The Bare Minimum: Shirking Ideals to Get Stuff Done

OR

How to Get Away with Doing the Least Amount of Work

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This talk will be most useful for people with a large backlog of collections management projects. It focuses on the back-end processes, which are mostly data management processes. Preservation techniques are not discussed.

Will I regret this?

To determine whether you can simplify or skip a step, ask yourself “Will I regret this?”

Will I regret this?

- Is this legally mandated?

"Is this legally mandated?"

Some parts of what museums, libraries and historical society need to record for their collections is mandated by law—it's on the state level, so there is some variation depending on the state, but for the most part, they're all basically the same.

In Vermont, it is legally required for you to track all donations—monetary, objects, books, supplies—and who gave them to you. This is also how you prove that you *own* a thing—if you don't have a deed of gift stating that John Smith donated his sword to you, but he still has the receipt from when he purchased it, he or his descendants can use that receipt to take the sword back. So, not recording donations IS something that you'll regret.

Will I regret this?

- Is this legally mandated?
- Will this damage the collection more than is acceptable?

It is not possible for small museums to preserve objects indefinitely, so there will always be some damage/degradation. Determine what is acceptable loss at the beginning of the process, and work within that schema. Usually, that means working within your already established storage and preservation tactics. For example, folding a textile in a box may be acceptable damage. Simplifying the storage step by folding a textile and leaving on the floor is likely not within the acceptable damage parameters.

While this is probably seems like the most important question from the outside, in terms of saving time, skipping steps, and doing the least amount of work, this is the question that's going to come up the least. Doing the least amount of work in terms of preservation usually means working within our already established systems.

Will I regret this?

- Is this legally mandated?
- Will this damage the collection more than is acceptable?
- Is this information findable somewhere else in perpetuity?

“Is this information findable somewhere else in perpetuity?”

Everything must be findable by future staff. If it’s not, you cannot skip the step. This is most important for contextual information: if it only exists in someone’s memory, it is not findable by anyone but them, and so it will disappear once they are gone. Physical properties, such as measurements, are findable as long as the object still exists.

Session Goals

- Understand and acknowledge capacity limits
- Outline priorities
- Strategize efficiency
- Boost confidence

After this session and activity, you will be able to:

- Understand your capacity limits (how much you have time for)
- Outline priorities (so you can focus on what's important)
- Strategize efficiency (so you don't have to go back and fix or repeat steps)
- Boost confidence (so mountainous projects feel doable)

Goals

- Description
- Category
- Priority

Within the session, I provided an activity kit that you can make yourself. You'll need 18 cards with writable surfaces on each side, and a sheet of paper. Within the notes of each relevant slide, I'll provide instructions on how to make the corresponding card, then explain how to utilize the kit.

Goal Cards (4): These cards are one sided. Each needs a space to write a brief description of the goal, the category, and the priority. You don't need to use all 4, but you shouldn't use more than 4. You can fill in the spaces in the following slides.

Goals

- Inventory the collection and unpack things to create more room in storage.
- Process and house backlog of donations.
- Process donations as they come in.
- Publish full catalog online.

- Stick to collections-based goals
- Stick to goals you control

As an example, these are my goals. For yours, stick to collections-based goals as those are the only ones we'll address here. Make sure they're goals you can control. For example, "Increase the number of research appointments" relies on outside people making appointments, so you can't control it.

Keep your goals to one sentence without multiple clauses. You don't need details or explanations. If you have multiple clauses, split them into multiple goals.

Prioritize your goals starting with 1 (highest).

Categories

- Tracking
- Cataloguing
- Sharing
- Moving

These are the 4 categories that can apply to your goals. If your goal has multiple categories, list them all, but circle the one it leans most heavily on. (Explanation of categories in next slide.)

Categories

- Tracking
  - Location
  - Labels
- Cataloguing
  - Description
  - Dimension
  - Research
  - Condition
  - Context
  - Photography/images
- Sharing
  - Cataloguing for public consumption
- Moving
  - Moving objects
  - Displaying objects
  - Rehousing objects

Tracking: being able to find and identify an object [has its own tasks]
Cataloguing: everything you have an entry for in your database [has its own tasks]
Sharing: making information available for people offsite (i.e. online, in books) [changes priority level of tasks]
Moving: physically moving objects, or making them available for people onsite (i.e. exhibits, research) [changes priority level of tasks]

Categories

- Inventory the collection and unpack things to create more room in storage.
  - Tracking; Moving
- Process and house backlog of donations.
  - Cataloguing; Tracking; Moving
- Process donations as they come in.
  - Cataloguing; Tracking; Moving
- Publish full catalog online.
  - Sharing; Cataloguing

Here are the categories for my goals. They each have more than one category, but I've circled the main category that applies to each goal.
Warning: if any of your goals have you process things from the very start, you need to include 'Tracking' as a category.

