

# BIOGRAPHY OF A BOOK

## ECL 596 | FALL 2025

For the midterm, you'll be telling a book's story. Every book has one: how, where and why it was assembled, who assembled it and whose hands it passed through over the years. In this project, you will explore the physical, intellectual and artifactual elements of the specific copy of a book you viewed in your Special Collections labs to assemble its "biography." This project will consist of two parts: a full bibliographic description of the book (wordcount will vary) and a scholarly analysis of its most interesting, significant or mysterious features (1000-1500 words).

### PART I. THE BIBLIOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

#### PHYSICAL

How is it bound? Are the edges of the text block plain or colored? Are there illustrations? Are they integrated into the text or bound at the end? Are there decorative end papers? What genre of type face was used? What else can you say about how the copy was assembled?

### PART II. A SCHOLARLY ANALYSIS

#### INTELLECTUAL

Is there any damage? Missing pages? Handwriting? Are there any book plates or other signs of ownership? Do you think the binding has been repaired or replaced? Has the copy been modified in any other way?

#### ARTIFACTUAL

What is the text? What language is it in? Is it a translation? Are there other editions or translations? What year was it printed? Where? Who would have been reading the text and why? Who printed it? What's important about them? Does the typography or layout reflect the intellectual content in any way? Can you tell who bound it? Is there anything important that can be said about a former owner?

“...[W]hen we look at a volume printed before the nineteenth century, the cover is certainly part of the codex, but it is not, in fact, part of the book, since early modern book copies were bound to order. Those few books sold already bound at the time were still handmade, and therefore not completely identical to each other either. In addition to minute differences in the binding, each book copy will contain marginalia and other residues of reading that adhere to them thanks to their individual history of ownership and circulation. These are a part of the copy without being part of “the book.” The printing press thus changed the book by both facilitating its proliferation and separating the idea of the book from the object.” –Borsuk, *The Book*, p. 76

## SOME TOOLS

SDSU Library Catalog: <https://library.sdsu.edu/>

- You can enter the call number of the book in the search box to see its bibliographic record, which can contain a lot of useful information. Omit the location (e.g. “rare” or “fo” or “folio”) and enter in this exact format: QB41 .C76 1543

What is Bibliography? <https://bibsocamer.org/about/what-is-bibliography>

- Further Reading (lots of good links):  
<https://bibsocamer.org/about/what-is-bibliography/further-reading>

A great LibGuide (with terminology and videos) from College of Charleston: <https://libguides.charleston.edu/c.php?g=445238&p=3036771>