

Condition reports – The essentials

There are several different types of condition reports and many sorts of condition reporting forms, some of which form a component of a cataloguing system, others that have been designed for specific uses or collections.

Travelling condition reports accompany items travelling or going on loan even if a condition report already exists. Travelling condition reports provide accurate and current information from the time the item leaves your care.

A travelling condition report may also contain information specific to the exhibition, such as:

- Exhibition reference number the object has within the travelling exhibition
- The crate number the item is located in
- Condition check boxes for arrival and departure from each venue
- Instructions for the handling and packing of the items
- Details of who to contact if damage occurs to the work

Such reports may be necessary to meet the insurance requirements for a travelling exhibition or when collection items are travelling between locations.

Details on condition reports

All condition reports should contain details about:

Type of object

For example a ceramic cup, a glass plate negative, a tuxedo, an oil painting or a woodcut print.

Dates

Date of examination and person who carried out the examination.

Dimensions

These should be recorded in millimetres. Most

items will have a height, width and depth. A spherical item may use diameter in place of two of the measurements. Measurements need to be taken at the extremes of the item. While this may appear obvious, it can become confusing with some composite items. For example a wooden mask with feathers may have fine feathers sticking out of the edges of the mask and measurements should be taken to the outer edge of the feather, not the mask. This is so that any storage or display supports made for the item have taken into account the absolute measurements of the item. It can be useful to note this alongside the measurement. Framed works should be measured in both the unframed state and the framed state.

Description

Include material the item is made of, title, provenance, date and place of manufacture, artist/maker/manufacture, inscriptions, stamps, imprints, whether it relates to other items in the collection, how many components parts an object has and whether there are any accessories (such as frames, covers or cases). With complicated items, it is useful to include a diagram or a photograph.

Condition

Often a single word or number is used at the beginning of the condition section that summarises the object's condition. Such terms can be subjective so use a limited vocabulary of terms and provide a definition of each word for those carrying out condition reports. For example: Excellent (as new condition with little or no sign of use), Good (some signs of wear but physically sound), Fair (minor damage, some losses/deterioration more aesthetic than physical), Poor (wear, damage, deterioration and loss to a large proportion of the item), Very poor (extremely deteriorated, weakened condition with very extensive loss/damage which greatly impacts the integrity of the object).

Completing the report

Begin by providing a single word to summarise the condition, then continue to describe the overall appearance and condition leaving specific detail until last.

For example, when discussing a cane basket you may say:

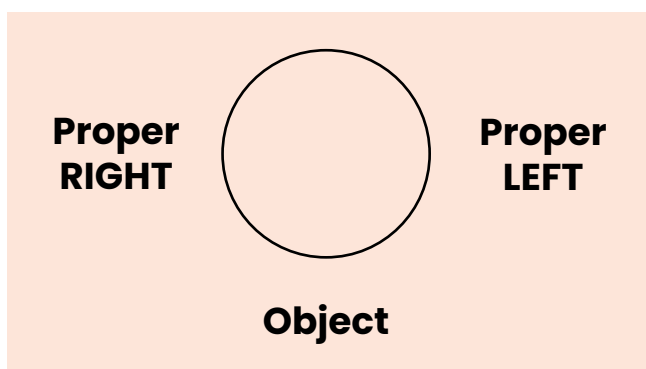
Fair, generally dusty with blue paint splatters overall. Some of the cane work is loose at one end of the handle causing it to be weakened. There is a hole in the base of the basket which may have been caused by a rodent as edges appear to have been chewed.

If you are uncertain about the cause of damage, make this clear by using terms such as 'possibly', 'could be', 'may be' to convey what you think is happening without confusing issues.

It is useful to document what you think has caused the damage and whether it appears to be active or not.

Proper left and proper right

'Proper left' and 'proper right' are used when documenting collection items to avoid confusion about locations. Describe the location as if you are the object. 'Proper left' refers to something on the object's left side, 'proper right' describes something on the right side of an object.



Don't forget to include notes

Previous repairs

While some repairs may be detrimental to the object, old repairs form a significant part of an object's history. Try and establish who carried out the repair and why. Inspect the repair to ascertain whether it is still sound.

Insect/mould attack

This should be carried out in a quarantined area, away from the main collection to avoid contamination and infestation if there are signs of active insect attack.

Corrosion

Many metal objects will show signs of corrosion. It is important to determine the extent of the corrosion — is it superficial or has it weakened the object? What colour are the corrosion products? Red, brown rust or green, blue on bronze, brass and copper.

Paintings on stretchers or strainers

Slack or loose canvas can lead to damage and paint losses, especially if the painting is going to travel.

Friable or fragile surfaces

These can make handling difficult and slow and present and pose risks if the item is being framed.

Loose or missing areas

If you find components that are loose, put them in a ziplock bag or wrap them in acid free tissue to avoid loss. Label them clearly on the outside of the package and indicate which item the pieces belong to.

You might also like:

Condition Reporting and Conservation Guidelines for Touring Exhibitions

Errol J Allen

reCollections-Caring for Collections Across Australia, pp.48-54, 1998

Heritage Collections Council (now hosted by AICCM)

Travelling Exhibitions: A Practical Handbook for Metropolitan and Regional Galleries and Museums, 1994

Museums & Galleries of NSW

<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-material-assistance-and-advice-organisations/>

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<https://mgnsw.org.au/sector/resources/online-resources/risk-management/hazardous-materials-museum-collections/>

Condition Reporting

National Services Te Paerangi, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

<https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/assets/76067/1687925474-26-condition-reporting.pdf>

Condition Reporting Form Template

National Services Te Paerangi, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

<https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/assets/76067/1687925481-conditionreportingform.pdf>

Exhibitions: a practical guide for small museums and galleries

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