I will now explain the tasks (which will be made into cards) or priorities of each category.

Tracking

- Assigning numbers
- Labeling
- Recording locations

The tracking category contains three tasks: assigning numbers, labeling, and recording locations. You will need 3 cards.

Assigning Numbers

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Assigning numbers. Assigning numbers to your collection cannot be skipped, but luckily it's fast. If you're using a database, the number (accession number or object ID number—the term varies from place to place) and the name are usually the two things it forces you to input before it allows you to save.

The only time-saving technique here is to skip assigning letters for individuals pieces. In the pictured example, the ideal is to have a letter for each piece, that way they're each individually labeled and identified so later you can come back and see which one is missing. If you're short on time, you can assign them just one single number and add the letters as you need them.

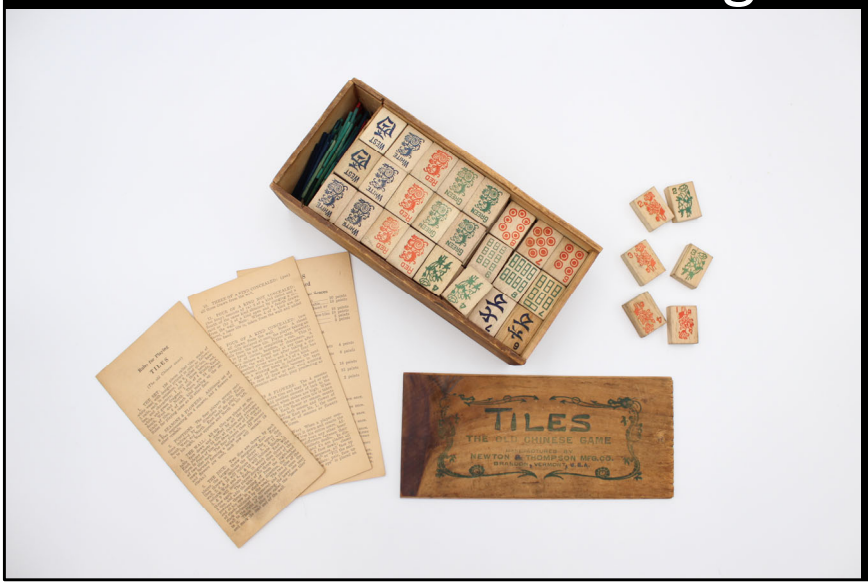
When will you need them? When you are creating multiple records for the same object. That is useful (and often necessary) when you're storing the object taken apart and in different places. These tops stored in the box on a shelf only need one record. But if I took some of the tops out and put them on display, I'd want to have two records—one for the tops on the shelf and another for the tops on display—so that both could have the location recorded correctly in the database.

If one of your goals focuses on Sharing, decide at the beginning whether it's

important to you to showcase each piece individually. If so, you'll need to assign the letters and create a separate record for each piece. If not, one group record will suffice.

FOR THE CARD:
On both sides, write "ASSIGN NUMBERS / .5 MINS"
Add some sort of indication to each side that this step cannot be skipped. For my cards, I used yellow highlighter to make a border on the edge to indicate steps that could not be skipped.

Labeling



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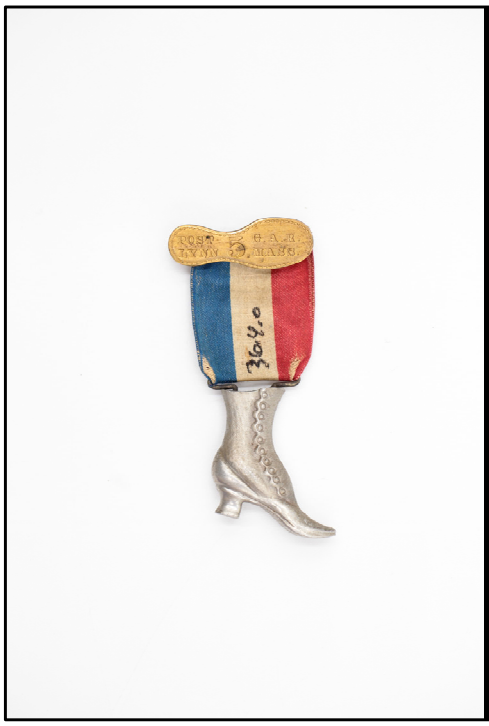
1 box
1 lid
3 instructions pages
2 dice
142 tiles
115 sticks

Labeling is the part of tracking where you can really save a lot of time if you need to. The ideal is to label each separable piece of an object. In the case of the mahjong set, that means each tile, each stick, etc. The ideal labeling method is any way that affixes the number to the object securely enough that it won't accidentally/easily become separated, but that is reversible.



