

**[The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University](#)**

**Article Title:** How Much Description Does a Manuscript Need?

**Article Author:** Marti, Roland

**Issue Date:** December 1987

**Publisher:** William R. Veder, Slavisch Seminarium, Universiteit van Amsterdam,  
Postbus 19188, 1000 GD Amsterdam (Holland)

**Citation:** *Polata Knigopisnaia: an Information Bulletin Devoted to the Study of Early Slavic Books, Texts and Literatures* 17-18 (December 1987): 73-84.

**Appears in:**

**Community:** [Hilandar Research Library](#)

**Sub-Community:** [Polata Knigopisnaia](#)

**Collection:** [Polata Knigopisnaia: Volume 17-18 \(December 1987\)](#)

HOW MUCH DESCRIPTION  
DOES A MANUSCRIPT NEED ?

ROLAND MARTI

This question is probably as old as the art of describing mss. So far a generally accepted answer has not been found. Only in one aspect a definite statement can be made: for the repository it would suffice to include only such data as are indispensable to ensure proper identification of the mss. (e.g. call number, measurements, number of folia, content), much as a library catalogue or a bibliography will contain essential information only. Surprisingly enough very few mss. descriptions of this kind (henceforth they will be referred to as inventories) exist. Usually a description is more elaborate. The amount and kind of supplementary information, however, may vary considerably. Naturally the question arises why mss. descriptions are more detailed than inventories, library catalogues or bibliographies.<sup>1</sup> To answer it we shall have to take a look at the similarities and differences between a mss. description and a bibliography.

For the uninitiated a mss. description has a lot in common with a bibliography. In a general sense this is quite true: both contain informations about books or other written materials, the information deemed indispensable in order to assure proper identification of all the items included. The similarities do not seem to go beyond that, however, as an enumeration of some of the main differences will demonstrate. A bibliography fulfills a clearly defined ancillary function. It is designed to help users in finding books they need: it leads the way to the book. Therefore a good bibliography is "user-oriented" It provides easy access to the information needed by its users, it is standardised to a high degree,

(1) Inventories are rather scarce and hardly ever reduced to the bare essentials as compilers tend to include additional informations. They are therefore not as typical in their "minimalism" as bibliographies. In the following discussion I shall therefore refer to bibliographies as typical representatives but the findings apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to inventories (and library catalogues), too.

it is objective in its listings and limits individualistic traits to a minimum, and last, not least it relies increasingly on the help of computers. Not so mss. descriptions, at least not up to the last few years. The way they were often presented and used they seemed to be an end in itself: they replaced the mss.<sup>2</sup> Mss. descriptions were usually "compiler-oriented" (This was hardly ever stated *expressis verbis* but it is evident from the descriptions themselves.)<sup>3</sup> In other words: whatever the compiler was interested in formed the main body of the description. Little did the compiler care about the "user".<sup>4</sup> This is also evident from the fact that mss. descriptions attained only a very limited degree of standardisation as regards the syntactic (arrangement of information in an entry) and the semantic (kind of information and comprehensive nature of it) aspect. The information as such was far from being objective and both presentation and selection were highly individualistic.<sup>5</sup> And last, not least descriptions are not as yet computerised.<sup>6</sup>

- (2) This is especially true of mss. that interest the slavist. Often the mss. themselves are not accessible for *de visu* investigation, and sometimes even microfilms are hard to obtain. (I might add here that my background is that of a slavist and that I only feel qualified to make statements in that domain. Even though I think that the concept I propose is valid for other domains as well I am not informed enough to state it with certainty.)
- (3) Thus the Gorskij/Nevostruev description of the Synodal collection (A. Gorskij/K. Nevostruev, *Opisanie slavjanskix rukopisej Moskovskoj Sinodal'noj Biblioteki* I-III,2, Moskva 1855-1917) is biased textologically (and, to some extent, linguistically), whereas its continuation (T.N. Protas'eva, *Opisanie rukopisej Sinodal'nogo sobranija (ne vošedšix v opisanie A. V. Gorskogo i K. I. Nevostrueva)* I-II, Moskva 1970-1974) is quite useless in these areas (to be frank, it is not very useful in other areas, either).
- (4) Even if the compiler had cared about the specific needs of the users he would not have been able to satisfy all of them (cf. *infra*).
- (5) This becomes evident from O. Mazal's statement: "Die individuelle freie Entscheidung über den richtigen Weg kann dem Bearbeiter durch keine Richtlinien zur Gänze abgenommen werden; dies ist nicht bedrückend, sondern eher tröstlich; jeder Katalog, so sehr er anderen ähnelt, wird auch immer den Stempel der Persönlichkeit des Bearbeiters tragen." (O. Mazal, "Die Arbeit des Handschriftenbearbeiters: Aufgaben, Erwartungen, Probleme und Beschränkungen", *Handschriftenbeschreibung in Oesterreich*, Wien 1975, pp. 31-39, here 39).

