What is MARC?

MARC stands for MAchine Readable Cataloging, and it is an encoding standard that provides a framework for library catalog records. That is, it shows librarians how to encode information so that it can be read by a computer, which translates it into a format that people can read. Since it standardizes how information is entered into a record, MARC makes it possible to exchange records between systems. For example, when you download a record from OCLC or receive a record from a vendor, you can upload the record into your local catalog because of MARC formatting.

Before we go too much further, I want to review MARC and RDA. They both influence bibliographic records, and some people make the mistake of using them interchangeably. However, they are very different.

MARC and RDA

Unlike MARC, RDA, or Resource Description & Access, consists of a set of guidelines that tells us what information to put into a bibliographic record, where to find this information and how to format this information. These rules cover topics such as required information and how to create headings for personal and corporate names. In 2013, RDA replaced the Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, Second Edition, or AACR2.

MARC, as previously stated, is the encoding standard that is wrapped around the information that we have created following RDA. When we talk about things like a 245 tag, we are referring to MARC encoding, rather than RDA.

MARC and RDA are intertwined. In this class, we will focus on MARC, but it will be necessary to talk about RDA when we are talking about the contents of each MARC field.

History of MARC

MARC formatting has been around since the 1960s. It was developed by Henriette Avram, who worked at the Library of Congress. Originally, the Library of Congress did not intend to use it for online record displays. Rather, it was used to
automate the process of printing the catalog cards that the Library of Congress distributed to other libraries. Since then, it has become a way of distributing records electronically.

MARC has gone through several different forms and had different names to go along with those forms. When it was first created, it was called LC MARC. It was called US MARC in the 1980s, and it became MARC 21 in 2000.

MARC standards are provided for a variety of types of data. In this class, we will be talking about bibliographic data, but there are also MARC standards for authority data, community information, holdings data, and classification data.

Automated Systems

In daily library work, we encounter MARC records in our automated systems, the various pieces of software that allow us to manipulate and display these records. You are likely to encounter MARC records in union catalogs or databases (like OCLC’s Connexion and WorldCat), your local automated system (whether it is in the behind-the-scenes cataloging module or the public Web catalog), and in MARC editors (like MARCEdit). As such, you may see the information presented in MARC records in a variety of formats. While the information is the same, the display differs according to your library’s ILS, whether you’re looking at the public web catalog, or the behind-the-scenes cataloging module. The following are examples of several MARC records in various displays.

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00922nam 2200217la 45
001001300000000030006000130050017000190080041000360400013000770200022
00900430012001120490090012410002000133245007700153260006500230300
002100295520029900316600003600615651004100651994001200692ocm55654318
OCoLC20050909094919.0040615r20042003caw 000 1 eng d emplcmpl
a1932407391 (pbk.) an-us-ny aTPBB1 akapl, Robert.14aThe cat who killed Lilian Jackson Braun :ba parody /cby Robert Kaplow. aBeverly Hills, Calif. :bNew Millennium Press, c2004, c2003. a213 p. ;c18 cm. aln this bawdy parody, Ms. Jackson's headless body has been discovered in a men’s room of a bar in Lower Manhattan. The police are busy filming reality television shows, so it falls to Braun’s writer friend James Qafka and his Siamese cats, Ying-Tong and Poon-Tang, to solve the ghastly mystery.10aBraun, Lilian JacksonvFiction. 0aManhattan (New York, N.Y.)vFiction. aC0bTPB
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A MARC record as a computer sees it.
As it appears in OCLC Connexion.
As it appears in the Mandarin cataloging module.
As it appears in Mandarin’s online search display.
Katie Gale: a Coast Salish woman's life on Oyster bay

Author: Lyn De Danaan
Publisher: Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 2013.
Database: WorldCat
Summary: Katie Gale's story is also one of remarkable pluck, a tale of hard work and ingenuity, gritty initiative and bad luck that is, ultimately, essentially American.

Genre/Form: Electronic books
Biography

Additional Physical Format: Print version:
De Danaan, Lyn.
Katie Gale.
Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 2013 (DLC) 2013009237 (OCoLC)830668890

Named Person: Katie Gale

Material Type: Biography, Document, Internet resource

Document Type: Internet Resource, Computer File

All Authors / Contributors: Lyn De Danaan

ISBN: 9781461937197 1461937191
OCLC Number: 855534421
Description: 1 online resource.
Responsibility: LLyn De Danaan.

As it appears in OCLC WorldCat.
As it appears in the Lincoln City Library’s SirsiDynix Enterprise display.