Labeling

Do not permanently damage or alter the object

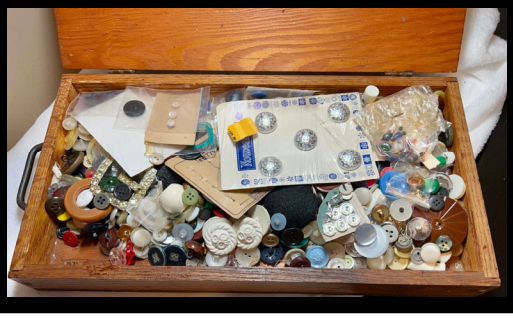
Though there are several shortcuts you can take with labeling, never take a shortcut that will permanently damage or alter the object, like the one shown here. (This was done in the 1930s, before people knew better.)

Methods that will damage an object:

- Writing directly onto it with ink
- Labeling it directly with paint, grease pens, and pencil (except for paper)
- Stapling or otherwise creating a hole to attach a tag
- Stickers, post-its, or other types of “temporary” adhesive
    - All sticker-style adhesive is acidic, so it will damage the object. Additionally, it’ll either lose adhesion and fall off, or become permanently adhered

Labeling

- Sewn in tags
  - 5 minutes per label
- Direct labeling with b-72
  - 1 minute per label (excluding dry time)
- Direct labeling with pencil
  - 30 seconds per label
- Paper tags
  - 30 seconds per label
- Labeling containers
  - 30 seconds per container



Here is a comparison of times for the ideal methods (left), and some faster methods (right). The time estimates are based on my own times.

Ideal:

- Sewn-in tags: write the number onto a piece of twill tape and stitch that into a standardized place
  - Used for costumes and/or textiles
- Direct labeling with B-72. This is a type of resin dissolved in acetone. Unlike fingernail polish, it's pH neutral and doesn't yellow. It can be removed with acetone.
  - Used for finished wood, metal, glass, glazed ceramic
  - Not used for textiles, porous materials
  - Traditional method: layer of b-72, hand-written number, top layer of b-72. New (and faster) method: print all the numbers in a small font on acid-free paper and use b-72 to glue the paper to the object.
- Direct labeling with pencil
  - Used for paper

Less ideal but faster methods:

- Paper tags
    - Can be attached to all types of objects, but not *quite* ideal because can easily become removed from object
- Labeling containers
    - If you have lots of similar objects from the same gift in one container (i.e. box, bag, drawer), label the container. Depending on how many objects are inside, this can save a LOT of time.
    - Don't use this method if you have objects from more than one gift inside, because you need to know which object came from which donor.

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: "LABEL / IDEAL / .5-5 MINS"
Side 2: "LABEL / TAG / .5 MINS"
Mark both sides to indicate that this step can't be skipped.

Recording Location

- Recorded in a way where you don't need extra knowledge to go to that spot
- Detailed enough to find the object within x minutes
- Searchable/findable by multiple staff without explanation
- Identifiable even after full staff turnover

Recording locations is another step that can't be skipped.

These are my personal rules for recording locations – you can skip anything that goes *more* in depth than this, but anything that's less in depth than this is going to be something that you regret.

1. You want to record the location in a way where you don't need to go search for anything else to find that location—for example, you don't want to say it's in Textile Box #5 without saying where Textile Box #5 is, or you don't want to say it's in the drawer of *x* dresser without saying where that dresser is.

2. You want it to be detailed enough that when you go to the location you wrote down, you find it within a short enough time that you don't get frustrated, because frustrated people are not as careful with handling objects. For me, that's about 3 minutes. That means I have go down to the box level or shelf level.

3. You want other people to be able to figure it out without needing to ask for a translation. So if you have location codes, you need to have those location codes posted everywhere. (i.e. 'Room 3' should be labeled on the door, the shelf numbers

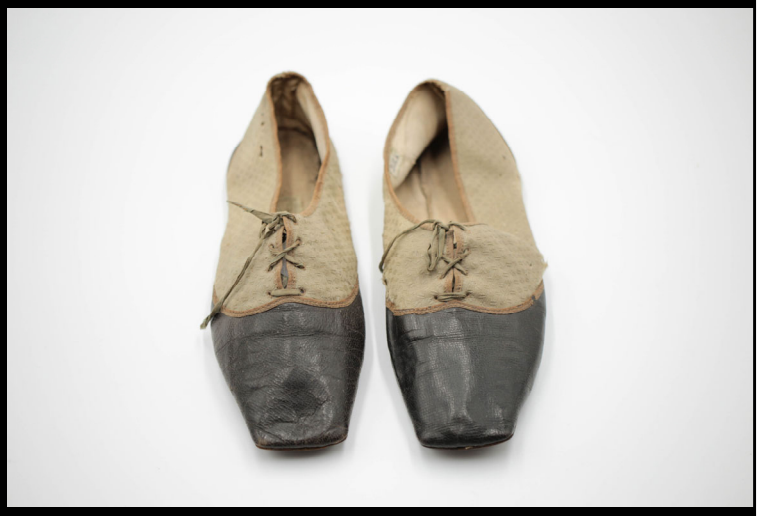
should be written on the shelf)