How are these differences to be explained? The main reason for them is the fact that a bibliography need only identify a book. The book itself is tacitly presumed to be available. The ms., on the other hand, is usually not available. Thus, further information on it is indispensable. This explains the difference in the amount of information but none of the other discrepancies (standardisation in bibliographies, individualism in mss. descriptions etc.). To understand them we have to resort to psychological criteria. To establish a bibliography seems to be a comparatively simple task. It requires little scholarly activity but much menial work. Consequently bibliographies are considered to be useful tools but not scholarly achievements; in general they are not held in high esteem. A mss. description is viewed quite differently. It demands considerable erudition and vast knowledge, it calls for a large amount of truly scholarly work, and it hinges on the compiler's ability to draw valid conclusions from scant evidence. It is thus with good reason that a detailed mss. description is considered a first-rate scholarly achievement. And as a result of "scholarly genius" it enjoys considerable privileges and freedom. Hence the differences between "inferior" bibliographies and "superior" mss. descriptions.

In spite of the generally acknowledged "inferiority" of bibliographies to mss. descriptions it seems to me that the compilers of the latter could learn a few things from their "lesser brethren". And if one looks at some of the more recent activities in the field it becomes evident that this process of learning is well under way. It is most noticeable in the area of standardisation. Today a compiler of a mss. description usually follows a pre-established set of rules or instructions.<sup>7</sup> Since

*schriftenkatalogisierung*, Bonn-Bad Godesberg 3<sup>1983</sup>), e.g., speaks of computerised indexes only, not of descriptions (p. 6). Databases such as "MSS" cannot be classified as descriptions; rather they presuppose traditional descriptions (R.Hamer, "'MSS': A Database for Western Medieval Manuscripts", *Gazette du livre médiéval* 9 (1986), pp. 7-11). Similar projects (e.g. PCC, cf. *Codicografie en computer*, Nijmegen 1983 (= *Nijmegse codicologische cahiers* 1)), although they may include the option of new descriptions, generally still start from pre-existing (often printed) descriptions. Also they do not use all the advantages offered by the computer.

(7) Cf., e.g., the instruction of the DFG (v.s., n.6), of the MKS ("In-

there are numerous instructions and since they are not very uniform full standardisation is still "a consummation, devoutly to be wish'd" Nevertheless much headway has been made in this area. Similarly descriptions tend to be more balanced, i.e. they try to describe all aspects of a ms. more evenly.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of these improvements it has to be pointed out that all descriptions I know still suffer from two major shortcomings: they are not "user-oriented" and they are not computerised. It seems to me that one of these shortcomings (lack of "user-orientation") could be remedied by implementing the other (computerisation). Before outlining the remedy, however, I should like to analyse the concept of "user-orientation" in the case of mss. descriptions.

A mss. description is supposed to serve the needs of a segment of the scholarly community, viz. those interested in mss. This segment, however, is far from being homogenous and different groups within this segment differ in their information needs. A truly "user-oriented" description would have to satisfy all these variegated demands. As it stands no mss. description I know of meets all demands. It seems that older descriptions in general favour one group of users (the group the compiler belongs to), satisfying its demand to a high degree. The remaining users, however,

strukcija dlja sostavlenija katalogov drevnix slavjanskix rukopisej", *Slavia* 32 (1963), pp. 240-249), of the Archeographic commission of the USSR ("Instrukcija po opisaniu slavjano-russkix rukopisej XI-XIV vv. dlja Svodnogo kataloga rukopisej, xranjaščijsja v SSSR", *Arheografičeskij ežegodnik za 1975 god*, Moskva 1976, pp. 28-40), of the CIBAL ("Règles-modèles méthodiques relatives au catalogue des manuscrits pour les besoins du catalogue collectif des manuscrits narratifs concernant l'histoire et la culture des peuples balkaniques", *Description et catalogue des manuscrits médiévaux*, Sofia 1984 (= *Balkanica* III, *Études et documents* 3), pp. 9-14), of the ÖNB (O.Mazal, "Richtlinien und Terminologie für die Handschriftenbeschreibung", *Handschriftenbeschreibung in Oesterreich*, Wien 1975, pp. 133-158) etc. The Dutch project PCC (v.s., n.6) also contains a very elaborate set of rules.

