

The Concept of Bibliography

Conceptual Analysis and Conceptual Engineering

(Short Version)

*Generated entirely by the Conceptual Analysis Machine,
a program written by Claude Code with some direction from David Chalmers*

Introduction

The concept BIBLIOGRAPHY would not appear on most philosophers' lists of topics urgently requiring analysis. A bibliography is a list of sources — everyone knows this, and knowing it seems sufficient for every practical purpose. Yet the moment we try to say exactly what distinguishes a bibliography from a catalog, an inventory, a reading list, or a search-engine results page, we find ourselves drawn into questions about curation, purpose, informational ontology, and the social epistemology of scholarly practice that are anything but trivial. This paper undertakes a classical conceptual analysis through twelve successive definitions, evaluates the best candidate against counterexamples, compares it with dictionary treatments, examines residual circularities, and then shifts from analysis to conceptual engineering — asking whether the folk concept BIBLIOGRAPHY is one we should retain, revise, or replace given the competing functional roles it plays in contemporary intellectual life.

Twelve Rounds of Analysis

Initial Structural Definitions

D1. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of books.

This etymologically grounded first attempt fails immediately: the bibliography appended to a journal article in *Mind* includes references to other journal articles, which are not books, yet no one would deny that it is a bibliography. The concept is not restricted to books.

D2. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of written or published works.

This broader formulation accommodates articles and dissertations but cannot distinguish a bibliography from a library catalog — both are lists of published works, yet they are organized around fundamentally different principles (topical relevance versus collection management).

D3. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of written or published works compiled to indicate sources relevant to a particular subject, author, or inquiry.

This improvement correctly excludes library catalogs but now admits a course reading list ("Reading List for Proseminar in Epistemology, Fall 2024"), which is organized around a pedagogical sequence rather than a domain of literature. A student who asked for a bibliography on epistemic injustice would be puzzled to receive a weekly syllabus.

Refining Purpose and Function

D4. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of written or published works compiled to represent the body of literature relevant to a particular subject, author, or inquiry, without prescribing a sequence of engagement.

The negative clause excludes reading lists but also wrongly excludes chronologically organized annotated bibliographies — such as an *Annotated Bibliography of Works on Cartesian Dualism* arranged from Descartes through to the present — that implicitly prescribe a historical sequence of engagement yet are paradigmatically bibliographies.

D5. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of written or published works compiled primarily to document or represent the existing literature relevant to a particular subject, author, or inquiry.

The qualifier "primarily" distinguishes bibliographies from reading lists by dominant purpose. However, this excludes works-cited lists appended to journal articles, which document only works the author happened to draw on rather than "the existing literature" as such — yet such lists are routinely called bibliographies in common usage.

D6. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of written or published works compiled to document the sources relevant to or drawn upon in a particular subject, author, inquiry, or text.

This accommodates both comprehensive subject bibliographies and narrow works-cited lists, but now admits discographies — Jan Lohmann's exhaustive discography of Miles Davis is a list of "published works" documenting sources relevant to a particular artist, yet we call it a discography, not a bibliography. The concept carries an implicit restriction to textual or documentary works.

D7. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of textual works (including books, articles, manuscripts, and other written documents) compiled to document the sources relevant to or drawn upon in a particular subject, author, inquiry, or text.

The restriction to textual works handles the discography case but excludes the YouTube video cited in standard bibliographic format in a recent article in *Ethics and Information Technology*. Contemporary bibliographic practice has expanded beyond textual sources.

Accommodating Modern and Non-Standard Cases

D8. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of identifiable works or sources compiled to document the sources relevant to or drawn upon in a particular subject, author, inquiry, or text, where the items are presented using bibliographic conventions (such as citing author, title, publication details, and the means of access).

Replacing the content restriction with a formal one (mode of presentation) accommodates non-textual sources, but the definition is not explicit enough about what counts as a "work or source": the Sumerian King List records kings and reigns, not consultable documents, yet it satisfies the definition on a loose reading.

D9. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of citable informational artifacts (including books, articles, manuscripts, recordings, datasets, and other retrievable sources) compiled to document the sources relevant to or drawn upon in a particular subject, author, inquiry, or text, where the items are presented using conventions that enable identification and retrieval.