4. You want the terms to be usable if there is a full staff turnover, so you shouldn't use colloquial names for spaces or call them after previous usages. For example, VHS used the "upper gym" and "lower gym" as the names for two storage rooms that *used to be* a gym and its mezzanine before we retrofitted our building. Because I was not present at that time, I didn't know where those spaces were. If you have trouble with this one, I suggest drawing a floorplan and assigning every room (and every hallway and closet etc) its own number, then posting that floorplan throughout the building.

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Both sides: "RECORD LOCATION / 2 MINS"
Indicate that it cannot be skipped.

Cataloguing

- Donor records
- Description
- Materials
- Dimensions
- Condition
- Photography
- Contextual Information

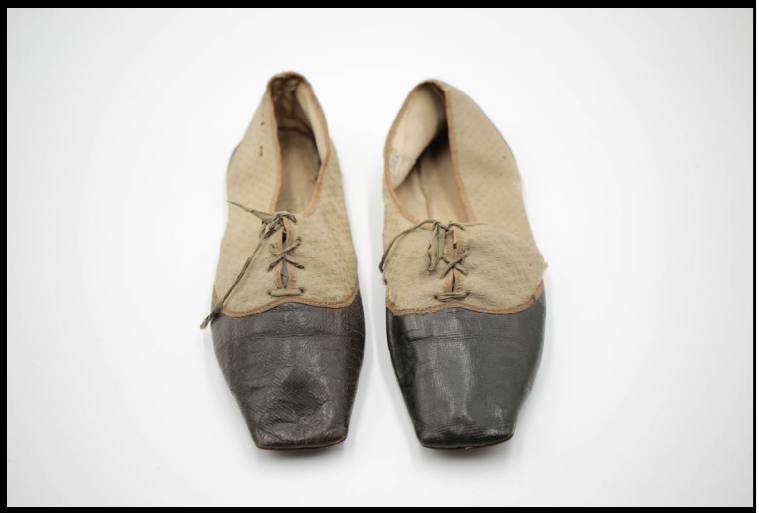


Cataloguing is where you can really save a lot of time and effort without hurting the museum, and that's mostly going to be because of that last question we got at the beginning: "Is the information findable somewhere else?" Since there are several resources for learning the ideals for these tasks, I will skip that and only talk about the shortcuts.

Maintaining donor records is legally required, so I'll bypass that. There are no shortcuts.
TO MAKE THE CARD:
Both sides: "DONOR RECORDS / 2 MINS"
Indicate that it cannot be skipped.

Cataloguing

- Description
  - Can be skipped
  - Just enough to identify the object with no picture
  - Think about your audience
  - 30 secs – 10 mins

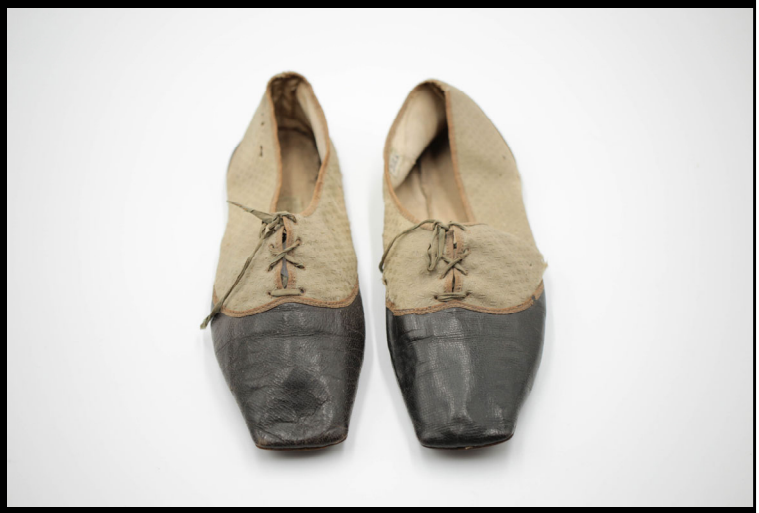


Object description.
As long as you have the object Name in the record (this is a shoe) and the object is labeled with its number, you *can* skip the description, because the physical appearance of the object is something you can find by looking at the object. So that would be the *least* amount of work you could get away with.
The medium amount is describing it enough to wear you can identify the object without a photo or if you lose the label. So if you don't have a lot of shoes, you can say "pair of lace-up shoes". If you do have a lot of shoes, you might want to say something more like "pair of lace up shoes with leather toe and silk uppers; flat soled; label on inside".

