Archival Accessioning Best Practices

ABP v.1.0

A set of best practices by the

NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES *for* ARCHIVAL ACCESSIONING WORKING GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

Accessioning: The Roots of Archival Stewardship

> **Accessioning is the basis of all archival stewardship. It is a suite of activities through which archivists appraise, transfer, stabilize, and document archival acquisitions. Accessioning provides pathways to access, informs future decisions, and promotes sustained resource commitment for the care of archival materials.**

Accessioning is foundational to ethical archival practice. Accessioning marks the beginning of care for archival materials and is proof of a repository's ability to do so. Through the act of accessioning, archivists commit to supplying accurate information about archival materials to colleagues and users, ensure materials are stable, initiate the ongoing work of preserving them, enable access, and keep promises made to donors and collection creators to do all of the above.

Accessioning is not an isolated or project-based task but rather systemic work directly connected to the core archival functions of appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, and access.

The amount of institutional resources put into accessioning may be the single best test of a repository's commitment to the responsible stewardship of materials. If an institution doesn't have the time, space, and resources to accurately describe, stabilize, store, and administer a new acquisition, it cannot meet its obligations to care for and provide access to the materials. An unaccessioned or poorly accessioned acquisition is an inaccessible one, and providing access is an ethical imperative of the archival profession. An institutional commitment to accessioning constitutes a substantial commitment to care for archives and signals a meaningful respect for the work of archivists.

Accessioning work has a holistic impact across an institution. The accessioning labor of skilled archivists furthers institutional goals, mitigates risks, and has wide-ranging effects on preservation, stacks management, technical services, public services, instruction, outreach and programming, donor relations, and collection development. Therefore, it is vital to understand the complexity of accessioning labor, as well as the professional judgment and diverse yet specific set of skills it requires. The Best Practices seek to build solidarity around accessioning work by centering the archivist not only as a worker, but, more importantly, as a person.

These best practices are intended to be an active resource for practitioners.

The Road to Best Practices

FINDING THE PATH

The National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group officially launched in 2021, emerging from a sea change in the profession that began to articulate the importance of accessioning and demand a more sophisticated understanding of accessioning praxis. Despite this development, individuals performing accessioning often find themselves isolated and under-supported, combating misunderstanding of the necessity and complexity of their efforts. There were no profession-wide best practices for archival accessioning.

Rosemary K. J. Davis (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University) and Meaghan O'Riordan (Archives, Moravian Church in America, Southern Province) began organizing within the profession toward that end. Beginning with a research project in 2019 to build a network of archival accessioning peers, Davis and O'Riordan developed their project into broader initiatives, building a community of practice around archival accessioning labor. This included:

- Petitioning the Society of American Archivists (SAA) for an accessioning-focused section, leading to the addition of accessioning to the topical focus of the former Acquisitions and Appraisal Section. The section's title was amended to "Accessioning, Acquisitions, & Appraisal Section" in Winter 2022,
- Applying for IMLS funding to host a nationwide meeting for accessioning practitioners, and
- Submitting a proposal to the SAA Standards Committee to form a working group for the formal development of best practices for archival accessioning.

Concurrent with Davis and O'Riordan's work, Audra Eagle Yun (University of California, Irvine, Special Collections and Archives) gathered archivists together to demystify and guide the work of archival accessioning—its history, practice, impact, and its many forms—in an SAA-published volume. Published in 2021, Yun's *Archival Accessioning* was the first SAA publication dedicated exclusively to accessioning labor, and it served as an additional catalyst to support the formal development of accessioning best practices.

THE NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES FOR ARCHIVAL ACCESSIONING WORKING GROUP

In an effort to address the lack of best practices, the SAA Standards Committee approved the application to create the National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working

Group (ABP) in 2021, with sponsorship from the Accessioning, Acquisitions, & Appraisal Section. In the spring, Davis and O'Riordan issued a call for applicants to join this working group, requesting information about professional experience, personal identity, and motivation to improve accessioning work. Thirty archival practitioners were selected from more than 90 applicants. In the selection process, Davis and O'Riordan prioritized applicants who were professionally qualified and self-identified as members of marginalized communities, resulting in an inclusive group demographic. Both new professionals (0–2 years of experience) and seasoned practitioners (10+ years of experience) were well represented in the working group, as were varying perspectives of professional practice within historical societies, corporate archives, public and private colleges and universities, public and federal libraries, and philanthropic foundations.

With Davis and O'Riordan as initial co-chairs, ABP was charged for a three-year term and divided into five subgroups, each with its own leader and topical focus. Subgroup leaders laid the foundations beginning in June 2021, and the full working group kicked off in October 2021. The first year of ABP focused primarily on establishing a leadership cohort and fostering community among the new members, a crucial step for a thirty-two-person group spread across the country. ABP's second year focused on accomplishing two main goals: (1) developing a comprehensive first draft of the best practices, and (2) organizing an in-person, multi-day summit for all members of the working group.

The summit was funded by an IMLS National Leadership Grant for Libraries in the amount of $245,963, received by Davis and O'Riordan in 2022. ABP members convened in Providence, Rhode Island, in May 2023. The IMLS award funded ABP participants' lodging, meals, and transportation. The three-day summit resulted in a new structure for the best practices, a draft combining texts generated by the subgroups, and many deep professional connections. The final year of ABP focused on revision of the Best Practices, circulation for public feedback, submission to the SAA Standards Committee for approval and adoption, public programming, and community engagement.

Working group members received two stipends, one for each year of the grant, to compensate them for their efforts. The development and maintenance of standards, guidelines, and best practices demand time, energy, emotional labor, and administrative skill on the part of the individuals who contribute to these efforts.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Though the work of the ABP ends with the formal submission of the Best Practices to the SAA Standards Committee, ABP members have built a suite of accompanying educational materials to support the sharing and adoption of these best practices by the professional community. It is the intention of this group that the Archival Accessioning Best Practices will be reviewed, considered, and updated on a regular schedule, so that they may grow and evolve with the profession. Future revisions and enhancements will be made to maintain these recommendations as a useful and applicable guide for the professional community.

How to Use This Resource

NAVIGATION

The Best Practices are structured to facilitate practical reference. They begin with contextual grounding on both accessioning broadly and this project specifically, introduce a foundational ethical platform for accessioning work, guide readers through the day-to-day labor of accessioning archival materials, and point toward external resources for further consideration.

Best practice statements are included throughout these guidelines and are intended as a principal recommendation with foundational actions applicable in many contexts. Each statement is followed by additional explanations, definitions, guidance, and steps for meeting desired outcomes.

Some "best practice" statements are **followed by "additional considerations" or steps for "going further"** to provide flexibility and adaptability. "Going Further" recommendations are a way to do more, or move beyond what is essential, but *are not innately better*; they are simply practices that might be relevant in individual contexts.

For a quick reference to all best practice recommendations, see Appendix B. Best Practices At-a-Glance.

> **A note on the use of "best"**
> An inability to meet a best practice should not be considered a failure! The word "best" has power, both to diminish important labor limited by outside forces and to support advocacy for accessioning resources.

Structure and Organization

The Best Practices consist of four parts:

- **Guiding Principles:** This chapter consists of foundational positions that serve as a conceptual reference point for accessioning work and provide an ethical grounding for practical accessioning decisions.
- **Methods and Practices:** The majority of the Best Practices takes the reader through the activities that occur during accessioning work, with a stated "best practice" recommendation grounded in practical implementation approaches and intended

outcomes. This chapter also includes recommendations for successful accessioning labor practices that propose a multifaceted understanding of the accessioning archivist, and it offers guidelines for creating accessioning positions.

- **Accession Record Elements:** This chapter provides system-agnostic guidance on the creation and maintenance of accession records. It includes a recommended elements set.
- **Appendices:** The Best Practices conclude with complementary resources that individuals may wish to consult in the course of reflecting upon their accessioning practices. The appendices consist of a metadata crosswalk, a compiled list of all best practice recommendations, an expanded exploration of accessioning partners, templates of workflow documents, and a bibliography.

This document is functionally organized; it is structured according to actions rather than specific job titles or roles. The Best Practices are intended to be as flexible as possible with the understanding that institutional contexts vary greatly: not every institution has a defined accessioning archivist position; some archivists oversee all archival functions within their repository; resourcing for collections care varies and has a material impact on workflows; and acquisition rates and models differ.

Similarly, the order of this document does not imply a linear workflow narrative. These accessioning methods are presented in the order that they generally occur, but they are by no means prescriptive. While some activities have a natural sequence (e.g., securing a deed of gift before physically transferring a collection), the collaborative and multifaceted nature of accessioning often demands parallel work or iterative processes. The sections and best practice statements are numbered to ease navigation and reference, but the numbers do not suggest an implicit value or prescribe an order of operations.

Recommendations for Born-Digital Materials

General best practices for accessioning apply to all formats, and in this document recommendations related to specific born-digital needs are only made explicit when they diverge from the needs of analog materials. Additional accessioning needs of born-digital materials are interwoven into the relevant functional areas. Accessioners frequently work on analog and digital content concurrently, and born-digital accessioning is a central part of modern accessioning practice, not an addition or footnote.

TERMINOLOGY

For definitions and explanations of most archival terms, please consult the SAA *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*. This document uses some terms in ways that diverge from these definitions. As used in the Best Practices:

- **Accessioning** is the basis of all archival stewardship. It is a suite of activities through which archivists appraise, transfer, stabilize, and document archival acquisitions. Accessioning provides pathways to access, informs future decisions, and promotes sustained resource commitment for the care of archival materials.
- **Accessioning archivist** refers to anyone doing archival accessioning, regardless of their official job title. This phrasing should not be interpreted to imply that the suite of accessioning activities is specific to one person, as staffing levels and organizational structure vary widely from repository to repository.
- **Access** refers to the availability of archival materials and/or information about them to user communities. Access is an ethical archival imperative, but one that is specific and contextual to each institution.
- **Source** refers to the agent responsible for transferring custody of an archival resource to a repository, with or without monetary recompense. This might include individuals, families, organizations, vendors, or other repositories. "Source" is used throughout the Best Practices unless a more specific term is appropriate.
- **Stabilization** refers to the actions that ensure materials can be reliably located, safely moved, and protected from needless damage or deterioration until they receive further attention.

WHO SHOULD USE THESE BEST PRACTICES

The Best Practices are for two primary audiences: archivists doing accessioning work and managers and administrators who oversee accessioning archivists. Due to the broad impact of accessioning across an institution, **all archivists and archives administrators will benefit from an increased understanding and appreciation of accessioning**.

For accessioning archivists, the Best Practices are a scalable framework to be modified and applied to their local contexts. The document also includes guidance to help them advocate for themselves and demonstrate the value of their efforts to others in their institutions. It seeks to uplift the often invisible and underappreciated—yet highly critical—labor of archival accessioning.

The Best Practices also set forth professionally endorsed, ethical employment practices regarding accessioning labor. The concrete recommendations in this document aim to help managers set accessioning archivists up for success in their roles and support them in their work. The well-honed professional skills and judgment required to perform the work of accessioning should not be overlooked when creating job descriptions, supervising accessioning work, advocating for the importance of accessioning for the institution, and advocating for the individuals performing this labor.

HOW TO MAKE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION DECISIONS

A reflexive joke in the archival profession often appears in response to many questions: "It depends." Too often, however, the conversation stops at "It depends." The Best Practices aim to identify the factors specific situations *depend on*, allowing individuals to evaluate the matter at hand, exercise judgment, and identify a sensible path forward.

This is not a how-to manual. These best practices strive to be both realistic and aspirational, as well as flexible and scalable to any local context. Practitioners are encouraged to modify these best practices to the unique needs of their collections and user communities based on staffing, workflows, stakeholders, and available resourcing. An example may be instructive: One best practice recommends that archivists maintain original order during rehousing. Some institutions may elect to incorporate some physical and intellectual arrangement activities into their accessioning programs; other institutions may enforce a firm delineation and explicitly avoid any arrangement activities during accessioning. Both are valid options so long as they are thoughtfully considered and based on institutional needs.

These best practices are not meant to be prescriptive. Local implementation decisions are highly specific and contextual, based on unique combinations of resources, organizational structure, collections, and user communities. As such, these recommendations do not endorse any particular tool, system, or workflow, nor do they include an extensive library of examples or templates. Case studies, conference presentations, and an active community of practice are complementary ways to share and learn about local decisions and workflows.

Archivists are encouraged to be reflective and bold in applying these best practices locally. Ask yourself:

- What is the goal of this best practice?
- What are the risks? What is necessary?
- What can I do with the resources I have?
- What is possible?

These recommendations are also not an all-or-nothing model; some may appear unsuitable or out of reach due to an institution's resources, permanent infrastructure, or other limitations. **Read each best practice recommendation for its outcome, and do the best with what you've got.** Accessioning workflows can be a work-in-progress that you refine over time.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Preface

The Archival Accessioning Best Practices provide principles that both guide accessioning activities undertaken by practitioners and serve as a framework for developing an institutional accessioning program.

Archival values such as access and use, responsible stewardship, and accountability inform these principles for archival accessioning. These fundamental assumptions recognize and uplift the often invisible labor involved in accessioning work. **The principles represent an ethical baseline for archival accessioning**, with the best practices elaborating on specific recommendations to carry out the values presented in these principles. By providing a baseline, these principles can be applied to measuring or updating existing accessioning policies and practices and developing new accessioning programs within institutions.

Principles

I. **Accessioning is the leading indicator of a commitment to responsible stewardship.**

   - A successful accessioning program requires a thoughtful and thorough assessment of a repository's resources, technologies, and labor to ensure both responsible stewardship and baseline control of acquired materials.
   - The assessment of resources must be honest, as accessioning work can surface a mismatch between resources that are required and those that are available. A culture of planning and a deep understanding of staff workloads is needed.

II. **A successful accessioning program provides a series of protective practices that collectively create a baseline of access, stability, and legal and ethical care.** Effective accessioning fosters trust and strong relationships with creators and donors through clear, transparent, centralized information about archival interventions.

III. **Accessioning is the optimal time to record custodial information about the collection and contextual information about the acquisition itself**. It is also the point at which the most information about the materials—including information not present in the archival materials themselves—is available. Relying on memory or institutional knowledge rather than documenting information promptly, consistently, and in a reliable location exposes a repository to unnecessary risk.

IV. **Accessioning work *must be* supported** and built into the operational labor structure of the repository.

  - **Accessioning takes time.** Archivists doing accessioning need the resources, especially time, to carry out accessioning tasks and create documentation.
  - **Archivists doing accessioning need power and agency** to act on materials according to best practices. Archivists doing accessioning work need to be meaningfully involved in acquisition conversations from the beginning.