The phrase "citable informational artifacts" correctly excludes the Sumerian King List and includes YouTube videos, but now a Christie's rare book auction catalog satisfies the definition

— it is a list of citable informational artifacts presented with conventions enabling identification, organized around a subject. Yet its purpose is commercial, not documentary.

D10. x is a bibliography iff x is a list of citable informational artifacts compiled for the purpose of documenting, recording, or indicating items of informational or scholarly relevance with respect to a particular subject, author, inquiry, or text — rather than for purposes of commercial transaction, collection management, or other primarily non-informational ends — where the items are presented using conventions that enable identification and retrieval.

The exclusionary clause handles auction catalogs but wrongly threatens to exclude Teerink-Scouten's *Bibliography of the Writings of Jonathan Swift*, a paradigmatic bibliography that also functions as a collection-management tool for rare book librarians. A single work can serve multiple purposes.

Toward a Mature Definition

D11. x is a bibliography iff x is a structured compilation of citable informational artifacts that (i) is organized around a unifying principle of informational relevance — such as a subject, an author, a discipline, an inquiry, or a particular text — and (ii) has as a principal purpose the documentation, recording, or indication of items pertinent to that unifying principle, and (iii) presents its items using conventions that enable identification and retrieval.

This replaces the exclusionary clause with a positive "principal purpose" requirement, correctly including the Teerink-Scouten bibliography while excluding auction catalogs and reading lists. However, a Google Scholar results page for "epistemic injustice" satisfies all three conditions — it is structured, organized around a topic, documentation-purposed, and retrieval-enabling — yet no one would call it a bibliography. What is missing is the concept of deliberate curation.

D12. x is a bibliography iff x is a curated compilation of citable informational artifacts — that is, a compilation resulting from deliberate selection by one or more agents exercising judgment — that (i) is organized around a unifying principle of informational relevance, such as a subject, an author, a discipline, an

inquiry, or a particular text; (ii) has as a principal purpose the documentation of items pertinent to that unifying principle; and (iii) presents its items in a form that enables their identification and retrieval.

Assessment: The Best Definition

D12 is the high-water mark. Its genus term "citable informational artifacts" captures media generality without tethering the concept to any particular substrate. The curation condition distinguishes bibliographies from algorithmic aggregations. Condition (i) distinguishes bibliographies from miscellaneous citation heaps. The "principal purpose" calibration in (ii) allows bibliographies to serve secondary functions (collection management, commercial assessment) without disqualification. And condition (iii) ensures that bibliographies are communicative artifacts enabling others to locate listed items.

A False Negative

Consider a team of information scientists who produce a *Comprehensive Bibliography of Climate Change Adaptation Research, 1990–2005* by ingesting bibliographic databases and applying keyword filters, machine-learning classifiers, and citation-network algorithms — without any human reviewing individual entries. The resulting 47,000-entry work is titled as a bibliography, functions as one, and is recognized as one by researchers and librarians. It is organized by subtopic, presented in standard bibliographic form, and compiled exclusively to document the literature. Yet it fails D12's curation condition: no person exercised judgment about individual entries. One might respond that designing the algorithms constitutes second-order curation, but this reasoning would readmit Google Scholar results pages, collapsing the very distinction D12 was designed to capture. What distinguishes this work from a search result is not item-level human judgment but its status as a stable, deliberately published, authoritative reference artifact — suggesting that D12 conflates the presence of intellectual authority with the mechanism of selection.

A False Positive

Consider a senior curator at the Museum of Modern Art who prepares an *Exhibition Checklist: Abstraction and Utopia, 1910–1935* containing 137 artworks, each identified by painter, title,

date, medium, dimensions, lending institution, and accession number. The curator exercised extensive judgment over eighteen months about which works to include based on relevance to the exhibition's thesis. The checklist is organized around a clear unifying principle, its principal purpose is documentation for scholarly reference, and its format enables identification and retrieval. D12 is fully satisfied — yet no curator or art historian would call this a bibliography. A graduate student who asked for "a bibliography on abstraction and utopianism" and received this checklist would rightly protest that she wanted scholarly literature, not a list of paintings. Bibliographies list items functioning as *sources of propositional content* — documents one consults for information, arguments, or data — whereas artworks are *objects of study*. D12's genus "citable informational artifacts" is too broad, failing to capture this distinction.

