- *For objects that are to be added to the long term collection:*  
Accession the object as a new acquisition but indicate that it was found in the backlog, for example 'found un-accessioned in stores'.
- *For objects that are to be disposed of:*  
Follow the [SPECTRUM Deaccession and disposal procedure](#) and the [SPECTRUM Object exit procedure](#) (also see [SPECTRUM Object exit fact sheet](#)).

## 6. Glossary

*Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom* – Accreditation is the UK standard for museums and galleries. It defines good practice and identifies agreed standards, thereby encouraging development. It is a baseline quality standard that helps guide museums to be the best they can be, for current and future users.

*Documentation System* – all of the recorded information a museum holds about the objects in its care. This includes paper and digitised records of all kinds (e.g. registers, forms, committee minutes, curator's files, and donor letters).

[SPECTRUM 4.0](#) – SPECTRUM is the UK Collections Management Standard. It represents a common understanding of good practice for collections management in museums and contains detailed procedures for managing the different processes that an object goes through in its lifecycle in a museum. Find out more about [SPECTRUM and the SPECTRUM Community](#).

*SPECTRUM Primary Procedures* – the procedures that should be in place in a workable and accountable museum Documentation System. If the Primary Procedures are not in place, documentation backlogs will occur.

*Documentation Backlogs* – a term used in museums to describe undocumented or poorly documented collections. Your museum should have policy statements which define the standards expected for the documentation of your collections – most museums use the SPECTRUM Primary Procedures as a standard against which to measure the quality of their Documentation System and records. If the Primary Procedures are not in place there will be gaps, or backlogs, in the system and the information it carries (e.g. object will not link up with records). Backlogs are tackled using the SPECTRUM *Retrospective documentation* Procedure.

This fact sheet forms part of SPECTRUM Advice, a support pack which is published on Collections Link at [www.collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/spectrum-advice-factsheets](http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum/spectrum-advice-factsheets).



**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

This fact sheet was updated in January 2015 with funding from [Arts Council England](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk), and aligned with the requirements of the Museum Accreditation Scheme.

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Collections  
Trust

The Collections Trust is the professional association for collections management. Established in 1977, it is a UK-based charity that works with worldwide museums, libraries, galleries and archives to improve the management and use of their collections. It does this by providing know-how, developing and promoting excellence, challenging existing practices, pioneering new ideas and bringing experts together.

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