As it appears in the Missoula Public Library’s SirsiDynix Enterprise display.

You can see that libraries display the same information in different ways. Not all libraries display the same information. Some choose to show their patrons very little of the MARC record, while others go into detail.
Parts of a MARC Record

We have talked about what MARC records do and why they are important; now we are going to look at what a MARC record is. In other words, the parts of a MARC record. Each MARC record can be divided into three parts: record structure, data content, and content designation. We are mainly going to focus on content designation, but I’ll briefly cover the other two parts.

Record structure includes the leader, which tells the computer how to process a record. The leader is represented by the first twenty-four characters (in the red circle). It also includes the record directory, which tells the computer what data is represented in the record (it is sort of a shorthand version of the record). The record directory follows the leader. Unless you are looking at a MARC record as a computer sees it, you do not see the leader or the directory.

The rest of the record is composed of the content designation or the actual fields. These fields instruct the computer on how to interpret the data content. Data content is the information (title, publication information and so on) that you enter into the fields.
**Tags** are three-digit codes that tell the computer what type of field it is.

**Fields** are areas in the record that always contain the same type of information. There are two types of fields: **variable** and **fixed-length**. As you can tell, variable fields do not limit the amount of data that can be entered while fixed-length fields limit field information to a specific number of characters. Since there are no limits to the number of characters, you will use variable fields for cataloging.

**Indicators** are digits or blanks that give the computer instructions about the data contained in the field. Their meanings vary based on which field they are used for.

**Subfields** are distinct pieces of data within the field. In this case, the 245 field contains three subfields. A subfield a is for the title proper; subfield b is the remainder of the title, and subfield c is for the statement of responsibility.

**Subfield codes** tell the computer what specific information is included in a particular subfield. The character preceding the subfield code is a delimiter. They indicate where a new subfield, or smaller piece of information, begins. A number of different symbols can be used for delimiters, including $, #, _, and ǂ. In this class, we will use the dollar sign ($).

The handout on MARC tags lists the indicators and what they are used for, as well as the subfields. You will notice NR next to some fields and subfields — this means that field or subfield is non-repeatable. The R means a field or subfield is repeatable.

The tags are grouped by hundreds, according to what type of fields they are.
Another important concept to understand when thinking about MARC tags is a concept called parallel content. Fields with parallel content are fields for which the last two digits are used consistently across fields to represent the same type of data. For example, a 100, 600, or 700 field is always a personal name.

- X00  Personal names
- X10  Corporate names
- X11  Meeting names
- X30  Uniform titles
- X40  Bibliographic titles

Subject heading fields also use the concept of parallel content, as follows:

- X50  Topical terms
- X51  Geographic terms

Parts of a MARC Record: Fixed Fields

As previously mentioned, MARC records also have fixed fields. Again, these are fields that are fixed in length. Their data comes from a list of fixed values.

There are some system-generated fixed fields, which means that you do not input information into these fields.

The 001 field is the record’s control number. It is generated by OCLC, LC, or your local system, wherever the record is created. The 003 field contains the MARC code for organization that created the record. Finally, the 005 field notes the date and time that the record was last edited.

The Leader

Earlier I talked about the leader. It is also partially supplied by the system. Each leader consists of 24 characters and can be found at the beginning of the record. It tells the computer how to process a record. One part that a cataloger can control, is the type of record. Type of record is just that – what type of item you are cataloging. For more information, you can visit the OCLC page on Type of Record.

Some commonly used codes for type of record are:

- a: Language material [Text]
- e: Cartographic material
- g: Projected medium
- j: Musical sound recording
- p: Mixed materials
Another important component is the bibliographic level field or BLvl. This tells the computer more about the type of item you are cataloging. Some of this field’s codes are:

- i: Integrating resource
- m: Monograph/Item
- s: Serial

If you would like to see additional bibliographic level codes, visit the OCLC page on BLvl.

008 Field

The first fixed field that the cataloger has complete control over is the 008 field, which is defined as a field for coded general information. It can also be referred to as the fixed field.

The 008 field can appear as a string of characters that is really hard to make sense of, like this:

008 050614s2005 ilua b 001 0 eng 4

In OCLC Connexion, however, it is broken down into individual fields that make more sense.

How your local system displays the 008 will vary. For example, the Commission’s displays the 008 in a string of characters but also allows for it to be expanded into individual fields.

The 008 field is important because it can determine how things display in your catalog. For example, the large type icons and the audio book icons in this display are linked to the 008 field.