V. **A permanent acquisitions program at a repository also requires a permanent accessioning program.** Temporary or contingent labor is an unethical and unsustainable approach to persistent archival needs.

VI. **Accessioning documentation is the most essential mechanism of accountability for decisions that resulted in acquisition**, including why the materials were acquired and interventions made onto archival materials. Creating documentation is a shared responsibility between all parties involved in the acquisition and accessioning process.

VII. **Accessioning should be transparent.** Accessioning information is most useful when it is outward-facing. Ensuring this information is accessible to user communities offers a more universal sense of what is available in a repository.

VIII. **It is never too late to accession.** Use accessioning practices retrospectively to evaluate and improve control and stewardship of materials.

METHODS AND PRACTICES

Get Ready Before You Go! Documenting the Accessioning Workflow and Creating the Collection File

New acquisitions can be exciting for an archival repository and its user community. Before bringing new materials "in the door," it is critical to first establish repository-wide practices around accessioning documentation, workflows, and responsibilities. These include a **documented accessioning workflow** and **the collection file** (also referred to as the control file, donor file, or case file)**.**

Used in tandem, an accessioning workflow and the collection file capture and communicate essential acquisition information. They also confirm that a repository is meeting its stewardship goals and obligations from the start.

SECTION 1: ACCESSIONING WORKFLOW

An accessioning workflow comprises a sequence of events and activities required to acquire, intake, and stabilize new archival materials. *See Appendix D for a sample accessioning workflow checklist*.

✪ **Tip!** Use these best practices as inspiration for the types of activities to include in an accessioning workflow.

BEST PRACTICE 1.1 ➢ Create and use a system to track accessioning work

A tracking system helps archivists adhere to local accessioning protocols and efficiently report on the status of accessioning work. This system will look and function differently depending on the needs and capacity of the repository. It can be as simple as a checklist on a piece of paper or integrated into a project management application or collection management system.

Characteristics of an accessioning tracking system:

- **Prescriptive and direct:** It should succinctly list the tasks needed to accession a collection at the archival repository, from pre-custodial work to description and access.
- **Accessible:** It should be easily available to all stakeholders who need to know the status of an acquisition in the accessioning process.

- **Reusable but flexible:** Most accessioning procedures will be the same with each acquisition; however, some situations may require adjustments to the workflow to include slightly different tasks.

GOING FURTHER 1.2 ➢ Systematically track accessioning labor and capacity

Consider recording other accessioning actions or data in order to report on aggregate activities, the amount of labor undertaken, or the institution's accessioning capacity. Assigning specific team members/stakeholders to tasks and tracking dates tasks are performed can help manage workloads.

SECTION 2: THE COLLECTION FILE

The knowledge and documentation gained through the accessioning process are invaluable; however, this information is vulnerable until it is recorded in a centralized and accessible location.

A collection file, also known as an accession file, case file, control file, or donor file, is a record of legal and administrative documentation about a given archival collection, fonds, donor, creator, or source. It holds critical background information on the selection and acquisition process and documents actions taken during the accessioning process. Much of the information about a collection that is later recorded in the accession record is drawn from the collection file.

Characteristics of the collection file:

- **Centralized and accessible to staff members:** Access should be as open as possible within the repository while adhering to organizational privacy guidelines, as collection files can contain private information.

- **Arranged in a structured, consistent manner:** Collection files may be arranged, for example, by accession number, in chronological order, or by collection name/number.

- **Maintained in a realistic, useful format:** A collection file can be physical, digital, or both. The best collection file format is the one that is easiest to maintain and use by accessioning staff, whether that is:

    - **Physical**, with printed born-digital records and email correspondence,

    - **Digital**, with born-digital records and digitized surrogates of physical records, or

    - **Both physical and digital**, with identical file arrangement between physical and digital folders when possible or necessary; cross-references between physical and digital files should be used when the files are not identical.

- **Accessible to external researchers**, **with conditions as needed:** External access to the collection file should be governed by a written policy that balances privacy risks with the benefits of research access to key contextual information about the archival materials' provenance, custodial history, and contents. This policy should explain what information can be shared with external researchers and how it can be requested.

BEST PRACTICE 2.1 ➢ Compile accessioning documentation and information in the collection file

The collection file typically contains documentation that contextualizes the selection of an acquisition and supports specific aspects of the acquisition process. The following list describes the documentation an accessioning archivist is likely to encounter in a collection file or which may be generated during the accessioning process:

- **Legal records:** Documentation of the repository's legal ownership of a collection; transfer or retention of copyright and intellectual property rights; and terms that define access, use, and the rights and responsibilities of the donor and repository. **Legal documents are the most important documents to keep in the collection file.** *Legal documentation is also discussed in Pre-Custodial Considerations.*
    - Includes deed of gift, transfer agreement, purchase agreement, invoice, receipt, bill of sale, or deposit/loan agreement
    - May also include letters of acknowledgment, proof of receipt, import licenses and customs documents, documentation of negotiation, a summary of terms in the legal agreement, or drafts or superseded legal agreements
- **Donor or source information:** Documentation of the donor or source's contact information, identity, or relationship to the repository.
    - Includes contact information of donor, source, creator, or heir
    - May also include obituaries, resumés, CVs, and other biographical information; notes on relationship to the organization
- **Communications:** Communication with donors, sources, creators, heirs, and other external stakeholders that provides context to any expectations, negotiations, and agreements before, during, and after acquisition. Communication among

administrators, curators, and archivists may also be retained for context on collection treatment during and after acquisition.

  - Includes email and paper correspondence with relevant external stakeholders and summaries of phone calls and meetings
  - May also include questionnaires, text messages, and internal email correspondence

- **Site visit documentation:** Information gathered during site visits about the creation, original arrangement, and custodial history of the archival materials that can be repurposed in accessioning and processing, including significant pre-custodial actions taken by the repository, such as appraisal or changes to arrangement. *Site visit documentation is also discussed in Pre-Custodial Considerations.*
  - Includes field notes and memoranda of appraisal decisions, and an on-site, pre-custodial survey report
  - May also include photographs of materials in situ before and after packing. Photographs can be used to support insurance claims if material is damaged in transit.
- **Appraisal documentation:** Provides important context about the archival materials' alignment with mission statements and collecting priorities, their research value and audience, and financial value, when applicable.
  - Includes notes or memoranda of appraisal decisions or a formal appraisal report/form, a reappraisal and deaccessioning form, and documentation of the disposition of separations
  - May also include a copy of a third-party financial appraisal, information about the appraiser, and an operational impact report
- **Research information:** Additional materials that provide context on the creator or collection, which may be used in the creation of a biographical/historical note or scope and content note.
  - Includes clippings, bibliographies, off-prints, and any other secondary source materials that contextualize the archival collection
- **Inventories, metadata, and descriptions:** A list and/or description of the archival materials being acquired, specifically information about their content, provenance,

condition, and format, that is generated by archivists, sources, creators, stakeholders, or content specialists.

  - Includes creator-, donor-, or vendor-supplied descriptions, spreadsheet inventories/lists, born-digital manifest or file directories, and digital forensics reports
  - May also include legacy inventories created by the repository

> ✪ **Tip!** This information can be repurposed for accession records, finding aids, and other catalog records.

- **Processing and preservation documentation:** Documentation about the repository's processing treatment of a collection.
  - Includes processing plans, conservation reports, and born-digital file ingest reports
  - May also include copies of accession records, bibliographic records, and finding aids; post-processing reports; and documentation of actions taken on born-digital files
- **Documentation about refused/unresolved acquisition opportunities:** Records related to why materials were not acquired, including interactions with sources/creators. This documentation is used in cases when the acquisition is presented again, acquisition discussions resume after a long pause, or the initial acquisition presented potential problems or concerns.
  - Includes communications, formal letters of refusal, and internal notes

Pre-Custodial Considerations

Successful accessioning depends on the work that precedes it. The pre-custodial period is a vulnerable one: as the collection is removed from one context and prepared for another, crucial information and connections can be lost. Decisions made and information gathered during the acquisition process determine how thoroughly a collection can be accessioned.

This chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive resource on the acquisition process; rather, it addresses acquisition, appraisal, and selection *as they apply to accessioning*.

SECTION 3: SELECTION AND APPRAISAL

Choices about what to collect—and how those choices are documented—significantly impact whether or not collection materials can be accessioned in a timely, thorough manner. An institution's mission statement, collection development policy, and other applicable policies serve as guiding frameworks for collecting priorities, limits, and obligations; however, professional judgment and ethics should also guide each assessment. The total cost of acquisition, stewardship, and environmental impact should be factored into the appraisal and selection of material.

> **External Resource:** Resources such as OCLC's *Total Cost of Stewardship* provide tools to understand and communicate financial costs of acquiring and maintaining collections in all formats, including born-digital materials.

BEST PRACTICE 3.1 ➢ Involve accessioning staff early in the acquisition process

Curatorial and collection-building staffing models vary across repositories. In some institutions, archivists are responsible for collection development, while in others curators or content experts make those decisions. Collaboration among selecting, accessioning, processing, and reference staff is critical to ensuring ethical collecting and efficient functioning of the repository.

BEST PRACTICE 3.2 ➢ Document collections before acquisition or packing

Collections should be documented in situ before they are packed or moved. Investment in pre-custodial selection and appraisal saves time in all future stages of the accessioning process. It aids in planning future storage, prevents the introduction of preservation or safety hazards into collections storage spaces, and serves as a reference for later processing. The more time between appraisal and accessioning, the greater the risk of losing critical information and context. **Having the donor present when documenting this information is helpful**, as the donor can explain the arrangement of the collection and how it evolved over time. If only a subset of the donor's collection will be acquired, it will be especially helpful to have them on hand to ensure only the correct items are flagged for retrieval.

Photographing the collection prior to packing is also recommended. Images can vary in their usefulness as a reference source, but consider capturing the general layout of the storage area, existing labels and descriptions on containers, and oversized or otherwise distinctive items. If time constraints mean that quickly photographing a collection is the only documentation option available, plan to **annotate the images** to contextualize what they show.

Document any pre-custodial surveys and add this documentation to the repository's control file. *Appendix D includes a [pre-acquisition collection survey] that provides an example of information that should be gathered and documented during the pre-custodial stage.*

BEST PRACTICE 3.3 ➤ Solicit source-provided description of potential acquisitions

Information and description provided by sources or creators are helpful in making acquisition decisions and creating archival description. Source-generated description enables archivists to better understand the original arrangement, illuminates what a creator views as most significant, supplies appropriate industry-specific terminology, provides accurate and respectful identity terms, and ensures that sensitive material can be identified.

Resource investment at the pre-custodial stage of accessioning results in more accurate description of materials to enhance accession records. Engaging pre-acquisition custodians in preparative description honors their lived experiences and creates an opportunity for them to contribute in tangibly helpful—and possibly personally rewarding or reassuring—ways. This can help to advance caregiving and relationship-building goals, while also smoothing the path ahead for efficient and accurate archival labor in the future.

Provide a sample inventory form, or a list of desired fields, to sources willing to create an inventory. **Consider metadata reusability** when designing forms and templates, and use formats like spreadsheets that can be edited and manipulated. Repurposing existing metadata puts description on the fast track toward discovery.

While all acquisitions benefit from pre-transfer interviews, **source-provided contextual information for born-digital materials is especially critical.** Ideally, a survey and appraisal of born-digital collection material should occur in the original environment of the material's creation or use. **If in-person appraisal is not possible, virtual conversations can also be effective.** Virtual meetings with screen-sharing allow sources to walk archives staff through their creation, organization, and storage methods for digital material. If the source is still able to access the content on their computer, acquisitions staff may request the source generate a file tree, send screenshots, describe the material over the phone, or other creative approaches to gaining intellectual control over born-digital materials. This process also encourages source reflection on the material, decreasing the likelihood of transferring unintended files. In cases where the original creator or user of the digital material is unavailable or no longer living, interviewing close collaborators, family members, or others familiar with their work may provide insight.

BEST PRACTICE 3.4 ➢ Approach conversations about a source's care of materials and personal digital practices with sensitivity

Interactions with a professional institution can be intimidating. Sources may feel embarrassed about the condition of their materials, perceived messiness, or storage in suboptimal environments. It's important to honor sources as caretakers and demonstrate respect for the work they have done to preserve materials for transfer. Approach survey and appraisal conversations with diplomacy, making sure communications are judgment-free. Sources may also feel embarrassed about their lack of familiarity with digital best practices, especially when presented with questions about their personal file management. Clearly explaining the purpose of survey and appraisal questions and meeting the source at their level of technical comfort can assuage anxieties about the archivist's inquiries and documentation.

Born-digital collections can provide unique opportunities for collaborative description with creators and communities of origin.

The relative ease of joint access to digital content may allow acquisitions staff to remotely guide further description of notable materials. Online file sharing and spreadsheet programs can facilitate this work. Commercial software programs have been designed for collaborative input in the appraisal and description process, including the Mukurtu CMS for Indigenous communities' cultural heritage and ePADD's appraisal module for email archives. Cooperative work can lighten the burden on processing staff to describe unfamiliar materials and build better relationships with sources and communities of origin.

BEST PRACTICE 3.5 ➢ Create a plan to treat culturally sensitive materials with culturally responsive care

Community holdings or culturally sensitive materials, such as those created by or about Indigenous Nations and peoples, must receive ethical care, even if the repository intends to return or repatriate the materials. Identify the presence of these materials as soon as possible, and determine if acquisitions or accessioning workflows require adjustments. Decisions should be guided by compliance with legal statutes and respect for community needs and cultural traditions.

External Resource: For professional best practices on the care of Indigenous materials, refer to the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*.

SECTION 4: LEGAL AGREEMENT

Securing legal title and ownership of physical property is a critical part of the acquisition and accessioning process. **The lack of a clear legal title opens an institution to substantial risk and limits its ability to care for, administer, and provide access to collections.** The legal agreement provides a foundation for future archival work, serving as the inflection point between what is possible and what is desired, what is practicable and what will best serve a repository's mission. It is the most important piece of documentation that accompanies an acquisition, establishing legal transfer of physical and/or intellectual rights and outlining in clear terms the agreement between repository and donor.

BEST PRACTICE 4.1 ➢ Be clear and transparent in legal agreements about what will happen to materials after transfer

The legal agreement is an opportunity to practice an ethic of mutually informed consent between the creator, donor, or collector of an acquisition and the archivists responsible for its stewardship. **Unrealized or unrealistic expectations can erode the donor-repository relationship, but outlining both the donor's and repository's obligations in the transfer documentation can manage those expectations on both sides.** Approach every donation or purchase negotiation with the understanding that until an agreement is signed, it is not guaranteed, and with the willingness to walk away if an agreement in alignment with institutional mission and goals cannot be made.

