“Available from” Or “Retrieved from”?

My question has to do with the amount of 'license' a writer might take with the citation examples set forth in the 6th edition of the Manual.

For example the following 'reference template' is provided for doctoral dissertations and master's theses:

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`For a doctoral dissertation or master's thesis available from a database service, use the following reference template (p. 207):

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Yet the very first example following this template:

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Example 40. Master's thesis, from a commercial database (p. 208):

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offers 'alternate' descriptive text, the phrase "Available from..." rather than the template's "Retrieved from...". Are these two phrases equally valid? Had I used my own phrase, e.g., "Located in...", would this be equally valid?

Also, when it comes to what the 'reference template' calls the 'Accession or Order No.' is there flexibility in how that number is introduced? Example 40 above uses the text prefix 'UMI No.' The ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database uses the prefix 'Publication No.' Are both prefixes equally valid when composing citations compliant with APA 6th style guidelines?

November 10, 2009 at 10:15 AM

APA Style Blog response:

Thanks for your comment and questions. Regarding the use of “Retrieved from...” and “Available from...” I can offer only counsel and suggestions. I work with the Publication Manual every day, but I didn’t draft it and, alas, I have no hotline to the style gods in the clouds to explain the intention behind particularly Delphic directives.
That said, here’s my take: Are the two phrases equally valid? Well, after a quick flip through the manual, it looks to me like “Retrieved from” is heavily preferred. It’s used more than 30 times in examples and templates. “Available from” crops up only twice, at Examples 40 (“Master’s thesis from a commercial database”) and 49 (“Video”).

In both of these “Available from” examples, the item cannot be obtained from the source/publisher for free; the thesis must be purchased from a commercial database and the video bought from its producer. So there’s an argument to be made that “Available from” applies to commercial sources, while “Retrieved from” concerns sources from which the referenced item is freely available.

However, I personally don’t wish to make that argument, as I haven’t been through every “Retrieved from” reference in the manual and checked online to ascertain that each and all are downloadable at no cost. This is not to say that the argument is incorrect. It’s just not the approach I personally would take.

My approach is thus: The manual offers two ways to handle this situation. Both are acceptable. One is heavily favored, used 15 times more often than the other in the manual’s examples. So, generally, although I have the option of using “Available from” in a reference entry, I most likely wouldn’t unless there was something about the particular entry that made “Available from” seem more useful and/or accurate than “Retrieved from.”

Of course, this is only one person’s opinion.

You went on to ask if using other phrases, such as “Located in” would be equally valid. If our standard is that the phrase must appear in the manual, I’m afraid not.

Finally, you asked about the extent of flexibility in regard to the reference template’s mention of “Accession or Order No.,” noting that subsequent examples use “Publication No.” and “UMI No.” I think that some confusion is arising here because of the template’s attempt to follow APA style with some rigor by capitalizing “Accession No.” and “Order No.” because they are used before a number (per section 4.17, p. 103).

The template’s point is that any accession or order number should be given. The examples go on to use the publisher’s own proper-noun designation for the kind of number. Thus, whatever name any publisher used before the number would be appropriate here.

Analogous instances occurring in the references chapter of the manual include a generic “Report No.” in the template in section 7.03 (p. 205), “NIH Publication No.” in Example 31 (p. 205), “Research Report No.” in Example 33 (p. 206), and “Issue Brief No.” in Example 35 (p. 206). The publisher’s or provider’s designation is what should be used in these instances. The manual does not rule that any such designation is more or less acceptable.