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: "DESCRIPTION / MINIMAL / .5 MINS"
Side 2: "DESCRIPTION / IDEAL / 10 MINS".

Cataloguing

- Materials
  - Can be skipped
  - Can be broad
  - Leave blank rather than guess
  - 30 secs – 3 mins

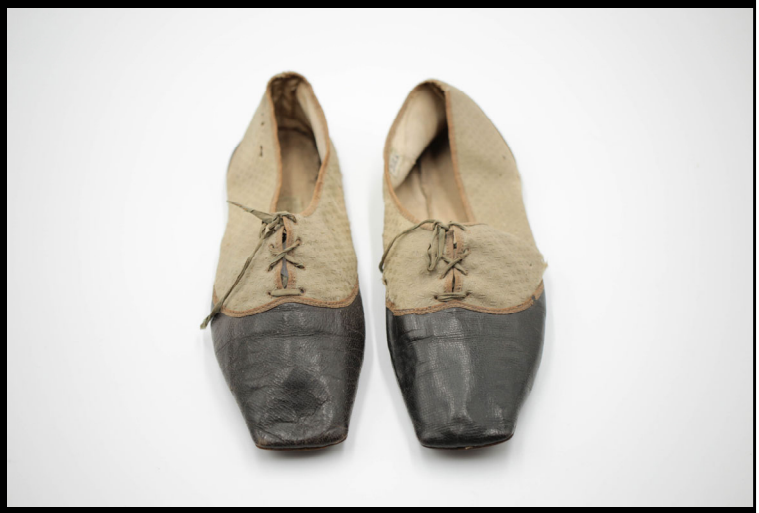


Materials
Again, this is information you can find by looking at the object, so it *can* be skipped. It can also be broad – like saying metal or wood if you don't know what type. The main point of recording the materials is usually to inform us about how to handle an object, like whether we need to wear gloves or not, so the broad category is usually enough to tell us that information. If you don't know what it's made of, leave it blank. It's always better to leave something blank than to input it in wrong. If it's wrong, you lose credibility, and you can waste a lot of future staff time from them trying to figure out *why* the cataloguer thought this was wool, and if they were correct. So if you don't *know*, leave it blank.

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: "MATERIALS / MINIMAL / .5 MINS".
Side 2: "MATERIALS / IDEAL / 3 MINS".

Cataloguing

- Dimensions
  - Can be skipped
  - Medium: biggest dimensions
  - Intense: mounting dimensions
  - 1 min – 5 mins

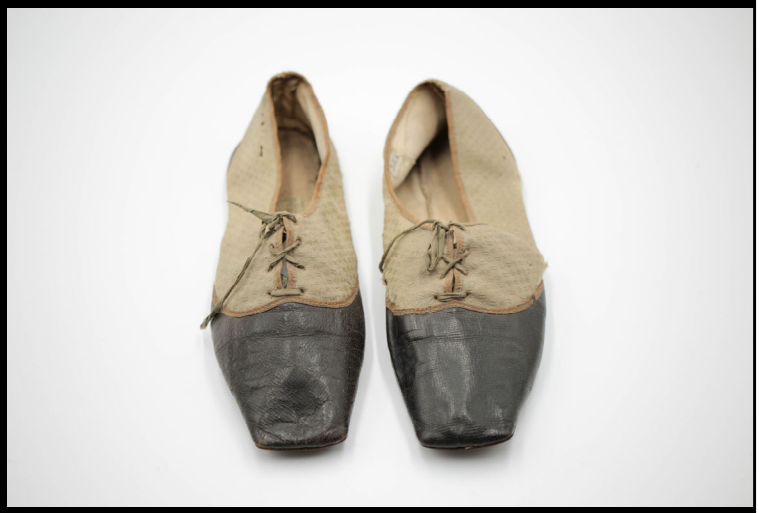


Dimensions is another thing that can often be skipped. If one of your goals leans toward the Moving category, you'll probably want to keep it, but otherwise you can always go and measure the object. If you do want to measure stuff, the most important data for you to have will be what the dimensions are at the biggest point because that will tell you what size box you need or if it will fit into your display case. If you have lots of extra time, you can do even more detailed dimensions—for clothes, you can measure the waist, the bust—everything you need to know to put it on a mannequin. But if you've got a backlog like mine, you can mostly skip it.