Comparison with Existing Definitions

Major dictionaries converge on characterizing a bibliography as a *list of books, articles, or writings* organized around a subject, author, or period. Merriam-Webster distinguishes a disciplinary sense ("the history, identification, or description of writings or publications") from a product sense ("a list often with descriptive or critical notes of writings relating to a particular subject, period, or author"). Dictionary.com notably characterizes a bibliography as "a complete or selective list of works compiled upon some common principle, as authorship, subject, place of publication, or printer." Oxford Reference specifies items "cited or referred to in a scholarly work, or thought relevant to its subject matter."

The dictionaries get several things right that D12 neglects: they acknowledge the discipline/product polysemy, they retain the etymologically and prototypically appropriate reference to books and writings, and Britannica explicitly identifies the user-facing communicative function ("so that students of the subject may have access to it"). However, no dictionary definition distinguishes a bibliography from a library catalog, a publisher's inventory, or a search-engine results page. What D12 contributes — and the dictionaries uniformly lack — is the conjunction of curation, a unifying principle of informational relevance, a documentation purpose, and a retrieval-enabling condition. The dictionaries also remain tethered to "books and articles," failing to accommodate the videos, datasets, and software packages that routinely appear in contemporary bibliographies.

A synthesis definition, D13, would incorporate the dictionaries' insights — the discipline/product polysemy, the explicit audience specification, the broader range of organizing principles (including publishers and places of production) — while retaining D12's innovations of curation, media generality, and a retrieval condition.

The Circularity Problem

The term bearing the greatest definitional weight in D12 is "citable informational artifact." An attempted independent definition decomposes it into three conditions: (i) *x* is a product of intentional human activity; (ii) *x*'s primary function is to convey, encode, or make available propositional, representational, or expressive content; and (iii) *x* possesses sufficient determinacy of identity that a third party could be reliably directed to the same *x* on the basis of a finite identifying description. This definition faces serious difficulties — ephemeral web content (tweets, Instagram stories) strains the determinacy threshold; geological core samples cited in paleoclimatology bibliographies fail condition (i) since they are natural objects, not artifacts; and oral traditions passed down without recording lack the stable identity condition (iii) demands, though they appear in actual bibliographies.

These difficulties structurally mirror those encountered in defining BIBLIOGRAPHY itself. The concepts BIBLIOGRAPHY, CITATION, SOURCE, REFERENCE, and CITABLE INFORMATIONAL ARTIFACT form a mutually elucidating network: a thing becomes citable partly because bibliographic practices confer citability upon it, and a bibliography is recognizable as such partly because its entries are the sorts of things that get cited. This circularity is informative rather than vicious. It marks BIBLIOGRAPHY as an *infrastructure concept* — one whose content is fixed by its role within a system of interrelated epistemic practices rather than by independently specifiable conditions. D12 succeeds in articulating the concept's internal structure while honestly presupposing the network of practices that give it life.

Conceptual Engineering: Successor Concepts

The folk concept BIBLIOGRAPHY serves at least four distinguishable functions: epistemic credentialing (signaling one's place in a web of intellectual accountability), retrieval-enabling (allowing readers to trace claims to their origins), domain-mapping (representing the extent and structure of a field's literature), and normative-regulatory (mediating obligations of attribution

and plagiarism adjudication). Four successor concepts, each optimized for one function, illuminate these divergences.

The **sourceledger** is optimized for retrieval. It requires that entries be systematically associated, by explicit reference markers, with specific claims in a host text, and that its function is to enable verification of those claims. This is more useful than the folk concept for publishers and plagiarism-detection systems, but it excludes free-standing enumerative bibliographies and uncited background sources — things ordinary speakers unhesitatingly call bibliographies.

The **epistegraph** is optimized for epistemic credentialing. It requires that items be selected on the basis of bearing on a domain of inquiry, that selection reflects deliberate evaluative judgment, and that the structure encodes a perspective on relative importance. This isolates the evaluative dimension that makes bibliographies intellectually significant — the reason reviewers scrutinize them for conspicuous omissions — but excludes algorithmically generated lists that lack evaluative judgment yet are called bibliographies.

