



# INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS ADVISOR

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## COOKING UP DATABASE STANDARDS

By Karen DePauw, coordinator, IHS Local History Services

Although it might be one of the least exciting things we do in museums, cataloguing collection items is one of the most important; and even less exciting than doing the cataloguing are the databases we employ to hold the information. Before we can begin adding information into those databases, we first have to consider setting some standards for their use. This does not necessarily just mean *what* we put into them, but also *how* we enter that information. This is increasingly important when more and more people add information to the database. Many hands may make light work, but too many cooks spoil the broth. Therefore, come up with a recipe of sorts, a set of standards, so each cook knows exactly what they should enter, where it should go, and how it should look.



[Attucks Night School](#). (Indianapolis Recorder Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

### STANDARDS FOR EASE OF USE

When writing the recipe for making a catalogue record, start by thinking about how the museum and researchers will *use* the database. Consider modern recipes. For ease of use the list of ingredients usually comes first, followed by the step-by-step instructions. Since all of the ingredients are listed in the same place, it is easy to quickly look to see if this particular recipe calls for onions or not; if the onions were only included in the instructions, they might be easy to miss.

The first database standard to establish is which information should go in which field. Databases come with fields designated for certain information. However, there are times when the museum may have information it needs to enter that does not fit nicely into the bucket created by the database. For instance, if the database does not have a field pre-loaded to contain notes about the original maker, the museum will determine where it goes. If one individual puts notes about the original maker in the description field, another in the notes field, and still a third in the



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provenance field, then none of them can be sure whether or not there is information about the original maker without checking every possible place. However, if the museum had determined that notes about the original maker would always go in the notes field with the title of "maker note," then this information could be quickly found and retrieved.

Even standardizing seemingly small things can help produce a clean, easy to understand database, especially if the database is used by researchers. Standardizing things like the use of full sentences versus a list of tag words in the description field is one way to create an easy to use database. When standardizing for ease of use, it is not about doing anything in a certain way, it is about doing it the same way every time so everyone knows where to find each piece of information.



[Boys Working in the Kitchen at the Gibault Home.](#) (Martin Collection, Indiana Historical Society)

## STANDARDS FOR INFORMATION GATHERING

The second reason to standardize database information is to guarantee accurate searches and reports. While some databases have built-in capabilities to find related terms, others do not. Think about searching a recipe box for how many bread recipes you have. If you look under the "bread" tab, you may presume you have fifteen recipes based on the number of recipe cards you found. But what if someone else put a bread recipe under "breakfast" because it was for blueberry bread? While not incorrect, you would not necessarily know this additional recipe existed. In the database, this might take shape as one person recording place names with the postal abbreviation and another with the full state name, then a search for "Indiana" may only result in finding the five records that spell out "Indiana" while missing the seven other records that note it as "IN." Setting up the standard on the front end guarantees that any future searches will result in all of the records being found.

Some databases also allow the museum to create a list of search terms that can be attached to individual records in order to pull them all together. Imagine each person adding information to the record adds a search term to the list following a different formula. One person enters "settlement, Willow Creek" and another "Willow Creek Settlement," suddenly only a fragment of the items shows up when either term is searched. It is easier to set up a formula for adding terms to the list at the beginning than going back and reattaching terms to objects later.



[Cooking Class.](#) (Indiana Historical Society)

## STANDARDS FOR ONLINE

Standardization is important for ease of use and for accurate reports and searches. If the museum uses an online component available to researchers, standardization becomes even more important as these users will have to infer how the database is used without additional inside knowledge. This can be helped by deciding early on what the standard of a record going online must be. Do online records require a photograph or just a title, date and accession number? Must all online records include a location so when a researcher finds and requests an item it can easily be found? These seemingly small details coupled with the standards already set by the museum regarding how records are laid out and the terminology used will help researchers use the collection to its utmost capabilities. Think about how difficult it would be to cook from a historic recipe. A dash of this, a pinch of that. No indication of the baking temperature or time. Modern recipes tend to follow a formula of the information they contain and where it can be found, ensuring that even the most novice of cooks can be equipped for success.

When making decisions regarding standardization, it is important to record what was standardized and how. Creating a quick binder of decisions made by the museum about standards will help ensure that as staff, volunteers, and interns cataloguing in the database come and go, the museum standards will always be known and followed. Thanks to standardization, databases can be effectively and efficiently employed by a variety of users, from the novice home cook to the professional chef.

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### [Local History Services](#)

Indiana Historical Society, 450 West Ohio Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202  
(317) 232-1882 | [localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org](mailto:localhistoryservices@indianahistory.org)

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