- (8) Again O.Mazal may serve as witness: "Prinzipiell ist es seine [the compiler's, R.M.] Aufgabe, der Forschung soviel Material zu liefern, als es unter den gegebenen Umständen möglich und realisierbar ist. Die Forschung darf erwarten, die nötigen Hinweise in gleichmäßiger Weise in allen Aspekten der Handschriftenbeschreibung zu finden, die sie für ihre speziellen Untersuchungen benötigt." (v.s., n.5).

are left out almost completely. More recent descriptions, on the other hand, tend to contain some information for all groups of users, but they fail to satisfy any of their particular interests (except for those of the repository).<sup>9</sup> Strange as it may seem, such "balanced" descriptions are less useful than those biased in a certain direction: whereas the latter satisfy at least part of the users, the former do not satisfy any one. It is disheartening to see that today's tendency towards short and "balanced" descriptions has aggravated an unsatisfactory situation. Instead of detailed information in one field scholars find general indications on matters that are of little interest to them and highly insufficient information where they would like to draw from in-depth analysis. The problem is complicated by the fact that certain detailed information is needed by specialists of different profiles, so that in such cases many would agree on the need for in-depth description. Other information, however, might be needed by one group only. The combination of such needs, finally, is highly individual and depends on the profile of the respective scholar or his investigation. This means that ideally each scholar would need an individual description custom-tailored for him. To illustrate this it might be useful to draw up a provisional list of items a description might contain and of the profiles that require in-depth information in any given section.

	codicology	paleography	history of art	textology	linguistics
content (incl. history of text)			x	x	x
language				x	x
paper (incl. watermarks)/parchment	x	(x)			
measurements, writing area	x	x	(x)		
quire arrangement	x	(x)		x	
reglure, ink, writing utensils	x	x	(x)		
script (incl. change in hand)		x		x	(x)
scribal notes		x		(x)	
illustrations		x	x		
binding	x		(x)		
history of ms.	x		x	x	x

(9) The shortcomings of the "unbalanced" mss. descriptions might be remedied by completing the neglected areas in a later, separate publication. (Surprisingly enough none of the repositories that have been described more than one dispose of such complementary descriptions.) The type of description envisioned by the majority of existing in-

The kind of description available today offers the specialist of a given profile too much in the areas left blank and not enough in the areas marked with a cross.

This unsatisfactory situation need not be perpetuated. The ideal solution to this problem is to have both an inventory (for the needs of the repository) and a detailed description the different parts of which can be assembled so as to satisfy individual needs. This would also reconcile the antagonism between strict standardisation (a prerequisite for bibliography and inventory) and scholarly individualism (a consequence of detailed descriptions). I propose to arrive at this solution by introducing the concept of "structured expandable manuscript description on two levels" (SEM). The ultimate goal of SEM is to have a complete description of all mss., a description covering all aspects with equal thoroughness. The minimal requirement for the implementation of SEM is a description of the inventory type. The features of SEM allow the description to grow, to be updated and corrected, and they enable the users to retrieve only the information that is of interest to them. Furthermore SEM invites and sometimes depends upon the collaboration of scholars in order to achieve the ultimate goal. SEM implies that the description be stored in a database and that it preferably be accessible through information networks.<sup>10</sup> It might be advisable to publish SEM1 (cf. infra) in hard copy to serve the purpose of preliminary information but this is not an essential requirement.

SEM consists of two components. SEM1 is a rather rigid frame of indispensable informations to ensure identification and proper reference and to enable users to decide whether they want detailed information on the ms. (the indications in the frame at the same time serve as a kind of section headings for SEM2).<sup>11</sup> SEM2 contains a detailed description of all

structions, however, cannot be made more user-oriented by simply complementing certain areas since additions will have to be made everywhere.

(10) As an alternative a hard copy of the relevant sections of the description could be made available to users.

(11) SEM1 thus bears a certain resemblance to an inventory but it carries more information than the latter.

aspects of the ms., preferably in a given sequence. Whereas in SEM1 all elements of the frame should be present (although empty slots do not impair its functioning)<sup>12</sup> the description in SEM2 may be incomplete, even lacking; such lacunae are to be filled in when the respective information becomes available. The two-component concept of SEM allows the compiler of a mss. description to make mss. accessible quickly without having to perform time-consuming and detailed research beforehand and (more important still) without having to sacrifice information that is beyond the limitation of an inventory.