The **corpuscarta** is optimized for domain-mapping. It requires explicitly stated scope boundaries and an aspiration to completeness relative to that scope. This captures the great bibliographic enterprises (Pollard and Redgrave's *Short-Title Catalogue*, the *Répertoire International des Sources Musicales*) but excludes most works-cited lists and selective reading lists, which make no pretense of completeness.

The **attributrix** is optimized for normative-regulatory function. It requires that the compilation identify sources from which ideas or expressions in an associated output are derived, that it be governed by community-recognized norms of attribution, and that its adequacy be assessable relative to those norms. This makes the moral dimension of bibliography explicit — the sense in which a deficient bibliography represents a failure of intellectual honesty — but excludes free-standing bibliographies compiled outside any operative attribution norms.

The **epistegraph** is the most philosophically illuminating successor, because it isolates a feature that does the most unacknowledged work in folk categorizations. When examiners inspect a dissertation bibliography, they are evaluating the candidate's *judgment* — her understanding of what matters in the field. This evaluative function is so pervasive that we scarcely notice it, yet it is what most fundamentally distinguishes a bibliography from a database printout. The

epistegraph reveals that the folk concept conceals a deep ambiguity between compilation as collection and compilation as judgment, and that a bibliography is never merely a list — it is always, in paradigmatic cases, a curated verdict.

Conclusion

The twelve rounds of analysis reveal that BIBLIOGRAPHY is a concept whose apparent simplicity conceals a layered internal structure. Each definitional failure traced a genuine contour: the restriction to books exposed the concept's detachment from its etymology; the omission of curation conflated bibliographies with algorithmic outputs; the absence of a unifying principle failed to distinguish bibliographies from accumulations; and the neglect of a retrieval condition could not separate them from discursive discussions of sources. Dictionary definitions confirmed that the lexicographic tradition has contented itself with listing senses rather than unifying them. The circularity analysis showed that the genus term "citable informational artifact" does essential and not fully reducible work, marking BIBLIOGRAPHY as an infrastructure concept whose content is fixed by its role within a network of epistemic practices. The conceptual engineering discussion demonstrated that the folk concept's four functional roles are already diverging under digital conditions, with the epistegraph isolating the evaluative dimension that gives bibliographies their deepest intellectual significance. The compressed result is this:

D30. x is a bibliography iff x is a curated compilation of citable informational artifacts organized around a unifying principle of informational relevance and presented in a form enabling their identification and retrieval.

The compression preserves D12's three load-bearing conditions: curation (deliberate selective judgment), a unifying principle of relevance (distinguishing bibliographies from mere catalogs or inventories), and an identification-and-retrieval condition (distinguishing bibliographies from discursive discussions of sources). What is sacrificed is primarily the explicative gloss on curation ("resulting from deliberate selection by one or more agents exercising judgment") and the illustrative enumeration of possible unifying principles ("a subject, an author, a discipline, an inquiry, or a particular text"). The clause specifying documentation as a "principal purpose" is also dropped, on the grounds that it is largely redundant once the relevance-organization and

retrieval-enabling conditions are both in place — anything satisfying those two conditions while being curated will, as a conceptual matter, already have documentation among its principal purposes. These sacrifices are justified because the dropped material is either illustrative rather than constitutive, or else recoverable from the conjunction of the retained conditions.

References

Britannica. "Bibliography." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Cambridge Dictionary. "Bibliography." *Cambridge Dictionary*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Dictionary.com. "Bibliography." *Dictionary.com*, based on *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Hom, Christopher. 2008. "The Semantics of Racial Epithets." *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (8): 416–440.

Lohmann, Jan. 1992. *The Sound of Miles Davis: The Discography, 1945–1991*. Copenhagen: JazzMedia.

Merriam-Webster. "Bibliography." *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. "Bibliography." *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Oxford Reference. "Bibliography." In *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, edited by Michael F. Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Pollard, A. W., and G. R. Redgrave. 1926. *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640*. London: The Bibliographical Society.

Teerink, Herman, and Arthur H. Scouten. 1963. *A Bibliography of the Writings of Jonathan Swift*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Vocabulary.com. "Bibliography." *Vocabulary.com*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Wikipedia. "Bibliography." *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. [Online]. Accessed 2024.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell.