

LIS2304: Introduction to Archives & Archival Records

here are some structured notes to help you get started or stay organized:

Course Overview: LIS2304 (2025/26)

Title: Introduction to Archives & Archival Records **Platform Navigation:**

- Tabs available: *Sites, Tools, Overview*
- Current tab: *Overview*
- Section: *Welcome*

Key Themes Likely Covered

- **Definition and Purpose of Archives**
 - What constitutes an archive
 - Role of archival records in preserving history
- **Types of Archival Materials**
 - Manuscripts, photographs, digital records, government documents
- **Archival Principles**
 - Provenance and original order
 - Appraisal, acquisition, and accessioning
- **Archival Management**
 - Storage, preservation, and digitization
 - Metadata and cataloging systems
- **Ethics and Access**
 - Privacy, copyright, and public access
 - Cultural sensitivity and repatriation issues

Suggested Study Tips

- **Bookmark the Overview tab** for quick access to announcements and updates.
- **Explore the Tools section** to find readings, assignments, and discussion forums.
- **Create a glossary** of archival terms as you go—this field has a rich vocabulary.
- **Engage with case studies** if provided; they help ground theory in practice.

What Are Archives?

Archives are collections of records created or received by individuals, organizations, or institutions during the course of their activities, and preserved for their **long-term value**. These records can be in various formats—textual documents, photographs, audio, video, or digital files.

They are **not just storage spaces**; archives are curated repositories that reflect the **memory and identity** of societies, institutions, and individuals.

Purpose of Archives

Archives serve multiple critical roles:

- **Preservation of History:** They safeguard evidence of past events, decisions, and actions, offering insights into how societies and institutions evolved.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** Archives support democratic values by documenting government and institutional activities, enabling public scrutiny.
- **Cultural Heritage:** They are considered irreplaceable heritage, passed from one generation to another, helping communities maintain a sense of identity.
- **Research & Education:** Archives provide primary sources for scholars, students, and researchers, fostering deeper understanding and inquiry.
- **Legal & Administrative Use:** Many archives hold records that are essential for legal rights, property claims, or administrative continuity.

Core Qualities of Trusted Archives

To fulfill their purpose, archives must uphold:

- **Authenticity:** Records must be genuine and traceable to their origin.
- **Reliability:** They should accurately reflect the events or actions they document.
- **Integrity:** Archives must be complete and unaltered.
- **Usability:** They should be accessible and understandable to users.
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Types of Archival

1. Materials manuscripts
2. Photographs
3. Digital records
4. Government documents

These four types—**manuscripts, photographs, digital records, and government documents**—are pillars of archival collections. Here's a breakdown of each, along with their significance:

Manuscripts

- **Definition:** Originally referred to handwritten documents, but now includes unpublished personal papers, diaries, letters, and drafts.
- **Value:** Offers intimate insights into individuals, families, or organizations. Often unique and irreplaceable.

- **Examples:** Diaries of historical figures, unpublished literary works, correspondence between scientists.

Photographs

- **Definition:** Visual records captured through analog or digital photography.
- **Value:** Provides visual evidence of people, places, events, and cultural practices. Often used to complement written records.
- **Formats:** Prints, negatives, slides, digital images.
- **Examples:** War photography, family portraits, architectural documentation.

Digital Records

- **Definition:** Born-digital materials (created digitally) or digitized versions of physical records.
- **Value:** Increasingly dominant in modern archives. Requires careful management to ensure long-term accessibility.
- **Formats:** Emails, PDFs, databases, websites, social media posts.
- **Challenges:** File format obsolescence, metadata preservation, digital integrity.

Government Documents

- **Definition:** Official records produced by local, regional, or national government bodies.
- **Value:** Crucial for transparency, legal accountability, and historical research.
- **Examples:** Census data, legislative records, court rulings, policy documents.
- **Repositories:** Often housed in national archives or state repositories.

Each type plays a unique role in preserving memory, supporting research, and documenting the evolution of society.

Let's dive into the fascinating world of **archival appraisal** and **cataloging**—two pillars of archival science that shape what we remember and how we access it.

How Archivists Decide What Gets Preserved: Archival Appraisal

Appraisal is the process of determining the **value and significance** of records to decide whether they should be preserved. Archivists consider:

- **Informational Value:** Does the record contain unique or irreplaceable information? T.R. Schellenberg, a key figure in archival theory, emphasized uniqueness, relevance, and completeness.
- **Evidential Value:** Does it document the functions or activities of its creator (e.g., a government agency or individual)?
- **Intrinsic Value:** Is the record valuable because of its physical form (e.g., handwritten by a notable figure)?

- **Legal and Administrative Use:** Does it support rights, claims, or accountability?
- **Historical and Cultural Significance:** Does it reflect important social, political, or cultural moments?

Archivists also apply principles like:

- **Provenance (Respect des Fonds):** Keep records from the same source together².
- **Original Order:** Maintain the creator's arrangement to preserve context².

How Archival Materials Are Cataloged

Cataloging is how archivists **organize and describe** collections so users can find and understand them. Key steps include:

- **Arrangement:** Organizing materials by series, creator, or function.
- **Description:** Writing summaries and metadata to explain the collection.
- **Finding Aids:** Tools like inventories, indexes, and container lists that guide users through a collection².
- **Cataloging Standards:** Many archives use **ISAD(G)**, an international standard that ensures consistency and accessibility.

Catalogs are often structured hierarchically:

- **Fonds:** Broadest level, describing the entire collection.
- **Series/Subseries:** Groupings based on function or topic.
- **File/Item Level:** Specific folders or documents.

This process isn't just technical—it's philosophical. Archivists shape collective memory by choosing what survives.