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: "DIMENSIONS / MINIMAL / 1 MIN"
Side 2: "DIMENSIONS / IDEAL / 5 MINS"

Cataloguing

- Condition

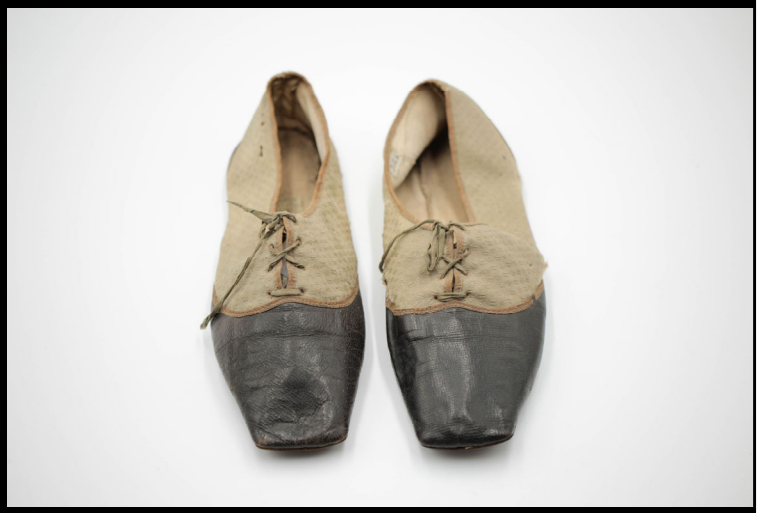


Condition reporting is so that you can track damage and decay happening to your objects—if you don't do a full condition report, you can't really know if the object is decaying within your space until the change is drastic. So you really should do a full condition report where you write down and photograph every piece of damage an object has.

However--

Cataloguing

- Condition
  - Basic Condition (good, fair, poor)
  - Note anything noteworthy
  - 30 secs – 10 mins



If your object is pretty much normal, you can get away with doing a very basic report where you just put whether an object is in Good, Fair, or Poor condition. If you go this route, I HIGHLY recommend you strictly defining what each of those terms means. If multiple people are cataloguing and they each have different personal definitions of Good and Fair, the terms alone become useless.

Beyond that, you should note anything significant, like mold.

This process can take anywhere from 30 seconds for the basic condition, to up to 10 minutes if you record all the damage.

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: “CONDITION / BASIC / .5 MINS”
Side 2: “CONDITION / FULL / 10 MINS”

Example condition term definitions: (These are the definitions used by VHS)

Excellent: The object is in perfect, like-new condition. There are no noticeable flaws.

Good: The object has very minor flaws that do not affect the stability or significantly impact the object's appearance. It can withstand being handled, stored, transported, and mounted for exhibition in any reasonable manner. Flaws indicative of the object's original use are not considered detrimental to the object's appearance.

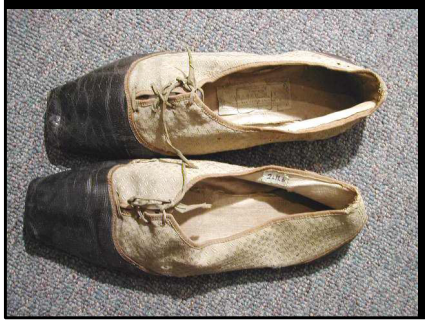
Fair: The object has several flaws that are not indicative of the original use and that do not affect the object's stability. The object's appearance is noticeably affected by the flaws. It can withstand being handled, stored, transported, and mounted for exhibition in most ways.

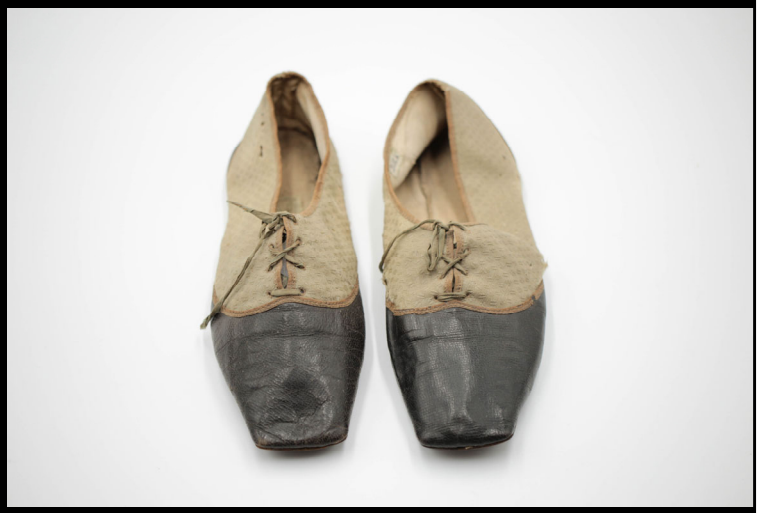
Poor: The object has several flaws that impact its stability. It cannot easily withstand handling or transportation and cannot be mounted for exhibition in most ways.