BEST PRACTICE 4.2 ➢ Consider the expertise and insights of staff responsible for the entire archival lifecycle during the negotiation process

The acquisition of new materials is an indefinite, repository-wide obligation. Ideally, the terms of the legal agreement should be in keeping with the materials' value to the repository's mission and should not impose an undue administrative burden. Staff of archival repositories should work together to determine a baseline set of negotiated terms that can be met as part of normal business processes and that will result in reasonably rapid access to new materials by researchers. It may also be useful for legal counsel to determine any additional terms that may fall within or outside the bounds of a typical acquisition negotiation to meet the institution's goals while avoiding unacceptable risk.

BEST PRACTICE 4.3 ➢ Negotiate and execute a legal agreement before materials are physically transferred to the custody of an archives

Terms of acquisition must be determined before transfer, and these terms must be clearly documented and communicated to all internal and external stakeholders. Archivists hold the greatest negotiating power before materials are transferred. **Until a legal agreement is in place, it is difficult to manage, track, prove ownership, and appropriately document a new acquisition**. Core archival information like provenance and chain of custody cannot be documented and made available to researchers without the open conversations that accompany a legal agreement.

BEST PRACTICE 4.4 ➢ Clearly identify restrictions

All restrictions governing researcher access and use, including identification of any restrictions requested by the donor or stipulated by the archives due to institutional policies or legal statutes (such as FERPA and HIPAA), should be identified in the legal agreement, and the reason for the restriction clearly stated. This ensures that terms of access, intellectual property status, and any other relevant promises to the donor can be accurately described in the repository's system of record during accessioning. **Restrictions must be finite** and for as short a period as legally or ethically possible. **Do not accept material that cannot eventually be made available to users**.

BEST PRACTICE 4.5 ➢ Clearly define intellectual property rights

Negotiating the legal agreement is an opportunity to explain the realities of copyright to creators, particularly the extraordinary lengths of copyright periods in the United States and the onerousness for researchers in seeking permission for use and reuse. The copyright status of the materials, as far as it is known at the time of acquisition, should be clearly stated in the legal agreement, along with information about any plans to transfer rights in the future. This eases the accessioning archivist's task of translating access and use terms into the system of record; gives the institution a clear directive for instructing users on copyright status; and, ultimately, helps institutions fulfill their promises to donors.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ Consider alternative permissions agreements

Institutions may advocate for a full transfer of copyright, but the burden of rights management may not be feasible or sustainable for all institutions. If a donor wishes to transfer their intellectual property rights, the institution should consider releasing the content into the public domain to further enable access and use. The institution can also advocate that the rights holder grant the institution a nonexclusive right to authorize all uses of these materials for noncommercial research, scholarly, or other educational purposes through a Creative Commons license.

BEST PRACTICE 4.6 ➢ Advocate for reproduction and usage rights for the institution to protect and enable future work

Ensuring the use of materials by the institution through a statement of rights for reuse should be explicitly stated in the legal agreement. Regardless of the retention or conveyance of copyright by the rights holders, certain access and use activities are protected under U.S. copyright law, particularly for libraries (see 17 U.S.C. sec. 108 of the Copyright Act). Use the legal agreement as an opportunity to **clearly define reuse with donors**; **establish usage rights to the extent necessary to preserve, steward, publicize, and promote** the materials; and make the materials **available for study, research, and exhibition**.

BEST PRACTICE 4.7 ➢ Establish a policy for materials transferred without an agreement

Create an explicit policy for accessioning materials that are physically transferred without an agreement. In some cases—especially when intellectual property rights cannot be transferred or a collection is already in the public domain—an accompanying letter from the sender indicating their wish to donate may suffice for the repository's purposes, but this choice should be made as a larger policy decision, and the risk of doing so should be fully considered. **Maintain documentation of any efforts to locate donors and comply with abandoned property laws.**

BEST PRACTICE 4.8 ➢ Have a deaccession plan

Sometimes, despite thorough appraisal efforts, collections will contain material that is outside the interest or collecting scope of the institution, or that presents storage or access challenges. Common examples include published materials, awards, and personal effects. **The legal agreement should outline the institution's process for deaccessioning out-of-scope material**. It is common practice to give contributors the option to have materials returned to them, but given the long lifespan of the care of materials, it can be an administrative burden to locate creators or their heirs. Instead**, inform contributors that duplicative materials or materials with low research, evidentiary, or symbolic value that the archives does not wish to retain will be responsibly discarded.** If the contributor insists on having materials returned, record this within the legal agreement and set a limited timespan on this requirement, contingent upon notice of any change of address or contact information. If there is no donor to accept the deaccessioned materials, dispose of them in a responsible manner, including destruction or offering to another institution.

BORN-DIGITAL

BEST PRACTICE 4.9 ➢ Include born-digital materials in legal agreements

Whether an accession is fully born-digital or a mix of physical and born-digital materials, having provisions that define what actions can and will be taken with digital materials is critical for accessioning staff to complete their work. Electronic records transferred on computer media may contain information—deleted, overwritten, or otherwise hidden—not necessarily known to the creator but potentially recoverable by the archives. **The legal agreement should include explicit consent from the source for the institution to access and preserve data embedded in born-digital records, including hidden and deleted files, log files, and system files.** Sources should agree that staff may need to unlock passwords or bypass encryption.

BEST PRACTICE 4.10 ➢ Establish a policy for accessioning collections on deposit

Collecting on deposit is the transfer of physical custody without title or ownership. Repositories should be mindful of the resources devoted to collections that may later be removed from their custody, balancing the costs of time and labor with their responsibilities to and relationships with creators, sources, and communities.

If an institution accepts a collection as a deposit or loan, it is imperative to have a legal deposit agreement clearly outlining the terms, including the length of the loan and eventual transformation from deposit to gift (or purchase, as the case may be)—or eventual return or transfer.

Additionally, repositories should establish and document policies for internal tracking and management of deposits, including determining whether (and how) deposited collections will be accessioned and deaccessioned. If a repository elects to accession deposits, the conditions of the deposit must be clearly conveyed in the accession record. Consider requesting that sources provide box-level inventories and store collection materials in stable containers in advance of deposit to ease the operational impact on the institution.

BEST PRACTICE 4.11 ➢ Clearly document shared stewardship arrangements

Shared stewardship or post-custodial arrangements where creators or sources retain custody of their materials (whether partially or completely) must be clearly documented prior to the transfer of original materials or surrogates. These plans should record a shared understanding of the responsibilities of all involved parties concerning access considerations, intellectual property rights, archival description, appropriate physical interventions, and perpetual cultural property rights.

The agreement should be stored in the collection file. As part of the accessioning process, the conditions of this arrangement must be clearly conveyed in the accession record.

Establishing Custody: Packing, Transfer, and Intake of New Collections

The packing, transfer, and intake phase of accessioning is when a repository physically and digitally takes custody and control of a collection. This is the moment when archival stewardship formally begins and archivists begin to apply their expertise in caring for materials.

Collections can come from an array of environments and in a variety of conditions, and this phase of accessioning may be the first time a repository's staff physically interacts with a new collection and its original environment. This chapter provides guidance for safely and effectively bringing physical or digital archives from their original location to the repository. It describes how to properly transfer and pack materials, assess for threats to people and collections, and apply initial care to the collection before further stabilization, arrangement, and description begin.

> **Staff Training**
>
> Repositories should have policies and procedures for handling materials to ensure the safety and security of people, collections, and collections infrastructure. Basic training in object handling and in identifying common preservation and conservation concerns for both physical and digital materials is recommended.

SECTION 5: PACKING AND INTAKE OF PHYSICAL COLLECTIONS

BEST PRACTICE 5.1 ➢ Pack collections in situ whenever possible

Preparatory work done during the pre-custodial phase sets both parameters and expectations for what materials will be collected during the packing and intake phase. Packing the collection wherever it is stored before removing it to collection storage can assist with better physical and intellectual control of the materials.

Packing in situ ensures that:

- Archivists have an opportunity to identify and record the original condition and order of the materials, and
- Materials are placed into stable containers that can fit on collection storage shelves.

If unable to pack the collection in situ, provide the donor/seller with clear packing and shipping guidelines.

BEST PRACTICE 5.2 ➤ Pack only what is being acquired and appraise again while packing, if needed

Ideally, archivists should only pack materials that have been formally appraised and accepted for acquisition. Consult pre-custodial information and legal documentation (e.g., deed of gift, transfer authorization, inventory, acquisition report/proposal) to confirm what has, and has not, been accepted for acquisition.

Archivists packing collections must be empowered to make appraisal decisions. Archivists may be confronted with last-minute additions to the collection that are unexpected and were not previously appraised. In this instance, an on-the-spot appraisal may be warranted.

> ✪ **Tip!** Be cautious of succumbing to a false sense of urgency by packing materials in the moment rather than consulting colleagues or scheduling an additional pick-up time. It's okay to take a breath and make space for appraisal. Deferring appraisal decisions until after material is acquired creates additional work in the future and transfers the burden to colleagues who may have less information or agency.

BEST PRACTICE 5.3 ➤ Pack collections for safe transport

Moving unique materials always comes with a degree of risk. Careful attention to how materials are packed will mitigate many of these risks. Consider the following when preparing for a collections move:

- **Pack mindfully**
    - **Place all items in sturdy containers with lids or enclosures.** If an oversized item cannot fit within a container, ensure it is fully wrapped.
    - Use inner boxes and other cushioning to **prevent slumping and damage** to materials in containers.

    - **Label each container** with brief administrative and descriptive metadata.
    - **Maintain the arrangement** of the collection as much as possible, taking special care to box similar or related items in proximity to one another.

- **Ship carefully**
    - **Insure and track** collections while in transit.
    - **Keep weather conditions and formats in mind** when recommending or deciding on shipping service types. For example, audiovisual (AV) materials, particularly during winter or summer months, may merit the expense of overnight shipping.
    - **Review institutional policies**, insurance requirements, and liability guidelines if personal vehicles must be used to move materials locally. Use of private vehicles should be a last resort.

- **Consider special needs for special formats**
    - **Isolate materials with suspected conservation concerns** or evidence of pest infestation from other materials until they can be properly assessed and potentially re-appraised.
    - If the collection includes potentially **hazardous materials**, such as cellulose nitrate film, ensure all relevant shipping regulations are followed.

BEST PRACTICE 5.4 ➢ Reuse, recycle, and repurpose packing materials

Be mindful of environmental impact and minimize waste when transferring materials:

- **Minimize or eliminate use of non-biodegradable or non-recyclable materials**, such as bubble wrap, foam core, Styrofoam peanuts, and other polystyrene-based materials.
- **Reuse clean, undamaged supplies**, particularly archival-quality materials, for future collection packing.
- **Repurpose or recycle used containers** and other packing materials when possible.

SECTION 6: RECEIVING AND STORAGE ENVIRONMENTS

BEST PRACTICE 6.1 ➢ Designate a consistent location for new acquisitions

Maintain a storage location for new acquisitions that is distinct from processed collections. For some repositories, this may include a separate, climate-controlled, monitored, and/or alarmed storage area only for new materials. For others, this separate location may be a labeled cart, wire rack, or designated area on collections storage shelves. Ensure that materials are stored at least four inches off the floor to prevent damage.

A separate storage area for new acquisitions:

- Ensures security of new, perhaps less-documented materials;
- Enables quick access for retrieval, processing, and preservation/conservation treatments; and
- Mitigates the risk of pests or mold infesting existing collections.

BEST PRACTICE 6.2 ➢ Storage for new acquisitions and accessioned materials should be secure, accessible, and environmentally stable

Most "short-term" storage locations are, at best, "medium-term." Interim storage locations should be **no less secure or stable than permanent or long-term storage**.

Interim storage is not:

- **Personal workspaces or offices:** Collections kept in personal spaces often go undocumented, putting them at risk of loss and damage. Storage in personal offices can encourage individual feelings of ownership over collections and may expose collections to different environmental and security policies than storage spaces.
- **Communal workspaces:** Keeping collections in communal spaces introduces the possibility of confusion and accidental mingling with unrelated materials.
- **A permanent backlog:** Consider how to keep accessions visible and accessible to staff to avoid "out of sight, out of mind" backlogs.

SECTION 7: INITIAL PHYSICAL INSPECTION AND ASSESSMENT OF PHYSICAL MATERIALS

The final stage of the acquisition process involves reviewing all received items. This is an excellent opportunity for **another round of appraisal** as well as a preservation assessment. Consider: Are the contents of the collection as expected? Are items missing, or was more received than planned? Was anything damaged in transport?

BEST PRACTICE 7.1 ➢ Review all received items as quickly as possible after receipt

Careful inspection of new materials should occur as soon as possible after arrival at the repository to:

- Assess the physical condition of the materials and address immediate threats, and
- Ensure that all parts of the expected collection are received.

Place the materials in a location that is consistent, secure, and, ideally, some distance away from other collection materials to avoid cross-contamination.

Any notable discoveries that arise during the initial physical inspection can be recorded in the archival collection management system or the collection file.

Inspect for	Benefits of Inspecting
Insects and mold	● Mitigate health hazards to people ● Stop possible infestation of other holdings ● Prevent further damage to materials
Food remnants, chemicals, broken glass, and other hazards	● Mitigate health hazards to people ● Prevent damage to surrounding materials

Assess for	Benefits of Assessing

Expected content and extent	• Ensure all materials that were packed have arrived • Discover and resolve issues with donor/seller immediately if materials are missing • Conduct (re)appraisal, identifying materials that could be returned to the donor
Restrictions/immediate preservation concerns	• Discover materials needing access restrictions or preservation and conservation work

BEST PRACTICE 7.2 ➤ Assign unique identifiers and track physical location

Once the collection has arrived and has been inspected, track the location of the materials and physically mark the containers indicating to which collection they belong. **A unique identifier should be assigned to the materials as soon as possible upon arrival** at the archival repository to tie all materials from one accession together. This might be an accession number, a collection number, or a temporary intake number. Whichever identifying schema is used should be employed consistently across all collections. Containers should be clearly marked with the identifier, as well as the storage location if needed. *Additional guidance on formulating accession identifiers is in the Accession Record Elements chapter.*

The location of the new materials should be recorded in an archival collection management system, shelf list, or any other method used by the repository for stacks management.

