

The Women's Print History Project

Matters of Format [Spotlight]

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Matters of Format

Michelle Levy

This post is part of our [By Our Books: Bibliography in the WPHP Spotlight Series](#), which will run through July 2023. This series attends to the bibliographical fields of the WPHP title records, tracing the history of our thinking about our descriptive practices and how they are informed by the sources available to us and by our feminist ambition to recognize and reconstruct women's labour in print, broadly conceived.

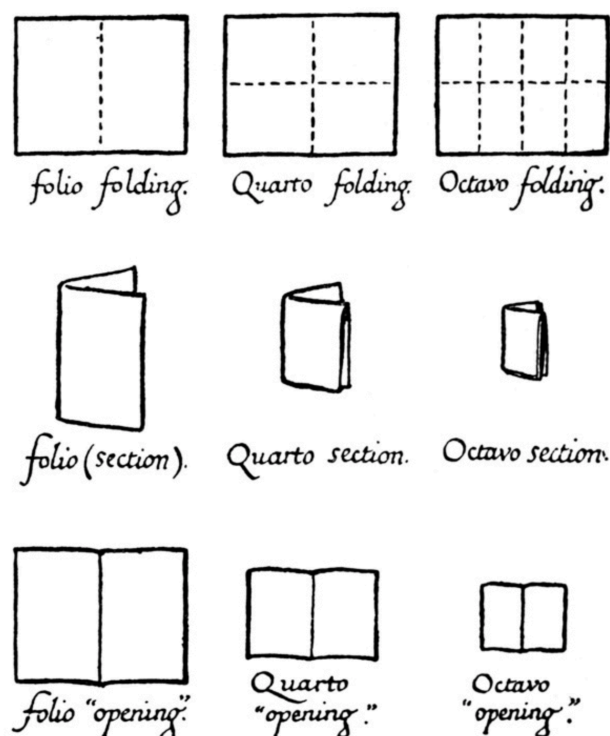


Figure 1. Edward Johnston, [Project Gutenberg's Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering](#).

Format is defined by John Carter and Nicolas Barker as “the structure of a volume in terms of the number of times the original printed sheet has been folded to form its constituent leaves . . . Thus in a folio each sheet has been folded once, in a quarto twice, in an octavo three times” and so on (109).

In the WPHP, each title record may be assigned one of the following formats. In the “**format**” section of the database, you find a list of all formats, their common abbreviations, a description and the number of titles assigned to each format:

Name	Abbreviations	Description	Titles
Folio	fo	Each sheet is folded once to make two leaves and four pages.	129
Quarto	4to	Each sheet is folded twice to make four leaves and eight pages.	599
Sexto	6to, 6mo	Each sheet is folded to make six leaves and twelve pages.	20
Octavo	8vo	Each sheet is folded to make eight leaves and sixteen pages.	3084
Duodecimo	12mo	Each sheet is folded make twelve leaves and twenty-four pages.	5701
Sextodecimo	16mo	Each sheet is folded four times to make sixteen leaves and thirty-two pages.	214
Octodecimo	18mo	Each sheet is folded to make eighteen leaves and thirty-six pages.	196
Vicesimo-quarto	24mo	Each sheet is folded to make twenty-four leaves and forty-eight pages.	117
Trigesimo-segundo	32mo	Each sheet is folded to make thirty-two leaves and sixty-four pages.	37
Quadragesimo-octavo	48mo	Each sheet is folded to make forty-eight leaves and ninety-six pages.	0
Sexagesimo-quarto	64mo	Each sheet is folded to make sixty-four pages and one hundred and twenty-eight pages.	0
Broadside	bs	A document printed on one side only of a single sheet of paper.	154
Unknown		The format is unknown.	3274

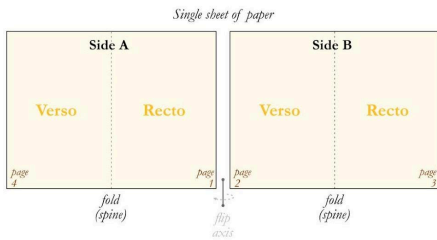
Figure 2. Screenshot of the WPHP “Format” page as of 7 June 2023.

