

Choice vs. Lookup Column: Which one is best?

Both Choice and Lookup columns allow you to create a controlled list of values for an attribute. But there are pros and cons to both choices so it's important to think about both your end users and your solution objectives when you decide which type of column to create.

Criteria	Lookup	Choice Column	"Mostly Best" Choice
Ease of adding new values by end users	Since the choices for a lookup column are maintained in a simple list, I have found that it is very easy to teach users how to add and maintain values. Moreover, site owners can, if they wish, easily share the responsibility for maintaining list values with other members of their team without giving those people full control privileges.	Choice columns are edited in either site settings or list settings and require full control privileges to update. My experience has been that unless a SharePoint site owner is very familiar with how SharePoint works and makes updates frequently, they will forget how to update the choice columns on their site. Writing good documentation doesn't always help – users don't always read it.	Lookup
Ensuring that list values are relevant/controlled	If more people can update values, it becomes harder to "control" the list of values and ensure that all values are necessary and relevant.	Easier to control values because only a limited number of people can update.	Choice
Ability to use in views	You need to be careful when you use Lookup columns in views. By default, you can only use a maximum of 8 columns in a view that are of the type workflow status, lookup, or person/group.	No limit to how many columns you can have in a view (other than best practices for the user experience with over-crowded views).	Choice
Performance	Could have a performance implication with lots of documents and lots of lookups.	No implications for performance.	Choice
Communicating choice options	Users can get easy visibility into the choices prior to entering or uploading an item.	Users who do not have full control privileges need to upload or enter an item to see all the possible choices.	Lookup
Displaying related information	With SharePoint 2010, you can lookup to one column in a list and display more than one value from the list in the target. For example, you can lookup to an abbreviation (CA) and "pull down" the full text (California).	No "out of the box" way to easily have "connected" metadata values.	Lookup
Including default values	Defaults to first value in the list automatically if the field is required. If you don't want the first value to be the default, you need to add a value with a character that will sort at the top to be the first item – for example (None Selected). Unfortunately, this means that users will actually have the option of leaving a required column essentially "blank," (which might be a good or bad thing depending on the situation).	Can have a "blank" value as the default even if the field is required.	Draw – it depends on the experience you are trying to achieve

Criteria	Lookup	Choice Column	“Mostly Best” Choice
<p>User experience and data updates when a value changes</p>	<p>Allows you to enforce a relationship behavior between the items in the Lookup List and the items in the target – with some implications as described below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With “Enforce relationship behavior” in the column definition unchecked: Deleting an item from the source deletes the metadata value from the documents where it was used but the document itself is not deleted. Changing a value in the source list will automatically update values in lists where the value was used. • With “Enforce relationship behavior” in the column definition checked and set to “Restrict delete:” Changing a value in the source list will automatically update values in lists where the value was used. With “Restrict delete” selected, you will not be able to delete a list value if it has been assigned to a document. • With “Enforce relationship behavior” in the column definition checked and set to “Cascade delete:” Changing a value in the source list will automatically update values in lists where the value was used. But, BE REALLY CAREFUL: deleting a lookup item deletes not only the value from the list, but also deletes the document that was connected to the item. The only way to get the document back is to restore the lookup list value from the Recycle Bin. 	<p>Changing or deleting an item from the choice values does not impact the artifacts where the old value was being used – until the item is opened. At that moment, the user will have to select a valid value from the list. When the document properties are edited, the value will revert to the first item in the choice list – even if the column has no default value and is not required. The user will have to select the correct value or the automatically “defaulted” value will be assigned.</p>	<p>Probably Lookup, but understand the implications</p>
<p>“Out of the box” Data Entry Experience</p>	<p>“Add and Remove” experience for multi-select values. Users see a small dialogue box that lets them Add and Remove selection choices rather than a long list that requires scrolling to individually check items.</p>	<p>When you have a multi-select column with a lot of choices, the user sees a very long vertical list of options in the out-of-the-box user interface – which can result in a lot of scrolling. Unless the multi-select choice column is towards the end of the metadata options, users may not bother to scroll to see metadata attributes after the choice field.</p>	<p>Lookup</p>