BEST PRACTICE 7.3 ➤ Dispose of or return unwanted items prior to accessioning

Accessioning is an opportunity to confirm that new materials are aligned with your collecting scope. **Avoid expending resources on materials you don't intend to steward long-term** by identifying materials not likely to remain in the collection. Materials that are weeded during inspection or appraised before accessioning is completed do not need to go through a formal deaccessioning workflow; however, that act of removal or disposal must still be documented in the collection file and accession record.

Document the types of materials, quantities, reason for refusal, and the date and method of disposal or disposition. As discussed in Pre-Custodial Considerations, follow any guidelines for returning or destroying materials set forth in legal documents or repository policies.

SECTION 8: TRANSFER, INTAKE, AND ASSESSMENT OF BORN-DIGITAL MATERIALS

The integrity and fixity of digital materials is paramount during the transfer process. File metadata, including create/modify/access dates, can be unintentionally altered and lost during this stage of accessioning, compromising the evidentiary value of the records. For this reason, staff should not move or copy files (and remember to instruct donors and record sources not to move or copy files) without careful planning.

This section does not identify or endorse specific tools, software programs, or hardware due to the likelihood of institutional preferences and the rapid pace of technological change. *Instead, refer to Appendix E. Bibliography and Resources.*

To assess born-digital materials, repositories need the following:

- Quarantined computer environment
- Anti-virus software or virus scanner program
- Write blocker
- File transfer utility that validates checksums

The following may also be needed:

- External media player or reader, such as a CD or DVD player or floppy disk reader
- Computer with ports or external port hub to connect auxiliary devices, such as flash drives, external hard drives, and media players
- Web-recorder or crawler
- Browser-based transfer utility

Transfer and Intake of Born-Digital Materials

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.1 ➢ Select a transfer method suitable for the source and the needs of the content

The technical capabilities of the source and where their content resides will help determine what transfer method is used, such as a Secure File Transfer Protocol (SFTP), browser-based transfer utilities, fetching from cloud storage, or auxiliary devices such as flash storage, external hard drives, or internal hard drives. Content may be on floppy disks, optical discs, and digital tape formats. Also consider file compression, file size limits, and the ability to preserve metadata when selecting a transfer method.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.2 ➤ Generate a file directory and checksum before transfer

Ideally, archivists should capture the state of the digital material in its original environment by generating a file and/or directory listing and checksums. Staff may also wish to use utilities and copy tools that can verify fixity before and after transfer by comparing checksums.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.3 ➤ Collect information on any encryption keys, passwords, and hardware needed to access born-digital materials

Follow up with the source of the materials as soon as possible if materials are inaccessible due to encryption, password, or lack of proper hardware.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.4 ➤ Use a dedicated file transfer utility to move digital materials to digital collections storage

Validate the complete and accurate transfer of files between digital storage locations by using a file transfer utility that compares checksums of source and target files. This ensures that what arrives in digital collections storage is identical to the original target files. A file transfer utility also preserves date timestamps and skips problematic, corrupted files to be dealt with later, rather than terminating the transfer altogether.

Assessment of Born-Digital Materials

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.5 ➤ Assess born-digital materials within a quarantined environment

A non-networked machine, or a quarantine environment, will ensure that accessioned files are isolated in case they are infected with a virus. Using a standalone, non-networked machine designated for digital preservation is advisable; however, a quarantine environment can also be created by disconnecting from the internet via unplugging the cable or turning off Wi-Fi.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.6 ➢ Run a virus scan on born-digital materials

All born-digital materials should be scanned for viruses during the ingest process and before being transferred into interim or permanent digital storage to keep digital archival storage clear of threats. Institutions may choose to rely on digital transfer methods with built-in virus scans.

Open-source and proprietary anti-virus software options are available. Regardless of which software is used, the anti-virus program should be:

- Actively maintained, so that it will recognize new viruses,
- Kept up-to-date with the latest software version, and
- Run in a quarantine environment.

Record in the accession record and/or accessioning documentation the following:

- Date of virus scan
- Software used, including version
- Result of the scan

If viruses are detected, do not proceed with the transfer. Use the anti-virus software to delete or quarantine infected files.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 8.7 ➢ Use a write blocker when interacting with new collections

Write blockers (tools that permit read-only access) allow staff to view and assess the collection without unintentionally overwriting its metadata, such as creation or modified dates.

Stabilization

After accessioning, collection materials may sit in storage for a long duration of time before they are processed or made available to users. Ensuring the materials are stabilized during this interim period is crucial, as it may be months or years before the materials are handled again. *Stabilization*, as used in the Best Practices, refers to the actions that **ensure materials can be reliably located, safely moved, and protected from needless damage**

or deterioration until they receive further attention. These stabilization best practices enable future access and use of the collection material.

SECTION 9: REHOUSING

Accessioning provides the perfect opportunity to assess storage containers for long-term durability, support, and movability. Collections might arrive in sufficiently sturdy containers, especially if sources were given guidance on how to pack their collections or if collections were packed by staff. However, in most cases, **basic rehousing is recommended to ensure collections go into either short- or long-term storage in strong, stable containers** that will support and protect the collections between accessioning and future interventions, and that can be easily identified, tracked, and moved, even if the collection remains unprocessed for some time.

BEST PRACTICE 9.1 ➢ House for stabilization

Stable housing is defined as identifiable, clean, durable containers that hold groups of materials in a way that they are **supported** within the container, **protected** from environmental damage (e.g., dust, light, leaks, temperature fluctuations), and **can be safely moved** without causing damage to either the material or the mover. It's acceptable (and sustainable!) to reuse clean, undamaged supplies, particularly archival-quality materials; however, dirty and damaged containers should be replaced as they can cause damage to the materials and be hazardous to users or other collections.

Consider the following recommendations:

Primary Containers	
Recommendations for Stable Housing	Desired Outcomes/Potential Risks
Intact, securely fitting lid	Keeps the container closed and protects contents. May enable minimal stacking during storage or transport.
Structurally intact and free of rips, dents, or damaged edges or corners, with a strong secure base	Can be safely moved without risking breakage, holds together on the shelf, and protects and supports contents.

Fits securely on repository shelving, without hanging over the edge	Containers fit fully on shelves without hanging over and risking injury to people and materials. Containers fit on shelves compactly, making the most use of available shelving. Containers can be shelved with other collections, without resorting to storage on floors, worksurfaces, or other non-standard storage locations that may result in damage or loss.
Clearly labeled with collection name, unique identifier (accession number or call number), and container unique identifier (box number)	Containers can be identified and tracked.
Free of active mold, insects, pollutants, irritants, and excessive dirt or dust	Longer-term stability, avoid damage to contents and other collections, safe for people to handle.
Within appropriate weight limits for safe handling	Containers can be safely accessed, examined, and moved by people.

Stabilizing Materials Inside Containers	
Recommendations for Stable Housing	Desired Outcomes/Potential Risks
Materials fit snugly in containers without being overfilled (avoid bowing sides or material that can't easily be removed)	Bowed, overpacked containers strain the structural integrity of containers and keep lids from fitting securely. Tightly packed containers make it difficult to remove and replace material without damage.
Underfilled containers are supported either with spacers or by rehousing in appropriately sized containers	Underfilled containers without spacers will cause folders and material to slump or bend. Materials may also slide to one end, making the box unbalanced and potentially dangerous for people removing boxes from shelves.
Remove or safely wrap sharp or potentially harmful items	Protects people from injury and protects adjacent materials from damage.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ House with users in mind

Keep users in mind when rehousing, including researchers, processing staff, and reading room staff. The following recommendations can reduce the amount of work needed to make collections accessible:

- **Materials in each container are easily viewable and accessible to a user** following reading room guidelines (e.g., remove one folder at a time, maintain original order). Separate units for removal are clearly identifiable (e.g., groups of archival materials in folders, separate bound items, or items in smaller enclosures).
- **Fragile materials or special formats should be separated, flagged, or otherwise identified** so they can be presented with safe handling instructions and supportive tools (e.g., book cradles, weights, nitrile gloves, handling assistance).
- Best efforts have been made to **separate or otherwise physically identify and restrict materials containing Personal Identifiable Information (PII)**, information that violates HIPAA or FERPA, and/or materials that are otherwise restricted.
- Material is **clean enough** that the container and folders do not unreasonably shed paper particles, dust, and dirt onto hands and surfaces (some dirt and debris is to be expected).

GOING FURTHER 9.2 ➢ House in archival containers

Optionally, rehouse collections during accessioning into user-friendly, uniform containers that meet stabilization, storage, transit, and ease-of-use needs.

The following additional recommendations for collection storage containers align closer to final storage recommendations.

Primary Containers	
Recommendations for Stable Housing	Desired Outcomes/Potential Risks
Use archival containers only	Clean, consistent storage containers support long-term preservation and enable efficient stacks management.

Separate material by size into appropriately sized archival containers (e.g., manuscript cases, flat oversized boxes, and archival cartons)	Appropriately sized containers prevent jostling, which can damage materials.

Stabilizing Materials Inside Containers	
Recommendations for Stable Housing	Desired Outcomes/Potential Risks
All materials are in folders or secondary enclosures within the box and enclosures are minimally labeled (e.g., box/folder number or title)	Allows a user to distinguish one grouping from another and select and safely remove one folder at a time from a container. Protects material from abrasion and unnecessary handling that may deteriorate and damage materials over time.
Rehouse AV carriers into specific housing made for AV, particularly carriers not in cases, or for film stored in metal or unvented cans	Protects material from abrasion and unnecessary handling that may deteriorate and damage materials over time, and slows deterioration caused by inherent vice.

BEST PRACTICE 9.3 ➤ Maintain original order during rehousing

The process of rehousing materials, for whatever archival purpose it serves, may be one of the first points in the accessioning process that requires a practitioner to intentionally disrupt the original order of an archival collection. **Avoid disrupting the original order where possible, and document any changes to physical order that occur during rehousing.**

Changes to original housing and physical arrangement should be noted in the repository's system of record for collection documentation.

SECTION 10: PRESERVATION

Preservation is a necessary component of archival management as it ensures materials are stabilized and accessible. Accessioning provides an opportunity to address preservation issues and ensures long-term stability of materials. **Assessing the physical condition of materials and addressing immediate preservation concerns should be a high priority**

during accessioning. What is considered an immediate preservation issue will depend on an institution's resources and desired outcomes.

Stick to baseline preservation actions during accessioning, and focus on immediate threats to the collection or repository, such as mold and pests. Flag secondary concerns for later follow-up. Intensive preservation work is time consuming; in most cases, performing additional preservation tasks should only be done if it is necessary to provide a baseline level of access to the materials.

BEST PRACTICE 10.1 ➢ Identify and document special formats and preservation concerns

Identify and document materials that need preservation work. **Label or flag materials with preservation concerns,** including mold, pests, fragile materials, and deteriorating materials requiring specific conservation treatment**. Identify and flag special formats such as audiovisual and born-digital media**. These materials may need special handling instructions or may affect future collection management decisions. Document and track preservation concerns and special formats in a central location, noting preservation concern type and/or media format type along with accession and container identifier, at minimum. Steps may include:

- **Urgent preservation concerns**: Quarantine materials with active mold, contaminants, or other significant preservation issues, and consider reappraising materials or restricting access until the issues can be mitigated.
- **Audiovisual and born-digital media**: Identify carrier types and quantities. Record this information in a standardized way that will support future collection work.

GOING FURTHER 10.2 ➢ Perform minimal preservation interventions

If time and resources allow, consider addressing items requiring basic treatment during accessioning. In addition, separating materials and queuing them up for treatment may save time later. Balance the impact of these actions with the time they require, but consider the following steps:

- Create detailed tracking of preservation concerns.
- Perform minimal physical intervention as time and skill allow to make access safer for users:
  - Clean materials
  - Remove dangerous fasteners

- Separate materials that need extensive treatment and enter them into the repository's preservation queue or workflow.
- Document the original location of materials within the collection by using flags or separation sheets. Note the type and quantity of material removed, date of removal, and current location within the collection, as well as any additional contextual information that may be useful.

GOING FURTHER 10.3 ➢ Separate and reroute audiovisual and born-digital media

Media formats require additional action prior to use. Separating these materials and queuing them for treatment during accessioning can support future collection work. Housing these materials in format-specific enclosures will further protect the materials.

Practices for audiovisual and born-digital materials are institutionally specific. Archivists should decide whether separating audiovisual and born-digital materials is beneficial to their workflows. Steps may include:

- **Separate materials**
    - **Physically separate AV and born-digital media**. House AV and born-digital media in a separate container or group them by format at the end of the collection. When separating material from the collection itself, it is essential to label all materials with the same accession information.
    - **Document the original location of materials within the collection using flags or separation sheets**. Note the type and quantity of material removed, date of removal, and current location within the collection, as well as any additional contextual information that may be useful, such as labels or description on media carriers. Doing this preserves original order and context, while enabling triage of challenging formats.
    - **Restrict access to media originals.** AV and born-digital original materials should not be provided to users. These items must be reformatted, either as physical use copies or digital surrogates, to facilitate access for both internal and external users.
- **Identify and document problematic media**
    - **Audiovisual**: Inspect for the presence of photographic and motion picture film that may pose a risk, such as cellulose nitrate (a fire safety hazard) and

cellulose acetate (prone to vinegar syndrome). Refer to film identification resources for help identifying film formats.

        - Add A-D strips to housing for acetate motion picture film to test for vinegar syndrome and assess the state of deterioration.
        - Nitrate film may need to be segregated or prioritized for reformatting (followed by safe disposal), depending on local fire regulations and institutional capacity to meet the standards prescribed by the National Fire Protection Association's *NFPA 40: Standard for the Storage and Handling of Cellulose Nitrate Film.*
    - **Born-digital**: Identify vulnerable or uncommon formats that may require specialized hardware to access.
- **Reroute materials removed from original locations**
    - Assign unique identifiers to media carriers at the item level. Labeling physical media ensures that items retain an intellectual connection to their collection of origin.
    - Create a container-specific list, noting special formats where present, and/or add materials to a primary inventory of all AV and born-digital media present in collections.
    - Route AV and born-digital media to a preservation or processing workflow.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 10.4 ➢ Use consistent and standardized packaging practices and/or directory structures for digital files

A package contains the digital content and metadata files, such as a file manifest and checksum values. It provides future archivists with the information they need to identify the provenance and context of the collection. You may opt to use a file packaging format to package your digital content for transferring and storing it. Consider the following guidelines:

- Bundle files together in a TAR or ZIP archive in order to encapsulate related files in storage.
- "Bag" or package an accession according to a standardized format. There are several advantages to doing so:

  - Ability to programmatically read files according to a predictable directory structure.
  - Ability to store data and metadata together while maintaining a clear distinction between the two.
  - Ability to retain the original directory structure of an accession.
  - Reduced likelihood of disassociation or loss of context.
  - Simple validation of generated checksums.
  - Interoperability with other institutions' workflows and tools.