Thus SEM combines the assets of an inventory with those of a detailed description. Its most appealing features are:

- no information on a ms. is lost,
- the description can be brought up to date as soon as new information becomes available,
- information culled from sources other than mss. descriptions (e.g. critical editions) can be incorporated easily,
- the elimination of incorrect information presents no problems.

The entries in SEM should be consistent at least within one description and comply with general usage, i.e. use the terminology agreed upon by the majority of specialists in the respective field.<sup>13</sup>

SEM1, although it is rather short, plays a crucial role within SEM. It is the basic part of SEM and a prerequisite for SEM2. It is therefore of utmost importance that SEM1 be very reliable. SEM1 is composed of the following sections:

SEM10 country, location, repository, call number, proper name (if any)

11 content

12 date

13 language/orthography (if necessary: alphabet)

(12) The only exception to this would be the lack of information in SEM10 and SEM16 (v.i.) as it would render the rest of the description inoperative.

(13) This would mean, e.g., that a Bulgarian description would indicate the use of *jus* and *jer*, whereas one in the Russian tradition would designate the language (Serbian, Middle Bulgarian etc.). However inconvenient this is, unification is hardly feasible and the initiate will encounter little difficulty in "translating"



- 14 type of writing
- 15 miniatures, rubrication, notation
- 16 number of folia, foliation
- 17 writing material, measurements of folia and of written space
- 18 binding
- 19 bibliography, compiler's name

Additional information on the different sections:

SEM10: The entry should adopt the reference system of the repository (e.g. SU MOSKVA GIM Sin. 132).

- 11: Content is to be indicated in a general way (e.g. "missal", "psalter", "patristic miscellany" etc.). If possible, existing terminological dictionaries should be used.<sup>14</sup> Classification according to Génicot might be indicated.
  - 12: Dates should be as exact as the method employed will permit (exact date according to colophon, century for parchment mss. dated on paleographic evidence only etc.).
  - 13: The respective tradition should be followed (v.s., n. 13).
  - 14: Only a general designation is to be given (uncial, semi-uncial etc.).
  - 15: The existence of any of these is to be indicated without detailed description.
  - 16: The foliation is to be indicated in an unambiguous way that reflects the usage of the ms. Unfoliated mss. are to be foliated beforehand. In mss. with multiple foliation one has to be chosen, preferably the one most widely accepted (e.g. 108 ff., I-III, 1-96, 96A, 97-103, IV).
  - 17: e.g. parchment, 230-238 x 165, 190 x 128.
  - 18: Material, adornments, lack of binding etc.
  - 19: The bibliography should only list titles that refer to the ms. as a whole, particularly previous descriptions. If the description of the whole collection is the work of one person mentioned in the
- (14) Cf. as an example L.P. Žukovskaja, N.B. Tixomirov, N.B. Šelamanova, "Rekomenduemye naimenovanija pamjatnikov pis'mennosti i rukopisej dlja slavjanskogo vypuska "Svodnogo kataloga rukopisej, xranjaščixsja v SSSR"", *Metodičeskie rekomendacii po opisaniju slavjano-russkix rukopisej dlja Svočnogo kataloga rukopisej, xranjaščixsja v SSSR* II/1, Moskva 1976, pp. 1-32.

title of it, the name need not be repeated here.

Changes in SEM1 should be avoided unless the respective information is clearly wrong. In cases of doubt the information is not changed but the questionable nature of it is indicated by "?" SEM16 may not be changed under any circumstances since that would entail adjustments in virtually all subsections of SEM2.

SEM2 is not restricted in form or content. It follows the same set-up as SEM1 with one exception: the bibliography and the compiler's name are given at the end of each subsection (since each subsection can be completed individually). SEM29, which is thus available, is reserved for commentary and information not fitting into any of the other subsections. As SEM2 is not restricted the following list of additional information to be included in the different subsections is only a recommendation. It can be expanded or altered according to the compiler's needs.

SEM20: All previous call numbers are to be listed here, especially those occurring in the literature. Also the history of the ms. might be outlined here (person commissioning the ms., previous owners etc.).

