The R5.1 Friendly Guide

Introducing COUNTER Metrics
This is part of a suite of Friendly Guides demystifying Release 5.1 of the COUNTER Code of Practice

The complete series is:

- Introducing COUNTER Reports
- Introducing COUNTER Metrics
- COUNTER and Open Access
- Working with COUNTER Reports
- COUNTER for Consortia
- Becoming COUNTER Compliant
- COUNTER Attributes, Elements, and Other (Slightly) Techy Things
- Changes in Release 5.1

Note: for ease of reading we have used plain English in all the Guides. For technical reasons, the Code of Practice itself uses underscores to link words – thus Data Type is actually Data_Type, and Total Item Investigations is Total_Item_Investigations.

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What are the COUNTER metrics?

There are three flavours of metrics in R5.1: usage metrics, search metrics, and access denials. We’re often asked about the differences between metrics, and one analogy that can be helpful is this: a publisher platform (website) is like a popular club. Search metrics represent the door count, usage metrics are people buying drinks at the bar, and access denials are the people turned away by the door staff for not meeting dress code.

![Diagram of COUNTER metrics]

**Figure 1. The three flavours of COUNTER metric, and what they cover.**

**Usage metrics**

Usage metrics, unsurprisingly, reflect usage of content. They have been designed to allow comparison of usage patterns across different publisher platforms no matter what type of content is delivered or what user experience designs have been put in place.

**Investigations and Requests: distinguishing between use cases**

Every interaction with a piece of content on a platform is an Investigation. Some interactions are also Requests.

An Investigation might be an interaction with metadata (e.g. a book blurb or a video thumbnail), or use of a link such as one to inter-library loan.

An Investigation is also counted when a user interacts with the full record, at the same time as that full-record activity is counted as a Request. This means Requests are a subset of Investigations that are tracked only when a user interacts with the full record for a piece of content. Using the same examples as earlier, viewing or downloading a book chapter or watching a video would be both Requests and Investigations.
Figure 2. All user interactions with content are Investigations. Some Investigations are also Requests.

**Total and Unique: deduplicating for accuracy**
Investigations and Requests are reported in two ways: as Total counts and then as deduplicated Unique counts. Unique usage metrics mean that usage patterns are comparable across publisher platforms, no matter how the user interfaces are configured.

Figure 3. Deduplicating Investigations and Requests to increase comparability of usage metrics.
**Item and Title: books are a special case**
While our usage metrics are primarily associated with individual pieces of content (Items), books and reference works are treated as a special case: for these types of content, unique Investigations and Requests can be rolled up to the level of the title.

That all means we have six usage metrics:

- Total Item Investigations and Total Item Requests apply at the level of the item and count every interaction.
- Unique Item Investigations and Unique Item Requests also apply at the level of the item, but roll up the total counts to only show one interaction per user session.
- Unique Title Investigations and Unique Title Requests condense the unique counts even further, to show just one interaction per user session per book.

**A usage metrics scenario**
Let's assume that a publisher platform offers journals, books (downloadable as both whole books and chapter-by-chapter) and multimedia. During a single visit, one user reads a journal article's abstract and then downloads the PDF; visits a book blurb and then downloads the whole 17-chapter book; and watches a video. That would result in the following usage counts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Video</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Item Investigations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Item Investigations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Item Requests</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Item Requests</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Title Investigations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Title Requests</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Search metrics**
There are four types of search metric in R5.1.

Searches Platform appears in the Platform Report, and it reports on user-initiated searches at the level of the platform (i.e. only one search is counted even if the platform includes multiple databases).
Searches Regular and Searches Automated are often confused. They both report on user-initiated searches on a per-database level and appear in the Database Report, but:

❖ Searches Regular applies where the user can select a specific database from a multi-database publisher platform, or where there's only one database on the platform.
❖ Searches Automated applies on multi-database platforms where users cannot choose which databases to search.

The fourth search metric is Searches Federated, which reports on searches conducted remotely by a search engine outside of the publisher platform. It only applies on a per-database level and appears in the Database Report.

**A search metrics scenario**
In this case, our publisher platform offers three databases. During a single visit, one user conducts three searches across the whole platform and then one search just on database 3, resulting in the following usage counts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Platform A</th>
<th>Database 1</th>
<th>Database 2</th>
<th>Database 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Searches Platform*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches Regular</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches Automated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches Federated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*appears only in the Platform Report

The same user then visits a different publisher platform with two other databases, and conducts five more searches. This platform does not permit the user to restrict their search, resulting in the following usage counts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Platform B</th>
<th>Database 4</th>
<th>Database 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Searches Platform*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches Regular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches Automated</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searches Federated</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*appears only in the Platform Report

**Access denials**
Access denials are sometimes known as turnaways, and we have two varieties in R5.1. No License access denials are counted where a user cannot access
something because their institution does not have a license to the content, while Limit Exceeded access denials are tracked where a user cannot access something because their institution’s cap on the number of simultaneous users has been exceeded.

One common pattern is for subscription journals, where users can read the freely available metadata (title, authors, abstract) but are then denied access to the full article. In those cases the usage would be counted as both a No License access denial and an Investigation.

**Which metrics should I use?**

**Metrics for calculating cost per download**

We always recommend using Unique Item Requests for calculating cost per download (CPD), sometimes called cost per use.

If you are calculating CPD for subscription content, divide your annual spend by the Unique Item Requests for that year.

If you are calculating CPD for a book you purchased, divide the purchase price by the Unique Item Requests since the purchase date.

![Cost per use diagram](image)
If you are calculating CPD for open access materials, you’ll want to make sure the report is a Global Item Report – there’s more information about that in the *Friendly Guide to COUNTER and Open Access*.

**Understanding the value of databases**

Many librarians use a combination of metrics to gain a clearer understanding of the value of their database holdings. Searches Platform is great for highlighting the total traffic to a platform (remember that door count?), while Total Item Investigations offers an insight into how useful the search results might be.

**Acquisition decisions**

Access denials can be valuable in acquisition decisions. High No License counts might suggest that users from an institution need resources that aren't within their holdings. In contrast, being able to demonstrate an absence of denials could help librarians push back against acquisitions that might not be used frequently.

**Find out more**

There is a lot more information in the full Code of Practice ([https://cop5.projectcounter.org/en/5.1](https://cop5.projectcounter.org/en/5.1)) and of course on our website at [https://countermetrics.org](https://countermetrics.org).

If you have questions that haven’t been answered elsewhere, please don’t hesitate to email our Executive Director: tasha@countermetrics.org
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