More on Bundling Files

Some institutions bundle files together in a TAR or ZIP archive in order to encapsulate related files in storage. One of the motivations for this is compatibility with common types of storage used in digital archives; for example, Amazon Glacier's asynchronous access model makes it desirable to bundle files that comprise a single intellectual object, accession, or collection.

Establish an institutional policy based on storage needs to support the consistent search and retrieval of archived files.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 10.5 ➢ Deposit digital files into designated storage for digital archival materials

Digital files or packages should be deposited into a designated storage area. Keep in mind these guidelines:

- Deposit packages to temporary storage if it will be processed within a reasonable timeframe.
- Deposit packages to preservation storage if processing will be scheduled at a later date or if accessioning is the only treatment the package will receive.

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 10.6 ➢ Keep multiple copies of digital files

The standard for digital preservation storage is to maintain multiple copies. Redundancy ensures that if corruption or failure affects any one copy, the other copies can be used to replace it. Remember the acronym **LOCKSS**: *Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe!* When storing copies, ensure that:

- **Copies are geographically distributed**. Geographic distribution protects from system outages and natural disaster threats.
- **Copies are contained on different storage media types**. Media diversification protects digital content from known vulnerabilities or user error. There are a number of storage options that can be combined, such as hard drives with inbuilt redundancy and recovery, tape storage, and cloud storage. Storage configurations will need to be monitored to ensure data integrity. Staff can automate monitoring, which might entail tracking when files have been changed or moved and checking file fixity through checksums.

Description and Access

SECTION 11: FOUNDATIONAL DESCRIPTION

Archival description is a core part of accessioning and helps establish intellectual control over materials in order to facilitate internal and external use.

BEST PRACTICE 11.1 ➢ Create an accession record for each new collection and accretion as a standard part of the accessioning workflow

Ensure that every new accession—both new collections and accretions to existing collections—receives an accession record.

> As defined in the Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, **an accession record serves several important functions: it safeguards the integrity and authenticity of records, documents receipt and legal custody, facilitates internal communications, and serves as the basis for future descriptive work.**

In conjunction with the collection file, the accession record serves as a summary of information about archival materials, allowing future archivists to answer key questions regarding an acquisition, including its creator and source, the scope and condition of the contents, and the reasons it was acquired. **Recording knowledge about the ways the collection materials were received and accessioned in a consistent and accessible location provides a strong and scalable foundation for institutions of all sizes.**

Consistent practices and an accessible location where the information is stored supports access and use and ensures that staff who have questions about the materials or pursue further work on the collection have all relevant information readily at hand. If information is not documented in an accession record, it is likely that archivists will make decisions about arrangement, description, and access based on assumptions that may be inaccurate.

For guidance on the creation of accession records, refer to the [Accession Record Elements.]

BEST PRACTICE 11.2 ➢ Create accession records promptly after receipt of materials

Strive to accession new materials promptly and limit the amount of time a new collection or accretion is undocumented in your system of record. Implicit in this best practice is an understanding that institutional capacity dictates the meaning of “prompt” in every local context.

Prompt accessioning supports respectful and responsible stewardship, as materials remain vulnerable in their un-accessioned state. Timely accessioning also prevents the accumulation of an unmanageable accessioning backlog.

Archivists often know a great deal about a collection prior to its acquisition, and they learn more about it through the course of accessioning. Information about the archival materials’ content, context, and path to the archives should be easily understood and accessible, rather than living in one person’s memory.

GOING FURTHER 11.3 ➢ Create accession records for legacy materials not yet documented in your system of record

Accession records can be created retroactively for undocumented materials that entered the repository at some point in the past. Retrospective accessioning can be challenging due to a lack of information, such as date of receipt and provenance. There is no single method of retrospective accessioning that will fit every institution’s circumstances. When creating retrospective accession records, use all available information and research, and indicate when information is unavailable or unknown as appropriate. Local decisions about how to format or record some information may be necessary. These local decisions should be aligned with the recommendations of the Best Practices, documented, and followed consistently throughout retrospective accessioning.

External Resource: For guidance on designing a retrospective accessioning project, see Chela Scott Weber’s chapter “Retrospective Accessioning,” in *Archival Accessioning*, edited by Audra Eagle Yun (Society of American Archivists, 2021).

BEST PRACTICE 11.4 ➤ Apply *DACS* principles to archival description created during accessioning

Depending on the institution's metadata guidelines, archivists can utilize a number of metadata schemas with appropriate field elements to assist with archival description.

Describing Archives: A Content Standard (*DACS*) does not specify a set of metadata elements and criteria for accession records. *DACS* acknowledges that archival materials can be described at many different levels and does not make recommendations about the proper level of description or description format. Instead, *DACS* defines "elements that are useful in creating systems for describing archival materials" and encourages archivists to make implementation decisions based on their own judgment and institutional policies and practices.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➤ Strive to create a single-level description when describing materials during accessioning

DACS provides guidance for single-level description, which forms the basis for the elements of the accession record recommended in this document. For example, an institution may choose to create a catalog record with a single-level description of an archival collection or record group. Although often associated with catalog records, single-level descriptions can be incorporated into finding aids as an efficient way of alerting researchers about new collections. Using information from the accession record, the archivist can describe materials at the collection level without including a container list. **Lower-priority materials, such as accessions with access and use restrictions, are potential candidates to receive single-level descriptions.** *For a recommended elements set, refer to* *Accession Record Elements*.

> **External Resource:** Refer to Chapter 1 in *DACS* for additional guidance on required fields based on the level of description. A simple, single-level description that may be applicable to accession records has nine required fields: reference code, name and location of the repository, title, date, extent, name of the creator(s), scope and content, conditions governing access, and languages and scripts of the materials.

GOING FURTHER 11.5 ➤ Create container lists, as well as more in-depth descriptions, as appropriate

Consider more granular description beyond a minimal element set and/or an inventory of the materials, if circumstances allow. Documenting the contents of specific boxes can potentially be sufficient for discovery and access or provide a foundation for future work on the collection. An optimal candidate for this type of additional work is an acquisition that arrives with folder titles rich in proper names or topical keywords or with a donor-supplied inventory. Balance the benefits of this additional work with the time and effort it will require.

BEST PRACTICE 11.6 ➢ Consistently document the presence of special formats in accession records

Make note of the presence of special formats in accession documentation, inventories, and finding aids. Add a location for audiovisual and born-digital materials in the collection as necessary.

This may include:

- Creating format-specific extent notes in the accession records in an archival management system, documenting the quantity and types of each format, and any specific notes, such as the condition of the materials.
- An inclusive narrative extent statement that notes the presence of special formats, including oversized materials and objects.

If materials are separated from the collection and routed to specialized workflows, this should be noted in the accession record. Utilize consistent, standardized terms to describe formats in accession records to assist other archivists and researchers.

External Resource: Two resources to help identify format types for audiovisual and born-digital materials are the California Audiovisual Preservation Project's 2013 Audiovisual Formats: A Guide to Identification and the University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries' Special Collections' *Know your Digital Storage Media*. *Additional resources for identifying and describing formats are found in Appendix E. Bibliography and Resources.*

BEST PRACTICE 11.7 ➢ Strive to reuse existing information when describing an accession

As feasible, **strive to repurpose existing information**, including what is available in the collection file, when describing an accession. Examples include summarizing a donor's or selector's explanation of the collection's research value or adapting a box-level inventory created by the donor as a container list.

Review pre-existing descriptions and inventories with a critical lens. Make adjustments or add contextual information to address inaccurate, harmful, or inappropriate descriptions. Dealer descriptions, for example, are documents created for the purpose of maximal profit and often contain highly laudatory descriptions of the creator.

BEST PRACTICE 11.8 ➢ Operationalize reparative description through accessioning

Approach accretions to existing collections as an opportunity to revisit legacy archival description. As information about new accretions is added, consider re-assessing and editing existing finding aids or other collection description with an eye toward inclusive language and reparative descriptive actions.

External Resource: Resources on inclusive description are available through SAA's Description Section.

SECTION 12: STEPS TOWARD ACCESS

BEST PRACTICE 12.1 ➢ Consider description during accessioning as the foundation of an extensible processing program

Extensible processing, as defined by Daniel Santamaria, "ensures that baseline descriptions of all collections material . . . are available online as quickly as possible, with more detailed descriptive work conducted later based on user demand and assessment of the research value and state of collections. The processing work is **iterative rather than linear and one size fits all.**"

By creating archival description during accessioning, archivists ensure that newly acquired materials receive a baseline of intellectual control, prevent the accumulation of new backlogs, and allow for further descriptive work to be built on solid foundations.

One of the main purposes of accessioning is to provide a pathway for users to access archives. The extent of access—how and to whom this access is given—is subject to the internal policies of the institution or organization. The capacity of each institution to provide minimally described material to researchers may range in limitations, but access can be delivered in different forms. Access can appear in born-digital and digitized materials made discoverable online, in materials pulled for show-and-tell events, in finding aids, or in an internal and/or external request system that allows staff to request a box for processing or digitization, or allows patrons to conduct research in a reading room.

BEST PRACTICE 12.2 ➤ Make descriptive information about accessioned materials available to users to the broadest extent possible

At a minimum, archivists must make the materials in their care discoverable, or intellectually accessible, to the archives' user base, however broad (the general public) or discrete (certain constituencies, stakeholders, clients, etc.) its user base may be. Ideally, an archives should make publicly available a description of its archival materials as promptly as possible, highlighting scope and contents, as well as any restrictions governing access and use.

The Best Practices recognize that the manner in which this description is served to users varies widely depending on the nature of the archives, its mission, and the sensitivity of the materials in its care. For some archives, providing intellectual access may come in the form of publishing accession records or equivalent catalog records online. For others, this may be prohibited or not feasible. Regardless, users who query an archives should expect to receive accurate information as to the existence of materials and their availability for further research.

This is in keeping with guidance from the International Council on Archives (ICA), which states in its "Principles of Access to Archives" that:

> Institutions holding archives make known the existence of the archives, including the existence of closed materials, and disclose the existence of restrictions that affect access to the archives.

GOING FURTHER 12.3 ➤ Regularize "accessioning for access"

Strong archival accessioning practices result in the basic stabilization and description of collection material. Beyond minimal intellectual access, archives must have a physical access policy for accessioned materials. **Ideally, repositories should provide broad access to accessioned collections whenever possible.** In some cases, the work done during accessioning is sufficient to provide users with meaningful access that is safe for both people and collections. Institutions implementing minimal and iterative processing practices may find access-driven accessioning a viable option for making collections available quickly and efficiently.

In some archival contexts and situations, it may be appropriate to limit access to materials until further interventions can be taken. These interventions might include more granular processing, conservation treatments, or working with community or legal experts to inform archival description and access. When considering if access to a collection or portion of a collection should be limited, archivists must review pre-custodial documentation and agreements, the preservation and conservation needs of the physical and/or born-digital materials, and the existence of any cultural, legal, institutional, or donor-imposed restrictions. **The need to fulfill user requests does not outweigh an institution's responsibility to avoid any undue harm that access to its materials might cause to people and collections.**

Successful Accessioning Labor Practices

Successful accessioning depends on skilled workers who are empowered to act as effective stewards for the materials entrusted to the care of their repository. In support of this, it is imperative that individuals with supervisory responsibilities establish a workplace culture that values accessioning as a part of the organization's holistic approach to archival practice. When properly supported, accessioning work offers an environment where individuals can self-manage their work and make decisions informed by their professional judgment and values.

SECTION 13: ACCESSIONING LABOR IS MULTIFACETED

Accessioning is the result of both visible labor, which is frequently physical, and invisible labor, which may be intellectual or emotional. A successful accessioning archivist will display strong competencies in each of these domains:

- **Physical labor** is visible and obvious, even to those with little understanding of the work: collections are packed, received, stabilized, and shelved to facilitate immediate access or further processing. Despite its apparent simplicity, however, the physical work requires a conceptual understanding of provenance and original order, experience safely handling material across a broad spectrum of formats, and the ability to identify and manage conservation concerns.

- **Intellectual labor** is evident throughout appraisal activities and documentation of acquisitions. Critical thinking, autonomy in decision-making, and the ability to manage and prioritize multiple tasks are essential to these core activities.

- **Emotional labor** is the least visible and most difficult to quantify, but it is inherent in the work. Collection donors may be navigating grief, they may be ambivalent about parting with their materials, or they may have complicated feelings about their legacy or how the institution will safeguard it. When appraisal or packing of a collection happens in situ, the accessioning archivist will be stepping into the donor's personal space and must simultaneously be a respectful guest and an efficient professional. “Diplomacy,” “caregiving,” and “soft skills” are blanket terms that gloss over the sometimes sharp edges of emotional situations that require both careful responses and clear strategic decisions.

BEST PRACTICE 13.1 ➤ Treat accessioning positions as skilled, professional labor

Accessioning roles are often conceived as early career positions, either to decrease institutional costs or due to a lack of understanding of the work entailed. Accessioning work is not entry-level work, however. **Specialized skills and professional judgment, developed through education and experience, are required for successful outcomes**.

Consider the following:

- Informed appraisal decisions depend on **knowledge of the institution** and its collecting policies and strategies, as well as an **understanding of how to assess** materials for historical and research value.
- Navigating donor and creator concerns relating to privacy, restrictions and access, and rights issues requires **diplomacy, as well as strong communication and confident negotiation skills.**
- **Legal and financial acumen** are necessary in overseeing the documentation of transfer, deeds of gift, loans, or purchase agreements.
- The logistics of physical and digital transfers, and the corresponding management of real and virtual storage spaces, require **competency in planning and coordination**.
- Documentation and access work hinges on **knowledge of archival description standards and practices**, as well as the **ability to make informed decisions** about levels of description and priorities for processing.
- **Facility with specific technologies** is required to use and administer collection management systems and in the acquisition and transfer of born-digital materials.
- **Project management and supervisory experience** is helpful when coordinating multiple accessioning projects or when undertaking large retrospective accessioning initiatives.

SECTION 14: BEST PRACTICES FOR CREATING ACCESSIONING POSITIONS

BEST PRACTICE 14.1 ➤ Create permanent positions

Accessioning is an ongoing operational practice, and given the skills and expertise required, positions should be permanent, full time, and include benefits. The need for a thorough understanding of archival theory and practice and sound professional judgment should be reflected in the job title, rank, compensation, and opportunities for mobility and promotion. Because of the detrimental impact on both the individual worker and the institution, term positions for accessioning should be avoided.

