

CDs: Compact Disks, or Complete Disasters?

TO: SML/CCL Selectors
FROM: Tobin Nellhaus, CD Center Coordinator
RE: CD-ROM purchases
DATE: 25 Jun 2001

Dear Selector:

Here are a few issues to keep in mind when considering purchasing CD-ROMs—specifically CD-ROMs that are purchased on their own, not the ones that simply accompany books as a supplementary resource. We should make every effort to make sure the former are usable; if readers want to use the latter, they're basically on their own. These notes are not meant to be purchasing guidelines, but rather are meant to alert you to some potential problems and questions you might ask. It will be extremely helpful both to you and to me if you would discuss **all** CD-ROM purchases with me before placing an order.

For most selection purposes, we think of CDs as being either indexes or full-text. For installation purposes, however, CDs are either all-in-one systems, or raw files. The all-in-one systems include their own software for accessing the data; the raw files require the user to already have the appropriate software. Each has its own implications for installation and usage.

All-in-One CDs

Most of the CDs we get fall into this category. The database comes with the software, and we simply load it and run it . . . Not! All too often, the CD will refuse to load onto the CD server (called a "zerver"), and sometimes it won't even run as a standalone product. Or we can't figure out how to load it because it has no installation program and no instructions in English. And a number of the ones that do load don't operate correctly (for example, they won't print, and crash the computer if you try). Here are a few things to watch out for:

- **Operating System:** Most of our computers use Windows NT 4; a growing number are on Windows 2000. If the CD says it will run on either of those, that's a good sign. Most software that claims to run on Windows 95 or Windows 98 will also work on these systems -- most, but not all. Some software for Windows 3, 3.1, or 3.11 will work on our computers, but some won't. Please don't purchase anything that runs under DOS. The CD Center has one Macintosh, but it's

had a hard life, so it's best to avoid materials that are for Mac only. (Some CDs are for Mac *or* PC; these are okay, if they work on an operating system we use.) Do **not** assume that if the CD was produced in a modern industrialized country, it will work in the CD Center (I can show you some Italian CDs that are looking like coasters!).

- **Language:** There are several potential problems here. If the data and even the interface are in (say) German, that's fine; but if the software wants the German version of Windows, we may be out of luck. If the material uses non-Roman characters, we may or may not be able to support it, and unfortunately it's hard to know until we install it and everything comes out in squiggly diacritics and little empty boxes. At the very least, try to find out if the CD comes with instructions in English (a potentially interesting Icelandic CD neglected to include such trivia . . .).
- **Hardware Requirements:** Problems in this area don't arise very often, but they do crop up. The most likely difficulty is that the CD has sound; we don't currently support that, though we hope to eventually.

Raw File CDs

These are a bit like raw fish: most will go down fine, and then you'll get one that'll kill you. Raw file CDs are usually text files of some sort; a few have videos or sound. Since they don't have any software, it's up to the library to provide a program (and occasionally hardware) that can work with them. For the most part, that eliminates the compatibility issues that the all-in-one CDs involve, but not all of them. Some possible difficulties include:

- **Character Encoding:** This is related to the problem of non-Roman characters mentioned above. We may or may not be able to display these characters correctly, and it's hard to know before the CD arrives. Even if a CD claims to use a "standard" character encoding system like ASCII, beware: there are different flavors of ASCII, and they don't all get along.
- **Text Encoding:** Some files are the text, the whole text, and nothing but the text. Others are marked up using SGML or possibly XML, which vastly enhances searching and analysis capabilities -- or it would, if we could get the software to read it (or get it to work right).

In Conclusion

If you don't keep an eye on these issues, you can easily end up with a very expensive but totally useless CD. **You have been warned!** (Unfortunately, since sometimes information is sparse, you may still end up with a high-tech coaster, but we can at least try to avoid that.) When in doubt, please ask me about the CD you're considering. And you should **always** doubt CDs.