Dire: The object is unstable to the point that it cannot withstand handling, transportation, or exhibition. Without conservation, the object will continue to deteriorate beyond repair.

Cataloguing

- Photography
  - Can be skipped
  - Make a station to make the process easier
  - 2-10 mins





Photography is a place where it helps to have your goals in front of you before you make a decision about skipping it or cutting corners. Ultimately, you can skip photography – it's extremely helpful to have in several situations, but as long as you still have the object, you can always take a picture of it. The same for scanning. For some types of objects, mostly archival materials, having a photograph really is not that important.

If you DO photograph your collection, there are two types of photos. Choose which to use based on your end use of the photos.
Cataloguing photos (end use: object identification)

- Any overall image where the object is identifiable

"Pro" photos (end use: showing the public)

- Hi-res photo showing the entire object from the front
- Plain background; no other objects in frame
- Can include measurement scale or color card

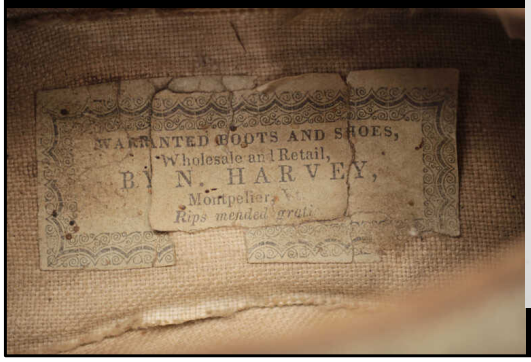
If you decide to go the "pro" route, setting up a photography station will save time. For a simple setup, get a white or grey posterboard (the thin cardboard/paper kind) and tape it to a wall so that half of it is laying on a table, creating both a base and a backdrop.

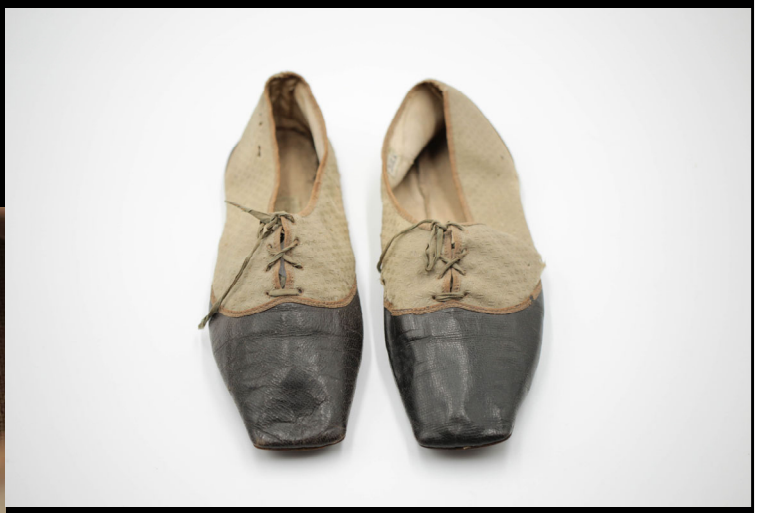
The part of photography that takes the longest is actually the post processing, so if you're short on time, the best thing you can do is have a database that allows you to shoot and attach pictures directly into the record as opposed to taking a bunch of pictures, uploading them into your computer, then uploading them into your database. If that IS your process and you can't get around it, the best thing to do to save time unfortunately is just to limit the number of pictures you take.

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: "PHOTOGRAPH / ID / 2 MINS"
Side 2: "PHOTOGRAPH / PRO / 10 MINS"

Cataloguing

- Contextual Information
  - Has to be somewhere
  - Cannot be guessed
  - 2 – 1k mins





For a history museum, contextual information is arguably the most important part. Researching it can also be the longest (and most fun) part of the process, so it's where you can save the most amount of time. The one rule: the information MUST be findable somewhere in perpetuity. If the *known* information is written in the file, on the Deed of Gift, or directly on the object, then this step is finished. Otherwise, the simplest/fastest way is to write it down using your fastest method, and either attach it to the object or to the file/record.

While non-museum people expect us to know *everything* about an object, who used it, when, where, who made it, etc., that is not possible without unlimited time. (And most of the time, not even then.) So, create a standard stopping point.
Examples:

- Do all the research you can in x minutes
- Find the life dates of all known people (i.e. who wore the shoes), then stop.
- Record all the research you find about know people using only x searches.