GOING FURTHER 14.2 ➤ Advocate for positions with guaranteed protections and growth opportunities

It's important to advocate for positions that provide the most support and growth opportunities, not only in terms of professional growth but also economic growth and job protections. For example, union positions provide routine wage increases, health and safety protections, and codify job responsibilities that protect skilled labor. Faculty positions at academic institutions may provide additional job security and opportunities for professional development. These types of positions create a larger pool of potential candidates and allow institutions to better identify individuals with the necessary skills and experience to succeed. They can also improve employee retention, resulting in accessioning work that is continuous and consistent. Understanding an institution's collecting scope, its existing holdings, and its capacity to take in new acquisitions is critical knowledge that takes time to develop. Continuity of staffing leads to stronger relationships with donors and sellers, strengthens institutional memory, and ensures that the work remains aligned with long-term institutional goals.

BEST PRACTICE 14.3 ➤ Clearly define the scope of work in job descriptions

Accessioning touches on many archival workflows. Without clarity on where accessioning begins and ends, a worker's job may suffer from scope creep. Clearly state in the job posting if the position is focused only on accessioning work or if other responsibilities are included, such as reference, supervision, or instruction. Be transparent about the amount of labor that focuses on accessioning work. If accessioning is just one role out of many, identify what percentage of the job is dedicated solely to accessioning, and ground that percentage in realistic assessments of institutional size, staffing levels, and number of acquisitions typically received per year.

BEST PRACTICE 14.4 ➢ Manage expectations for productivity

Establish productivity goals fairly and realistically, in a manner that is informed by the size and diversity of collections, and by other assigned responsibilities, while also providing flexibility in support of a human-centered work culture.

BEST PRACTICE 14.5 ➢ Advocate for the institution's accessioning program

Advocating for staff, resources, and training means documenting resource gaps or needs and tying them to professional and institutional goals. Maintaining statistics that track time spent on various components of the work, such as assessing collections, creating documentation, and physical stabilization activities, can make visible the amount of time and effort that goes into accessioning.

Sharing information about new acquisitions with other staff and institutional stakeholders through team meetings, social media posts, annual reports, or presentations can bring this work to life in ways that numbers don't—this includes providing contextual information on the collection creator, why the collection was acquired, and how it fits within the institution's larger mission or collecting strategy.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ Look outside the box to demonstrate accessioning labor and success to stakeholders

Qualitative metrics go beyond simple data points like the number of collections acquired or the number of linear feet on the shelves. Consider tracking and celebrating adjacent activities supported through accessioning work, such as exhibits, instructional sessions, and reference support, and issues identified for further action, such as preservation, ethical, or legal concerns.

BEST PRACTICE 14.6 ➢ Provide opportunities for professional development and skill enhancement

Accessioning is a human-driven process; thus, investing in staff is fundamental. Accessioning touches on the full lifecycle of collection stewardship, and professional development for accessioning archivists should reflect this. Accessioning archivists should have the opportunity to learn about tasks beyond those exclusive to accessioning, such as preservation and conservation, digital preservation, copyright law, data curation, and subjects related to the repository's collecting areas.

Enhancement opportunities include peer-led professional development support (such as reading groups); free and fee-based classes and webinars; and regular attendance at local, regional, or national conferences. Accessioning archivists and their supervisors should advocate for financial support for learning opportunities whenever possible. Professional development is not just a commitment of funds but a commitment of time: keeping abreast of new developments in the field may require that other duties and responsibilities are occasionally reprioritized.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➤ Encourage contributions to the field

Giving back to the larger professional community through presentations, scholarly publications, and other forums raises the profile of both the individual and the institution. Lessons learned and shared improve the archival community as a whole and contribute to the ongoing development of professional practice. The continued growth of our profession's understanding of accessioning depends on diverse contributions, particularly from practitioners actively engaged in this work.

SECTION 15: PARTNERSHIPS IN ACCESSIONING

While the act of accessioning may be carried out independently, the actions the accessioning archivist takes throughout the process are informed, influenced, or directed by their relationships with many partners. Managing expectations and juggling the competing timelines and priorities of numerous stakeholders is a continual challenge.

BEST PRACTICE 15.1 ➤ Empower the accessioner

When the accessioning archivist has decision-making authority and power equal to their level of responsibility, they will be better positioned to navigate the complex internal and external relationships involved in accessioning. Information sharing, knowledge transfer, and collaboration between all parties is vital, and the accessioning archivist must be supported from all sides—above, below, and in parallel. **Accountability without authority inevitably leads to frustration; however, trust, patience, flexibility, and open communication within and across these relationships will ultimately result in success.**

BEST PRACTICE 15.2 ➤ Define internal and external partnership responsibilities

An institution that defines its accessioning workflows and determines who is responsible for each step in the process has taken a critical step toward positioning its accessioning program for success. The accessioning archivist is positioned at the center of a complex network of partnerships, and each partner must be clear about their role in the process, what they are expected to contribute, and what they expect to receive. Shared accountability for the outcome of accessioning is the responsibility of the entire network.

The following is an example list of the most common—and most crucial—partners. *Appendix C includes a detailed exploration of these partnerships and Appendix D includes a template and model for identifying local partners and examining relationships.*

Internal Partners	External Partners
• Selectors and curators • Legal counsel • Development and outreach • Administration • IT • Preservation and conservation • Reference and public services • Technical services • Stacks managers • Facilities • Records managers • Student workers, interns, and volunteers	• Collection creators and donors • Sellers • Movers and shippers • Vendors • Users • Records subjects

ACCESSION RECORD ELEMENTS

SECTION 16: WHAT IS AN ACCESSION RECORD?

The Society of American Archivists' *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* defines an accession record as "a consistent and normally internal set of data detailing an archives' acquisition, documenting legal and physical transfer, and supporting description." By definition, it is the record of an individual accession that is created and maintained by a collecting institution. Regardless of the format of this record, it consists of a list of specific elements that document critical information about the accession. The accession record is complete when this element list has been filled by the accessioner. Its output serves as the official record of material entering a collection.

An accession record:

- safeguards the integrity and authenticity of archival materials,
- documents receipt and custody,
- facilitates internal communications, and
- serves as the basis for future descriptive work.

> **The accession record is a historical record of receipt that documents the singular moment in time for an acquisition.**

The Role of DACS and Other Standards in the Design of the Accession Record Elements Set

The accession record element set is designed to comply with *DACS* and complement *ISAD(G)*, its international equivalent. It also takes inspiration from the *Canadian Archival Accessioning Information Standard* (*CAAIS*). These recognized content standards inform elements of the accession record that are either required or optional and advise how to indicate when information is unknown. *See Appendix A for a crosswalk between the accession record elements and their relation to* DACS*,* ISAD(G)*, and* CAAIS*.*

This element set is intended to guide archival repositories to make the majority of information in accession records reusable and quickly discoverable, per *DACS*, *ISAD(G)*, and *CAAIS* principles, but this is at the discretion of the repository and its mission.

Additionally, in adherence to *DACS* Principle 3 indicating that descriptive rules apply to all archival materials, regardless of format, carrier type, content, or genre, the accession record element set is informed by standards and best practices for the acquisition and description of born-digital content, including PREMIS, OAIS, and TRAC.

The accession record's required element set reflects three specific attributes of *DACS*:

1. **These rules are output neutral**, meaning that rules for description apply to accession records as much as they apply to any other forms of archival description.
2. The accession record must at least follow the **single-level minimum element set**.
3. The accession record elements are **system-agnostic** and can be expressed in any tool or system.

DACS Principle 6 for archival description encourages archivists to "document and make discoverable the actions they take on records." This element set records interventions like appraisal and transfer and documents pre-custodial information about archival materials like provenance and chain of custody.

BEST PRACTICE 16.1 ➢ Identify who is responsible for creation of the accession record

These best practices do not prescribe *who* in a repository should be responsible for collecting and recording the various elements of an accession record. Determining who is responsible for each part of the record, who creates it, and how all stakeholders know that an accession record has been completed is an important internal workflow decision that must be determined, documented, and communicated clearly.

BEST PRACTICE 16.2 ➢ Avoid editing existing accession records

An accession record documents a specific moment in time. It should reflect the full extent of what is known about the materials at the time of accessioning. Avoid making changes that alter the original details of the acquisition. Consider legacy accession records products of their own times and practices; avoid updating these records unless there is a compelling use case to do so.

Any edits should be made in a consistent manner so that an audit trail is available. If an accession record is edited at a later date, the date, purpose, and author of the edit should be recorded. Archivists pursuing systems migrations or data normalization projects might consider updating existing accession records for the sake of data integrity and internal usability.

BEST PRACTICE 16.3 ➤ Be transparent about unknown information

As stated in Principle 5 of *DACS*, **"Archival description must be clear about what archivists know, what they don't know, and how they know it."** Transparently state circumstances in which information cannot be ascertained or is unknowable. Legacy acquisitions often lack documentation; aim to embrace these knowledge gaps rather than hiding them. This assists the next person who needs information about the accession. Using "unknown" is not recommended if information is pending or will be determined later.

SECTION 17: ELEMENTS OF AN ACCESSION RECORD

The following elements set was developed through research of adjacent content standards (refer to *Appendix A. Accession Record Elements Crosswalk*) and structured discussions within the National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group. The result attempts to balance clear and actionable guidelines with the flexibility necessary for a variety of use cases in local practice.

Required elements ensure a complete accession record. Optional elements can be used when relevant to the accession at-hand, to be determined at a local level. These elements are explained in more detail below.

Required Elements

1. Name and Location of Repository
2. Date Accessioned
3. Accession Identifier
4. Title
5. Material Date(s)
6. Extent(s) Retained
7. Creator(s) of Materials
8. Scope and Content of Materials
9. Conditions Governing Access
10. Conditions Governing Use
11. Languages and Scripts of Materials

Optional Elements

REQUIRED ELEMENT 1 ➢ Name and Location of Repository

This element identifies the name and location of the repository that holds the materials being accessioned.

Guidelines:

- This information is typically kept in an information system and universally applied to all records therein; it usually does not need to be explicitly recorded, but any output of the record should be sure to include this element.

***DACS* element:** *2.2, Name and Location of Repository*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 2 ➢ Date Accessioned

This element documents the date the accession record was either created or completed.

Guidelines:

- Individual institutional practices will determine which date your institution will use for Date Accessioned (e.g., date accessioning commenced, date accessioning completed). **Pick one approach and consistently apply this date type in the Date Accessioned element to all accession records.**
- The date accessioned can be recorded via the timestamp the accession record was created when using databases.

- The date the accession record was created or completed may not be the same as the date the collection was *acquired*. The date the collection was *acquired* should be put into the Immediate Source of Acquisition element and/or the Date Acquired element.

***DACS* element:** *8.1, Description Control*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 3 ➤ Accession Identifier

This element assigns a unique identifier that distinguishes it from other accessions.

The process for designing any identifier should be guided by core information management principles but may be designed in whatever way works best for the needs of the repository. Many repositories already use an accession identifier scheme; **remain consistent with what is already in place** unless there is a compelling reason to change it. Be sure that any change is well documented and public.

Guidelines:

- **Keep accession identifiers simple.** The purpose of an accession identifier is to mark new acquisitions as **distinct entities** and associate them with information kept in the accession record. Avoid using accession identifiers to convey information about the accession's content, formats, or collecting area.
- Make accession identifiers **human-readable**. They should convey clear and unique information to staff and researchers at first glance.
- Make accession identifiers **machine-parsable.** For example, use full years (2023 instead of 23) and pad incrementing numbers with leading zeroes (2023-00001 instead of 2023-1).
- **Avoid including information in your identifier that may change**, such as storage location, access restrictions, handling concerns, processing status, or legal status.
- **Do not reassign or delete identifiers that have been used** or referenced by internal staff or the external public. An accession record is documentation of the acquisition of materials by an archival repository. Deaccessioning, loss, transfer, or other activities that affect the subsequent custody or status of an accession do not change the facts of that original record.
- **Consider these possible parts of an accession identifier:**

    - **Accession year.** This may be the fiscal year, the calendar year, the academic year, or any other clearly—and publicly—documented scheme.
    - **Incrementing integer.**
        - Each should be unique.
        - It is not necessary for these numbers to be in the same order as materials were acquired (chronologically), since this information can be determined as part of the accession date.
        - Do not append letters or decimals to the incrementing integer to inter-file materials—this is not necessary and invites mistakes.
        - To avoid numbering mistakes, consider implementing software that performs validation and/or automatically increments accession identifiers.
    - **Repository code.** Particularly within institutions with more than one repository, it can be useful to understand which repository materials belong to.

***DACS* element:** *2.1, Reference Code*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 4 ➢ Title

This element is an initial descriptive phrase by which an accession is identified.

Guidelines:

- Create *DACS*-compliant titles for the accession at-hand.
- Be specific enough to identify the material in the accession.
- For accretions to existing collections, the accession title may be different than the collection title. This helps distinguish different accretions to the same collection.

***DACS* element:** *2.3, Title*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 5 ➢ Material Date(s)

This element records the date(s) of the materials within an accession.

Guidelines:

- Date(s) of materials can often be determined by a cursory survey of transferred materials and by referencing information provided during pre-custodial conversations with creators.
- **Do not leave the date field empty** in the expectation that this will be determined in the future or to produce an "undated" value.
- Estimated date ranges are acceptable and can be viewed as a foundational step in an iterative or extensible mindset.

***DACS* element:** *2.4, Date*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 6 ➢ Extent(s) Retained

This element records the extent and physical nature of the materials **at the end of all accessioning activities.** Recording the extent retained supports long-term collections management practices.

Guidelines:

- **Standardize description using common units** (e.g., linear feet, gigabytes, number of containers). Consistency aids in reporting and aggregation.
- This element is repeatable. **Consider creating multiple extent statements for the accession.** Optionally record quantities of specific formats in separate extent statements (e.g., audiocassettes, digital files, maps, photographs).
- If different, optionally record the extent of the materials received using the Extent(s) Received element.
- Explain appraisal actions that account for discrepancies in the extent received and retained using the Appraisal Decisions element.

***DACS* element:** *2.5, Extent*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 7 ➢ Creator(s) of Materials

This element records the corporate bodies, persons, and families associated with the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the materials being accessioned so that they might be appropriately documented and used to create access points by which users can search for and retrieve descriptive records.

Guidelines:

- The principle of provenance requires that materials be organized according to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection.
- If the creator is unknown, record that information.

***DACS* element:** *2.6, Name of Creator(s)*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 8 ➢ Scope and Content of Materials

This element provides initial and high-level description for the accession.