Archival Principles Provenance and original order Appraisal, acquisition, and accessioning

these principles are the backbone of how archives are managed, preserved, and made meaningful. Here's a clear and structured breakdown:

Provenance & Original Order

These two principles help maintain the **context and integrity** of archival records:

Provenance

- **Definition:** Keep records from the same creator (person, organization, or agency) together.
- **Purpose:** Preserves the relationship between records and their origin, ensuring authenticity and historical coherence.

- **Example:** Don't mix a politician's personal letters with government documents from their office—even if they relate to similar topics.

Original Order

- **Definition:** Maintain the arrangement used by the creator.
- **Purpose:** Reflects how the records were used and organized, offering insight into workflows, priorities, and decision-making.
- **Example:** If a company filed invoices chronologically, archivists preserve that order rather than re-sorting by vendor or amount.

Together, these principles help researchers trace the **narrative and logic** behind the records.

Appraisal, Acquisition & Accessioning

These are the **gatekeeping processes** that determine what enters the archive and how it's handled:

Appraisal

- **Definition:** Evaluating records to determine their long-term value.
- **Criteria:** Historical significance, evidential value, uniqueness, legal relevance.
- **Outcome:** Records are either retained for preservation or discarded.

Acquisition

- **Definition:** The act of obtaining records for the archive.
- **Methods:** Donation, transfer, purchase, or legal deposit.
- **Considerations:** Legal rights, donor agreements, and ethical implications.

Accessioning

- **Definition:** Formal process of recording the receipt of records into the archive.
- **Includes:** Assigning an accession number, documenting provenance, and initial physical or digital handling.
- **Purpose:** Establishes control and accountability from the moment records arrive.

These principles aren't just bureaucratic—they shape how history is remembered and accessed.

You're now venturing into the **operational core** of archival science—how records are physically and digitally cared for, and how they're made discoverable. Here's a detailed breakdown of these key concepts:

Storage, Preservation & Digitization

Storage

- **Goal:** Protect records from physical damage, environmental threats, and unauthorized access.
- **Methods:**
 - Climate-controlled environments (temperature, humidity)
 - Acid-free folders and boxes
 - Fireproof and waterproof vaults
 - Digital storage: servers, external drives, cloud platforms

Preservation

- **Goal:** Ensure long-term usability and integrity of records.
- **Strategies:**
 - Conservation treatments for fragile documents
 - Migration of digital files to updated formats
 - Redundancy: multiple copies stored in different locations
 - Regular integrity checks (e.g., checksums for digital files)

Digitization

- **Goal:** Convert physical records into digital formats for access and preservation.
- **Benefits:**
 - Enhanced accessibility and searchability
 - Reduced handling of fragile originals
 - Easier sharing across institutions
- **Challenges:**
 - File format obsolescence
 - Metadata capture during scanning
 - Ensuring digital authenticity

Metadata & Cataloging Systems

Metadata

- **Definition:** Data about data—describes content, context, and structure of records.
- **Types:**
 - Descriptive (title, creator, date)
 - Administrative (access rights, file format)
 - Structural (relationships between components)
- **Importance:** Without metadata, digital records lose meaning and become hard to retrieve

Cataloging Systems

- **Purpose:** Organize and describe collections for efficient access.

- **Standards:**
 - **Dublin Core:** Widely used for digital archives; includes 15 core elements like title, subject, and creator.
 - **MARC:** Library-focused, machine-readable format.
 - **PREMIS:** Focuses on preservation metadata.
- **Tools:** Archives often use integrated platforms to manage metadata, track usage, and support search functions

Together, these practices ensure that archives are **not just preserved—but usable, searchable, and meaningful** for generations to come.

Exploring one of the most nuanced and evolving areas of archival practice—**ethics and access**. These principles shape how archivists balance openness with responsibility, especially in a digital age. Let's unpack each theme:

Privacy, Copyright & Public Access

Privacy

- **Definition:** Protecting individuals from unwanted exposure or misuse of personal information.
- **Challenges:**
 - Sensitive data in medical, legal, or personal records
 - Post-mortem privacy concerns
 - Risk of re-identification in anonymized datasets
- **Best Practices:**
 - Redaction or restricted access
 - Consent from subjects or donors
 - Clear policies on handling private content

© **Copyright**

- **Definition:** Legal rights that protect creators' intellectual property.
- **Implications for Archives:**
 - Limits on reproduction and distribution
 - Need for permissions or licenses
 - Varies by jurisdiction and may persist after death
- **Solutions:**
 - Use of Creative Commons licenses
 - Rights metadata embedded in digital files
 - Deeds of gift to transfer usage rights

Public Access

- **Goal:** Democratize knowledge and preserve transparency.

- **Tensions:**
 - Balancing openness with privacy and copyright
 - Donor-imposed restrictions
 - Ethical concerns over exploitative or manipulated content
- **Strategies:**
 - Tiered access levels
 - Digital platforms with usage guidelines
 - Community engagement in access decisions

Cultural Sensitivity & Repatriation

Cultural Sensitivity

- **Definition:** Respecting the values, traditions, and perspectives of communities represented in archival materials.
- **Concerns:**
 - Misrepresentation or exploitation of Indigenous or marginalized groups
 - Displaying anthropological images or sacred content without context
- **Ethical Practice:**
 - Consultation with source communities
 - Contextual framing of sensitive materials
 - Avoiding voyeuristic or dehumanizing presentation

Repatriation

- **Definition:** Returning cultural materials to their rightful communities or nations.
- **Why It Matters:**
 - Restores ownership and agency
 - Addresses historical injustices
 - Strengthens community identity
- **Approaches:**
 - Collaborative agreements
 - Digital repatriation (shared access without physical transfer)
 - Legal and ethical frameworks for restitution