My stopping points: I find the life dates & birth/death location for known people, and/or the first & last time a business advertised (with newspapers.com) for their 'life dates', then I stop. If I can't solidly identify the correct information in 1-2 searches, I

make a note of what I tried, and then I stop.

An important thing here is not to guess, and to record how you know something beyond just factual information like life dates. For example, if you can't identify when these shoes were made, it's better to leave it blank then to guess. For information that can't be proven, like who wore them, you also need to record *how* you know it or why you think that. For example, "these were found in the back room with a lot of the son-in-laws stuff, but they're women's shoes, so they probably belonged to his wife" or "worn by [name] per donor"

TO MAKE THE CARD:
Side 1: "CONTEXT / ONLY KNOWN / 2 MINS"
Side 2: "CONTEXT / RESEARCH / [X] MINS" (fill in your own time limit)
Indicate that this step cannot be skipped

Sharing

- Prioritize Access
  - Fastest method possible
  - Unstandardized records
  - Don't prioritize photography
  - Make what you already have available
- Prioritize 'final product'
  - Standardize photography
  - Write descriptions and context for public audience
  - Input all known context fields

'Sharing' and 'Moving' are goals that use the same tasks we already made cards for, but they change the way that you prioritize them and what you can skip.

If you're cataloging for in-house use, you could skip almost every field in cataloguing if necessary. But, with a goal of sharing, you probably don't want to. Figure this out first, because it's faster to catalog with more info *once*, then to catalog for in-house use and go back and edit for sharing later.

There are two priority directions on the slide, but you'll probably end up somewhere in between. For saving time, it's important for you to know where your priority is *before* you begin the process if possible, so you don't end up having to redo work you've already—for example rewriting descriptions.

On the left is prioritizing access—this is making as much as your collection available and accessible as fast as possible. It's essentially taking the records the you already have, sharing them as is, and continuing to catalog in the way that serves your internal goals while simultaneous sharing them.

On the right is prioritizing having a 'final product'. This is what VHS does

(vermonthistory.org/catalog). It's a much slower process – we only share objects that have photos that are up to a certain standard, which often means rephotographing things, and our descriptions are in full sentences. Every piece of context we know is verified and entered into the record. For the audience, the description, context, and image are the 3 important things – the rest I consider mostly for internal use.

Moving

- Dimensions
- Materials
- Condition

The moving category applies to things like rotating objects on and off exhibit or pulling things for in-person research. This category also rearranges the priorities of the task cards. Dimensions may be necessary for knowing if something will fit in your boxes or cases. Materials may be necessary for knowing how to handle the object or how long it can be on display. Condition Reporting should not be skipped if your goal includes moving because the opportunity for accidental damage or increased wear is so great.

Activity

Practical Activity

First step is determining your capacity. On your sheet of paper, write the labels “Name”, “Hours”, and “Overhead” across the top. Under “Name”, list every staff member or volunteer who works with collections. Under “Hours”, list how many hours that person works divided into either week or month. (I suggest week unless the hours are so low that it becomes unreasonable.) Under “Overhead”, write how many of their work hours are consumed by other tasks (i.e. meetings, front desk). To determine your total number of Collections hours, subtract the total “Overhead” from the total “Hours”.

My example:

Name	Hours	Overhead
Teresa	40	8
Nancy	7	0
total	47	8

Total Collections Hours: 39

Next: determine your goal for how many objects/records you'd like to get through in you time frame (week or month, whichever you chose). I chose 250.

Next: determine how much time you can spend per object/record to meet that goal. To determine that:

- Multiply your total collections hours by 60 (to calculate how many minutes it is)
    - Mine: 2340
- Multiply that number by .7 (studies have shown that productive employees are only 100% productive 70% of the time)
    - Mine: 1638
- Divide that number by your object/record goal
    - Mine: 6.5

The final number is how many minutes you should spend on each record to meet your goal.
Now, starting with your highest priority goal card, rearrange your task cards in a line by priority so that you can meet that goal within your time limit. Remember that some of the cards have different times on either side. The cards you marked as unskippable (mine had a yellow border) must be included above your time cutoff.

Once you're satisfied, leave the task cards as they are, and replace your goal card with your second highest priority goal card. If the task cards don't meet that goal within your time limit, rearrange them so that they satisfy both goals as much as possible. If you cannot, adjust your goal number to accommodate how much time each object/record will take. Repeat with the rest of your goal cards.

Remember to order your cards by priority even within the time limit, that way if/when you have less time than anticipated, you know which additional tasks you're comfortable leaving off.