Guidelines:

- Building on the initial descriptive statement made in the title, this element should also provide a high-level summary of what is known about the accession.
- This element provides a foundation for future description. Refer to documentation in the collection file, and repurpose information learned through the acquisition process.
- This element allows for additional initial discovery, which is especially critical for unprocessed accessions.

***DACS* element:** *3.1, Scope and Content*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 9 ➢ Conditions Governing Access

This element documents decisions from the legal agreement regarding which parts, if any, of the accession may be restricted and to phrase those decisions in terms that will be legible to staff and to a typical researcher.

Guidelines:

- This information should be as concrete, specific, and explicit as possible to help avoid errors in providing access to researchers.
- If there are no restrictions, state that fact.

***DACS* element:** *DACS 4.1, Conditions Governing Access*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 10 ➢ Conditions Governing Use

This element documents decisions made in the legal agreement regarding the retention or transfer of intellectual property and phrases those decisions in terms that will be legible to staff and to a typical researcher.

Guidelines:

- If there are no restrictions, state that fact.
- If the existence of such conditions is unknown, record this.

***DACS* element:** *4.4, Conditions Governing Reproduction and Use*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 11 ➢ Languages and Scripts of Materials

This element identifies the language(s) and script(s) present in the materials being accessioned.

Guidelines:

- This information should come from a preliminary review of the material or the collection file. It typically will not be comprehensive.
- When possible, leverage tools already used to analyze an accession to obtain some of this information.

***DACS* element:** *4.5, Language and Scripts of the Material*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 12 ➢ Immediate Source of Acquisition

This element is used to document the source of acquisition, the date of acquisition, and the method of acquisition.

Guidelines:

- Identify the **source** of the acquisition (along with their contact information), the exact or estimated **date** that materials came into the custody of the repository, and the **method** of acquisition (e.g., gift, purchase, transfer).
- The person/persons (including specific individual(s) within an organization) responsible for transferring materials to the archival repository may or may not be the same person/entity as the creator.

- If the source, date, and/or method of acquisition is unknown, record that information clearly (e.g., "The provenance of this collection is unknown.").

***DACS* element:** *5.2, Immediate Source of Acquisition*

REQUIRED ELEMENT 13 (when relevant) ➢ Rights Statements for Archival Description

This element documents the conditions under which the archival description itself is available for use and reuse.

Guidelines:

- Repositories should establish a consistent policy about the rights granted.
- When accession information will not be discoverable by the public, it is not necessary to determine how and whether others can reuse this description. Make a repository-wide determination of this choice and for these records so that this decision can apply to future reuse.

***DACS* element:** *8.2, Rights Statements for Archival Description*

OPTIONAL ELEMENT 14 ➢ Date Acquired

This element documents the date the materials were acquired by the repository.

Guidelines:

- Use a **machine-readable** date of acquisition as a companion to the [Immediate Source of Acquisition](#) element.
- Adopt a consistent local practice on how the date used for this element is determined, such as date of agreement or transfer of physical custody.
- This element is particularly useful for retrospective accessioning of legacy materials.

***DACS* element:** 5.2.3, *Immediate Source of Acquisition*

OPTIONAL ELEMENT 15 ➢ Extent(s) Received

This element records the extent and physical nature of the materials **as received by the repository**. Recording the extent transferred serves as evidence of the acquisition.

Guidelines:

- **Standardize description using common units** (e.g., linear feet, gigabytes, number of containers). Consistency aids in reporting and aggregation.
- This element is repeatable. **Consider creating multiple extent statements for the accession.** Optionally record quantities of specific formats in separate extent statements (e.g., audiocassettes, digital files, maps, photographs).
- Record the extent of the materials retained at the end of accessioning using the Extent(s) Retained element.
- Consider this element as a complement to acquisition documentation stored in the collection file.

***DACS* element:** *2.5, Extent*

OPTIONAL ELEMENT 16 ➢ Condition Description

This element records the condition of the materials at the point of accession; notes technical requirements or specific software/hardware required to access the materials; and documents additional stabilization actions or significant conservation concerns that will need to be addressed.

Guidelines:

- This information should come from a preliminary review of the material.
- Information on the physical nature of the materials and specific formats contained within the accession are recorded in the Extent(s) Retained element.

***DACS* element:** *4.2, Physical Access; 4.3 Technical Access*

OPTIONAL ELEMENT 17 ➢ Custodial History

This element documents changes of ownership or custody of the materials being accessioned, from the time it left the possession of the creator until it was acquired by the repository. Documenting custodial history ensures the materials' authenticity and integrity.

Guidelines:

- Record any known impact of these transfers on the materials themselves, such as materials being removed from the collection.
- Record contextual information about transfers in custody that is significant to the user's understanding of the materials.

***DACS* element:** *5.1, Custodial History*

OPTIONAL ELEMENT 18 ➢ Appraisal Decisions

This element records the rationale for appraisal decisions and disposition actions.

Guidelines:

- Information regarding appraisal decisions will likely be held within the collection file. Consider recording this information within the accession record as well. Adopt a consistent institutional practice.
- Appraisal decisions may document the following:
    - **The decision to accept materials into the repository and the reasons for that decision.** Facilitate internal communication and subsequent resource description by documenting the reasons why materials were brought into the repository. Document the evidentiary or symbolic value of an accession or how it fits into the repository's collecting landscape.
    - Institutional/political considerations that contributed to acquiring a collection that might not otherwise have been accepted under normal criteria.
    - **The decision to *not* accept materials** into the repository and the reasons for that decision. Record **pre-custodial appraisal decisions** for materials offered to the repository but not accepted as part of the acquisition.
    - **The identification of materials that are separated or sampled**, along with the rationale for this decision. Generally speaking, materials that are appraised and separated from the collection at the time of accessioning do not need to be held to the same documentary (and process) standards for deaccessioning as accessioned materials do. For this reason, review materials shortly after transfer to make choices about their retention.

- **Policy information.** Information about rules defined by a retention schedule or collection development policy that affected the retention or disposition of the records in this accession. Provide enough information about this policy (including date referenced) to enable access by staff and researchers in the future.

***DACS* element:** *5.3, Appraisal, Destruction and Scheduling Information*

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Accession Record Elements Crosswalk

An asterisk * indicates when an element is required by that particular standard or system (For *DACS*, this refers to the minimum required elements for single-level description).

Accession Record Element	*DACS* Element	*ISAD(G)* Element	*CAAIS* Element
1. Name and Location of Repository*	Name and Location of Repository (2.2)*	Reference code(s) (3.1.1)	Repository (1.1)
2. Date Accessioned*	Description Control (8.1)	Date(s) of descriptions (3.7.3)	Event Date (5.1)*
3. Accession Identifier*	Reference Code (2.1)*	Reference code(s) (3.1.1)	Identifiers (1.2)*
4. Title*	Title (2.3)*	Title (3.1.2)	Accession Title (1.3)
5. Material Date(s)*	Date (2.4)*	Date(s) (3.1.3)	Date of Materials (3.1)*
6. Extent(s) Retained*	Extent (2.5)*	Extent and medium of the unit of description (3.1.5)	Extent Statement (3.2)*
7. Creator(s) of Materials *	Name of Creator(s) (2.6)*	Name of creator(s) (3.2.1)	Source of Material (2.1)
8. Scope and Content of Materials*	Scope and Content (3.1)*	Scope and content (3.3.1)	Preliminary Scope and Content (3.3)
9. Conditions Governing Access*	Conditions Governing Access (4.1)*	Conditions governing access (3.4.1)	Rights (4.2)

Accession Record Element	*DACS* Element	*ISAD(G)* Element	*CAAIS* Element
10. Conditions Governing Use*	Conditions Governing Reproduction and Use (4.4)	Conditions governing reproduction (3.4.2)	Rights (4.2)
11. Languages and Scripts of Materials*	Languages and Scripts of the Material (4.5)*	Language/scripts of material (3.4.3)	Language of Material (3.4)
12. Immediate Source of Acquisition*	Immediate Source of Acquisition (5.2)	Immediate source of acquisition or transfer (3.2.4)	Source of Material (2.1)*
13. Rights Statements for Archival Description*	Rights Statements for Archival Description (8.2)*		
14. Date Acquired	Immediate Source of Acquisition (5.2.3)	Immediate source acquisition or transfer (3.2.4)	Event Date (5.1)
15. Extent(s) Received	Extent (2.5)*	Extent and medium of the unit of description (3.1.5)	Extent Statement (3.2)*
16. Condition Description	Physical Access (4.2); Technical Access (4.3)	Physical characteristics and technical requirements (3.4.4)	Preservation Management Requirements (4.3)
17. Custodial History	Custodial History (5.1)	Archival history (3.2.3)	Preliminary Custodial History (2.2)
18. Appraisal Decisions	Appraisal, Destruction and Scheduling Information (5.3)	Appraisal, destruction and scheduling information (3.3.2)	Appraisal (4.4)

Appendix B. Best Practices At-a-Glance

This appendix consists of the compiled best practice recommendations in an abbreviated format that can be used as a pocket guide to accessioning. Please refer to the full text for each of the recommendations for explanations and more detailed guidance.

Section 1: Accessioning Workflow

BEST PRACTICE 1.1 ➢ Create and use a system to track accessioning work

GOING FURTHER 1.2 ➢ Systematically track accessioning labor and capacity

Section 2: The Collections File

BEST PRACTICE 2.1 ➢ Compile accessioning documentation and information in the collection file

Section 3: Selection and Appraisal

BEST PRACTICE 3.1 ➢ Involve accessioning staff early in the acquisition process

BEST PRACTICE 3.2 ➢ Document collections before acquisition or packing

BEST PRACTICE 3.3 ➢ Solicit source-provided description of potential acquisitions

BEST PRACTICE 3.4 ➢ Approach conversations about a source's care of materials and personal digital practices with sensitivity

BEST PRACTICE 3.5 ➢ Create a plan to treat culturally sensitive materials with culturally responsive care

Section 4: Legal Agreement

BEST PRACTICE 4.1 ➢ Be clear and transparent in legal agreements about what will happen to materials after transfer

BEST PRACTICE 4.2 ➢ Consider the expertise and insights of staff responsible for the entire archival lifecycle during the negotiation process

BEST PRACTICE 4.3 ➢ Negotiate and execute a legal agreement before materials are physically transferred to the custody of an archives

BEST PRACTICE 4.4 ➤ Clearly identify restrictions

BEST PRACTICE 4.5 ➤ Clearly define intellectual property rights

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➤ Consider alternative permissions agreements

BEST PRACTICE 4.6 ➤ Advocate for reproduction and usage rights for the institution to protect and enable future work

BEST PRACTICE 4.7 ➤ Establish a policy for materials transferred without an agreement

BEST PRACTICE 4.8 ➤ Have a deaccession plan

BORN-DIGITAL
BEST PRACTICE 4.9 ➤ Include born-digital materials in legal agreements

BEST PRACTICE 4.10 ➤ Establish a policy for accessioning collections on deposit

BEST PRACTICE 4.11 ➤ Clearly document shared stewardship arrangements

Section 5: Packing and Intake of Physical Collections

BEST PRACTICE 5.1 ➤ Pack collections in situ whenever possible

BEST PRACTICE 5.2 ➤ Pack only what is being acquired and appraise again while packing, if needed

BEST PRACTICE 5.3 ➤ Pack collections for safe transport

BEST PRACTICE 5.4 ➤ Reuse, recycle, and repurpose packing materials

Section 6: Receiving and Storage Environments

BEST PRACTICE 6.1 ➤ Designate a consistent location for new acquisitions

BEST PRACTICE 6.2 ➤ Storage for new acquisitions and accessioned materials should be secure, accessible, and environmentally stable

Section 7: Initial Physical Inspection and Assessment of Physical Materials

BEST PRACTICE 7.1 ➤ Review all received items as quickly as possible after receipt

BEST PRACTICE 7.2 ➤ Assign unique identifiers and track physical location

BEST PRACTICE 7.3 ➤ Dispose of or return unwanted items prior to accessioning

Section 8: Transfer, Intake, and Assessment of Born-Digital Materials

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.1 ➤ Select a transfer method suitable for the source and the needs of the content

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.2 ➤ Generate a file directory and checksum before transfer

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.3 ➤ Collect information on any encryption keys, passwords, and hardware needed to access born-digital materials

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.4 ➤ Use a dedicated file transfer utility to move digital materials to digital collections storage

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.5 ➤ Assess born-digital materials within a quarantined environment

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.6 ➤ Run a virus scan on born-digital materials

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 8.7 ➤ Use a write blocker when interacting with new collections

Section 9: Rehousing

BEST PRACTICE 9.1 ➤ House for stabilization

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ House with users in mind

GOING FURTHER 9.2 ➢ House in archival containers

BEST PRACTICE 9.3 ➢ Maintain original order during rehousing

Section 10: Preservation

BEST PRACTICE 10.1 ➢ Identify and document special formats and preservation concerns

GOING FURTHER 10.2 ➢ Perform minimal preservation interventions

GOING FURTHER 10.3 ➢ Separate and reroute audiovisual and born-digital media

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 10.4 ➢ Use consistent and standardized packaging practices and/or directory structures for digital files

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 10.5 ➢ Deposit digital files into designated storage for digital archival materials

BORN-DIGITAL BEST PRACTICE 10.6 ➢ Keep multiple copies of digital files

Section 11: Foundational Description

BEST PRACTICE 11.1 ➢ Create an accession record for each new collection and accretion as a standard part of the accessioning workflow

BEST PRACTICE 11.2 ➢ Create accession records promptly after receipt of materials

GOING FURTHER 11.3 ➢ Create accession records for legacy materials not yet documented in your system of record

BEST PRACTICE 11.4 ➢ Apply *DACS* principles to archival description created during accessioning

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ Strive to create a single-level description when describing materials during accessioning

GOING FURTHER 11.5 ➢ Create container lists, as well as more in-depth descriptions, as appropriate

BEST PRACTICE 11.6 ➢ Consistently document the presence of special formats in accession records

BEST PRACTICE 11.7 ➢ Strive to reuse existing information when describing an accession

BEST PRACTICE 11.8 ➢ Operationalize reparative description through accessioning

Section 12: Steps Toward Access

BEST PRACTICE 12.1 ➢ Consider description during accessioning as the foundation of an extensible processing program

BEST PRACTICE 12.2 ➢ Make descriptive information about accessioned materials available to users to the broadest extent possible

GOING FURTHER 12.3 ➢ Regularize "accessioning for access"

Section 13: Accessioning Labor Is Multifaceted

BEST PRACTICE 13.1 ➢ Treat accessioning positions as skilled, professional labor

Section 14: Best Practices for Creating Accessioning Positions

BEST PRACTICE 14.1 ➢ Create permanent positions

GOING FURTHER 14.2 ➢ Advocate for positions with guaranteed protections and growth opportunities

BEST PRACTICE 14.3 ➢ Clearly define the scope of work in job descriptions

BEST PRACTICE 14.4 ➢ Manage expectations for productivity

BEST PRACTICE 14.5 ➢ Advocate for the institution's accessioning program

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ Look outside the box to demonstrate accessioning labor and success to stakeholders

BEST PRACTICE 14.6 ➢ Provide opportunities for professional development and skill enhancement

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ➢ Encourage contributions to the field

Section 15: Partnerships in Accessioning

BEST PRACTICE 15.1 ➢ Empower the accessioner

BEST PRACTICE 15.2 ➢ Define internal and external partnership responsibilities

Section 16: What Is an Accession Record?