- 21: Special attention should be paid to this section. Texts should always be indicated by author (if known; incorrect attribution in the ms. is to be recorded), title, inc. and expl. with folio indication, lacunae, reference to published edition(s), to originals the text was translated from, to text inventories (BHG, CPG etc.), to parallel mss. (relationship with other mss.). Copied colophons should also be included here.
- 22: The date accepted in SEM12 is to be justified here by indication of watermarks (cf. also SEM27), colophons (cf. SEM24), paleographic arguments. Other, variant dates may be discussed.
- 23: A full description of the orthography is indispensable. If possible, orthographically distinct layers in texts or in the ms. as a whole should be separated.
- 24: The full inventory of letters will include indications on their shape in general and on their shape in context. In addition to this there should be information on supralinear marks and on abbreviations. Typical scribal errors, writer's colophon, and glosses

- are also to be mentioned. Finally the scribe's name (if known) and a general statement on his skills may be added.<sup>15</sup>
- 25: Miniatures are to be described in detail (location, content, technique). Rubrication, if ubiquitous, may be indicated summarily. The type of notation has to be specified.
  - 26: Possible informations include quire structure and numeration, missing folia (and when they were lost), folia added later. Alternative foliations/paginations are listed and their correlation with the foliation adopted must be indicated clearly.
  - 27: Watermarks are to be listed with folio indication and by using the watermark formula. Similarly details on the parchment are given using the Gregory rule. Other possible informations include defects, mise-en-page, later changes in the original measurements.
  - 28: Type of cover (material etc.) and ornamentation as well as the technique of binding are to be described.
  - 29: Amongst the additional materials an excerpt of the ms. should be given in order to illustrate language and orthography.

Basically it is the task of the repository to complete SEM2. For this it will usually have to rely on additional information.<sup>16</sup> There are two possible sources. One is the existing literature. It should be consulted and the relevant information incorporated into SEM2 by the staff of the repository. On the other hand there are the results of new research carried out by specialists. They should be made available (presentation copy) to the repository and then be incorporated. Inconsistencies with information already in the description should be resolved; outdated or incorrect information is to be marked as such but not to be deleted if it occurs in the literature. Inconsistencies that cannot be resolved remain

- (15) Actually the problem of the description of letters is still unsolved. As a possible solution (one that can be implemented quite easily on a computer) I propose to define each letter by a set of co-ordinates. (The co-ordinates could even be defined automatically by a scanning device. Deviations could be recorded in a similar fashion.) Each letter could then be generated on the screen by the user.
- (16) Certain informations to be included in SEM2 may already be a by-product of compiling SEM1 (e.g. those on watermarks or older foliations). Even though they may be incomplete they can be stored in SEM2 in order to be completed by later, more detailed research.

in the description; the arguments in favour of the different opinions are to be exposed impartially.

The right to change information and the responsibility for such changes rests entirely with the repository. It might be advisable to date changes and to keep a back-up copy of previous stages of SEM (probably as hard copy) for reference purposes. Reference to SEM in publications is to be made by indicating the date it was consulted.

SEM is submitted here for discussion. Its main asset, as I see it, is the two-component structure supplying it with a reliable rigid basis (SEM1) that is intimately linked with a highly adjustable and versatile extension (SEM2). This concept should be upheld by all means. The internal structure of SEM1 and SEM2, however, may be improved. I have tried to include all informations deemed important in SEM1 and to put them into a reasonable sequence. However, I do not insist on the parameters in this particular composition, and I do not insist on this sequence. On the other hand, SEM2 might, if the compiler so desires, be structured to a greater degree.<sup>17</sup> In order to facilitate the implementation of SEM it is important that a general agreement on SEM1 be reached with regard to the subsections and their sequence. (Actually SEM will work even without such standardisation: each description or each repository might define its own set of parameters in SEM. However, unification will greatly facilitate the user's task and is to be considered as one of the important features of SEM.)

It goes without saying that the possibility of ample indexing is one of the other main assets of SEM. Indexes may be established by the repository but the description should also be accessible to scanning by the users.

Making mss. descriptions of the SEM type available would, I am confident, facilitate research tremendously. It would also open up new sources as

(17) A viable alternative may be found, e.g., in the Dutch proposal PCC (v.s., n.6). PCC distinguishes between basic and additional information without separating the two. It seems to me that it could easily be adapted to work within the SEM structure.

collections hitherto undescribed could be made accessible at little expense. The repository is no longer faced with the choice between inventory (with the risk of never having a full description) and full description (keeping the collection from the public until the description has been published), where one precludes the other. Now the repository may complete SEM1 and make the collection accessible and then work on SEM2 on its own or by using the results of others.

And returning to the question posed at the beginning the answer would be: "As much as possible and available at a given moment but at least a minimal description."