As of early June 2023, we have a total of 13525 title records; of these 10251 have been assigned formats, and 3274 have unknown formats, or 76% of our title records have known formats and 24% of title records have unidentified formats. Of the known formats, the most common by far is duodecimo, at 5701 titles, or 42% of all title records, and 56% of title records with an identified format, followed by octavo, at 3084 titles, or 23% of all title records, and 30% of title records with an identified format. On the one hand, the popularity of these formats is in keeping with what we know of the long eighteenth century, as consumers demanded books in more portable, accessible and inexpensive forms; on the other hand, the large number of duodecimo and octavo titles may reflect bias in our data sources. We have used *The English Novel* extensively, for example, and most novels were published in duodecimo or octavo. On the other hand, broadsides and other more ephemeral forms of print are far less likely to survive and be included in the ESTC (see Tolonen), our foundational dataset that is a source in nearly 9000 title records, and this may explain why there are comparatively so few of these (154) in our title records. We are also still looking for our first quadragesimo-octavo (48mo) and sexagesimo-quarto (64mo). Please reach out to us if you have any leads!

According to *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (2010), “at the heart of a bibliographical description is a statement of format and a collational formula.” Both of these tasks require access to the physical books and, given constraints on resources, our location in Canada, and the scale of our dataset, we are rarely able to generate information on format ourselves (and do not include collation formulas) as we are able to hand-verify only a small percentage of our title records. Mostly, we rely on existing sources, including library catalogues, bibliographies, and publisher advertisements and catalogues. Fortunately, from these sources, we have been able to attach formats to over three-quarters of our title

records, another example of the importance of aggregating existing bibliographical knowledge for large-scale projects like the WPHP.

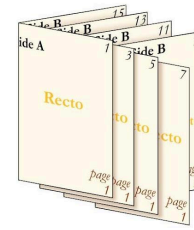
FOLIO
abbreviated
fo 2°



- 4 pages of printed text
- 2 on each side
- 1 fold
- creates 2 leaves
- each leaf is 1/2 size of the original sheet

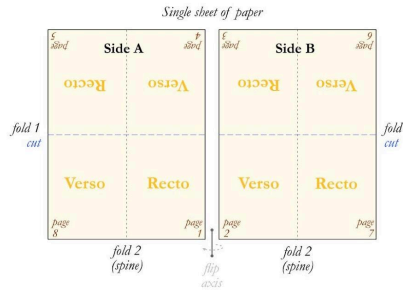
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folio>

Example of a Folio Gathering



Folios would be inserted within each other to form, for example, gatherings of 8 leaves (above). Gatherings are sewn through the central fold prior to binding the book. Multiple gatherings are stacked and made into a book.

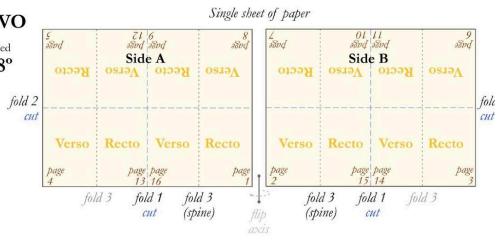
QUARTO
abbreviated
Qto, 4to or 4°



- 8 pages of printed text
- 4 on each side
- 2 folds, 1 cut
- creates 4 leaves
- each leaf is 1/4 size of the original sheet

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quarto>

OCTAVO
abbreviated
8vo, 8°



- 16 pages of printed text
- 8 on each side
- 3 folds, 2 cuts
- creates 8 leaves
- each leaf is 1/8 size of the original sheet

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavo>

For "left-to-right reading" books.

Figure 3. Created by *Wikipedia Commons* user Skaalr and shared under a Creative Commons license: (CC BY-SA 4.0).

WPHP Records Referenced

Formats (field)

The English Novel (source)

Works Cited

“bibliography (1).” *The Oxford Companion to the Book*. Oxford UP, 2010, n.p.

Tolonen, Mikko, et al. "The Anatomy of Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO)." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 56 no. 1, 2022, p. 95–123.