BEST PRACTICE 16.1 ➢ Identify who is responsible for creation of the accession record

BEST PRACTICE 16.2 ➢ Avoid editing existing accession records

BEST PRACTICE 16.3 ➢ Be transparent about unknown information

Appendix C. Partnerships in Accessioning

INTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

Selectors and curators: In addition to identifying and pursuing collections of interest, selectors and curators are responsible for transmitting insights discovered in conversations with collection sources. As key partners in the process, they may be candidates for full(er) instruction on accessioning; at minimum, their professional networks and their relationships with collection sources and researchers may be tied directly to the availability of acquisitions. Clear, open, and thorough communication between the selector and accessioning archivist throughout the acquisition process determines how effectively the "product" of accessioning meets the needs and expectations of all parties.

Legal counsel: Institutions generally have an individual or team whose responsibility it is to protect the legal interests of the collecting institution. Enlisting their services to navigate rights and restriction requests and to facilitate transfer of legal custody of materials is a natural fit. Externally, lawyers may represent donors or their estate and may participate in the completion of the deed of gift and other legal instruments related to the transfer of custody.

Development and outreach: Development and outreach staff are likely connected to existing and past collections donors and may have a sustained interest in pursuing future gifts. They may also be involved with courting potential new donors. New donors frequently have questions about what will happen to the materials they donate; a relationship with the development team can provide a window into the mechanics of the accessioning process, leading to a shared understanding of what is possible—and what is realistic—for all parties from the outset. Partnering with the outreach team to announce new acquisitions can also lead to promotion of the collection, marketing initiatives, and other donor-cultivation activities.

Administration: Management and leadership may have varying levels of knowledge about and understanding of accessioning work. The more administrators understand the time, skills, and resources required for effective and efficient accessioning, the more they can support the needs of the program.

IT: Whether supporting content and collection management systems, maintaining servers, or overseeing processes for file transfer, ingest, or asset management, accessioning work is highly dependent on an adequate and responsive technology infrastructure. Partnering with IT colleagues to build and maintain an environment that supports this work while also staying compliant with the institution's security and overall IT policies, procedures, and capacities allows both sides to operate with confidence.

Preservation and conservation: Whether internally or externally, the accessioning archivist needs a strong relationship with a partner who can assist in stabilizing, treating, and otherwise addressing condition concerns encountered during accessioning. Internal partners may want to engage in treatment with some urgency to prevent further damage to incoming acquisitions and the people, spaces, and collections in proximity. Collecting institutions without in-house support should have a list of external vendors or local conservation resources on hand.

Reference and public services: If a repository allows access to accessioned collections, the accessioning archivist will have the most knowledge about the collection's content and should be considered a valuable resource in facilitating collection use by researchers. Reference archivists can support the work of accessioning archivists by relaying information encountered during researcher use of the accessioned materials—often to the benefit of enhancing or correcting provisional information compiled during accessioning.

Technical services: Processing archivists, digital archivists, catalogers, and other allied colleagues are partners in many aspects of accessioning work, and they should be part of a regular continuum of shared knowledge and support.

Stacks managers: Accessioning generates new materials for collections management personnel to manage. Prior notification to and communications with those involved in stacks maintenance is a necessary courtesy, and discussions relating to space constraints or upcoming shelving needs are also beneficial to both staff and collections.

Facilities: Facilities and operations staff may be tasked with establishing storage or work spaces, moving materials or furniture, maintaining climate controls, cleaning, and other physical tasks necessary to support accessioning work.

Records managers: In addition to ensuring legally compliant retention of records, staff fulfilling records management responsibilities can be effective partners in identifying administratively and historically significant records for long-term preservation. Records managers may have the authority to establish expectations with records creators for how records are housed and described for deposit into offsite records storage or transfer to an archival repository. Clarifying accessioning workflows with records managers can facilitate the receipt of archival materials in appropriate containers and with reusable descriptive metadata, saving the accessioning archivist labor during the intake and stabilization phases of accessioning.

Student workers, interns, and volunteers: The time-consuming work of provisional treatment, housing, labeling, and inventorying often falls on casual workers such as students, interns, and volunteers. Participation in accessioning tasks allows them an opportunity to interact closely with materials of interest while also deepening their overall experience in archives. Student workers and interns in particular can be excellent collaborators in building practical training manuals and documentation, but their behind-the-scenes efforts should be acknowledged through skills development, learning outcomes, opportunities to present on their work, and acknowledgment in finding aids or other work products. Students or volunteers are not a replacement for paid professional and paraprofessional staff. Internships should be compensated through course credit or a stipend. Unpaid internships are a barrier to achieving equity in the workplace and are highly discouraged.

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIPS

Collection creators and donors: Perhaps the partners most closely connected to the materials, creators and donors are valuable information resources about their collections. Intake interviews and follow-up discussions can both clarify an acquisition's context and illuminate its content. Creator, donor, and accessioning archivist—as well as the collection materials—all benefit from an open exchange of information about both the materials and the process of making them accessible to researchers.

Sellers: Accessioning archivists may work directly with sellers to acquire collection materials via purchase on behalf of a curator or selector. Sellers may have additional contextual knowledge about their collections that can support the accessioning archivist's work.

Movers and shippers: Careful packing and delivery ensures collection materials are received in the best possible condition. Additionally, movers and shippers may interact directly with collection donors or sellers, and thus unofficially represent the institution during the packing and shipping process.

Vendors: An accessioning archivist or their parent archival unit may work with external vendors to buy software, applications, or hardware to facilitate processing born-digital material, digital preservation, and discovery.

Users: All accessioning work is ultimately for the purpose of providing end users with access to materials. They can enhance accessioning work by providing additional information, such as notes on content or feedback on the ease of use of an accessioned collection.

Records subjects: While the accessioning archivist will likely never interact with the subjects of the collections they accession, gratitude for their contributions to the historical record can be expressed through authentic and considerate representation in archival description and promotional activities.

Appendix D. Templates

SAMPLE ACCESSIONING WORKFLOW CHECKLIST

The following sample checklist, created by the University of Santa Cruz Special Collections & Archives (SCA), should not be considered prescriptive and is provided as *one* example of what a complete accessioning workflow could look like in practice. Not all elements of this example workflow will work for all institutions. Use the Best Practices guidelines to create a checklist that fits your environment.

Assess operational impact and capacity

For large/impactful collections only.

- ☐ Make a copy of and fill out the Operational Impact Estimator spreadsheet in OCLC's Total Cost of Stewardship tool suite.
- ☐ Meet with relevant staff to assess acquisition in relation to processing priorities, digital project timelines, and other goals and commitments of SCA.

Transfer records and gain administrative and physical control

- ☐ Gift or transfer paperwork completed
- ☐ Accession record created in ArchivesSpace (ideally within 2 weeks of arrival).

Required fields:

- Title
- Identifier
- Accession Date
- Content Description
- Provenance
- Retention Rule (if applicable)
- Acquisition Type
- Resource Type
- Access Restrictions Note (if applicable)
- Use Restrictions Note (if applicable)
- Dates
- Extents
- Agents
- Related Accessions (if applicable)
- Instance(s) (including location)
- Collection Management: Processing Status

- ☐ Agreement Signed OR Acknowledgment Sent event record created
- ☐ Collection boxed, numbered, and shelved

If it includes born digital:

- ☐ Files transferred to library server
- ☐ Capture event record created
- ☐ High-level post-transfer appraisal complete (if applicable)
- ☐ Extent recorded in gigabytes
- ☐ Digital Object Instance created (including location)
- ☐ Fixity report set up (if not prioritized for immediate processing)
- ☐ Carriers returned to collection

If it includes analog AV:

- ☐ Conduct item-level appraisal if not already completed
- ☐ Inventory AV at item-level in SCA Analog AV Log

Gain intellectual control and prepare for access

See Creating Resource Records in the Accessioning and Processing Manual for details.

- ☐ Resource record created. Required fields:
  - Title
  - Identifier
  - Level of Description
  - Resource Type
  - Language
  - Restrictions?
  - Dates
  - Extents
  - Agents
  - Subjects
  - Finding Aid Data: Finding Aid Status
  - Related Accession(s)
  - Collection Management: Processing Status
  - Notes:
    - Physical Location (if applicable)
    - Conditions Governing Access

    - Conditions Governing Use
    - Preferred Citation
    - Immediate Source of Acquisition
    - Scope and Contents
    - Processing Information

- [ ] Catalog record requested (ideally within 4 weeks of arrival)
- [ ] Catalog record created
- [ ] Cataloged event record created

If the collection is two linear feet or smaller, or if materials are uniform in format or arrangement and can be adequately described in a catalog record, processing stops here.

PRE-ACQUISITION COLLECTION SURVEY

Once contact has been made with a potential donor or seller, and research has been conducted to establish the context of the materials, it is recommended to conduct a survey.

Site visits are an exercise in collection development, donor relations, and risk assessment that can help archivists to better steward their institutions' resources. While it may appear more cost-effective to accept a collection without a site visit, costs for transport, review, rehousing, and disposition and/or return of unwanted materials can be significant.

A site visit may not always be possible, particularly if the collection is not held near the archival repository. A remote site visit, such as one conducted via videoconferencing or a pre-recorded video, can be a compromise.

- Make sure to ask for a view of every area where collections are stored and a look into a sampling of boxes or cabinets.
- Request a closer look at anything that looks like a potential issue.

Before an Onsite Survey

- [ ] Ask about logistics:
    1. Who you will be meeting with and their relationship to the collection
    2. How to access the building and where to park
    3. How you can contact the donor(s) if you need to reschedule (and vice versa)
- [ ] Review policies for your institution:
    1. Does your institution provide a vehicle or vehicle rental for staff to use? Are any certifications or permissions required ahead of time?
    2. What travel paperwork does your institution require in advance?
    3. Is use of a personal vehicle permitted? Are reimbursements for mileage or fuel provided?
    4. Are there potential liability issues if you must transport a passenger?
- [ ] Plan what to bring:
    - [ ] Note-taking materials

- [ ] Flashlight (or cell phone with flashlight function)
- [ ] Measuring tape
- [ ] Gloves and other safety equipment
- [ ] Post-it notes
- [ ] A preliminary idea of what you're hoping is in the collection
- [ ] Talking points about how the collection would be used or how it fits into your collecting scope
- [ ] A colleague: A colleague can offer additional perspectives, help move heavy boxes, and engage in conversation with the donor so you can focus on reviewing materials. If you're not already familiar with the donor, a colleague can also offer additional safety.
    - If you cannot find a colleague to accompany you and are not comfortable meeting alone with a donor at a non-public place, *do not do so*.
    - You might ask the donor to bring a sampling of the materials to your repository or help you conduct a remote survey instead.
    - If your colleague is not regularly involved with donor visits, talk with them ahead of time about what they can expect and what you expect of them.

During the Survey

- Look for:
    - [ ] Preservation issues, either evident on the materials themselves or in their surroundings
        1. Are there visible pests, droppings, or evidence of pest damage?
        2. Is there standing water, water damage, or mold?
        3. Does the space have any environmental controls such as heating, air conditioning, or dehumidifiers?
        4. Are the materials stored in a smoking environment?
    - [ ] Objects that you do not have the capacity to store

- ☐ Audiovisual or born-digital materials that may require specialized equipment or additional information
- ☐ Materials that appear obviously outside of your collecting scope
- ☐ PII or confidentiality issues

- Survey potential transport barriers:
    1. Are the materials accessible only via stairs?
    2. Is there available parking at the building's entrance?
- Gather information:
    - ☐ Extent
    - ☐ Organization and arrangement trends
    - ☐ Types (or lack thereof) of storage containers
    - ☐ Stability and transportability of current housing—will the materials need to be rehoused before transfer?
    - ☐ Quantity, size, and format of oversized items that may require special packing
    - ☐ Brief descriptions of containers and whether file/box labels are descriptive and accurate
    - ☐ Type (make/model) and content of media carriers, as well as description labels added by creator/donor. Note if cords are included or missing.
    - ☐ Details on computer operating system, software, and other hardware such as cameras or intermediary storage devices

PARTNERS IN ACCESSIONING: ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Accessioning archivists are at the center of a complex web of relationships, the strength of which can impact the effectiveness of accessioning work and advocacy. These relationships may be with true partners, stakeholders, or facilitators who help provide resources.

Accessioning archivists may be in constant direct communication with some partners and in indirect communication with others. Some infrequent connections may even be the most critical. These interpersonal relationships, partnerships, and dependencies vary based on institutional environments and cultures. Depending on individual circumstances or staffing structures, you may not know exactly what you need, how to get it, or how to identify who does what in acquisitions and accessioning workflows with fuzzy boundaries. As an accessioning archivist, it may be helpful to examine your own environment and conduct a scan of interpersonal relationships and partnerships in your accessioning environment.

For each identified partner, ask yourself:

- How do they move you forward?
- How can they be a better partner?
- What do you need them to do in order to do your job?
- What do you need them to know?
- What do they need from you? How do they benefit from successful accessioning?
- How do they hold you back?
- What are the risks if you don’t communicate with them?
- When do you need to communicate with them?
- How often do you need to communicate with them?
- Does communication need to be direct or indirect?

The following table, adapted from a SWOT analysis, can be used to record notes during an environmental scan and can help you learn more about how key relationships impact your work. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. A SWOT analysis is often used in strategic or project planning to better understand an operational environment and the internal and external forces at work.

Partner	Opportunities	Risks	Benefits from Accessioning	Communication Style

Appendix E. Bibliography and Resources

This bibliography was created by the National Best Practices for Archival Accessioning Working Group. It consists of resources that are cited in the Best Practices as well as sources that inform our understanding of accessioning work more broadly.

The bibliography retains the structure of the Best Practices. Practical resources such as tools and standards are listed at the top of each chapter heading, followed by works consulted.

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