

Statement of Principles

The following statement of principles forms the basis for the rules in this standard. It is a recapitulation of generally accepted archival principles as derived from theoretical works and a variety of other sources. These include earlier statements about description and descriptive standards found in the reports of working groups commissioned to investigate aspects of archival description,¹ national rules for description,² and statements of the ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards.³ In recognizing the disparate nature of archival holdings, the statement is also grounded in accepted professional practice in the United States.

Holdings of archival repositories represent every possible type of material acquired from a wide variety of sources. How archives manage and describe their holdings is rooted in the nature of the materials, the context of their creation, and 200 years of archival theory. Archival descriptive practices have increasingly been applied to all of the materials held by archives regardless of their provenance or method of acquisition. These principles examine the nature of archival materials and their context, and reflect how those aspects are made apparent in description.

The Nature of Archival Holdings

Archival collections are the natural result of the activities of individuals and organizations and serve as the recorded memory thereof. This distinctive relationship between records and the activities that generated them differentiates archives from other documentary resources.

Principle 1: Records in archives possess unique characteristics.

Archival materials have traditionally been understood to consist of the documents organically created, accumulated, and/or used by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs and preserved because of their continuing value. They most often consist of aggregations of documents (largely unpublished) and are managed as such,

¹ Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, "Archival Description Standards: Establishing a Process for their Development and Implementation," *American Archivist* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1989) (hereinafter cited as WGSAD Report), 440–43; *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), 6–9, 55–59, 63–64; Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, "Advancing Archival Description: A Model for Rationalizing North American Descriptive Standards," *Archives and Manuscripts* 25, no. 2 (1997) (hereinafter cited as the Bentley Report), 198–99, 203–4.

² *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990), xi-xvi, rules 0.1, 0.2, 0.22, 1.0A1, 1.0A2 (hereinafter cited as *RAD*); Steven Hensen, comp., *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989), rules 0.3, 0.9, 0.10, 0.12, 1.0A (hereinafter cited as *APPM*).

³ ICA Statement of Principles, 8–16; ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G) : General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 1999), 7–12 (hereinafter cited as *ISAD(G)*).

though archival institutions frequently hold discrete items that must also be treated consistently within the institution's descriptive system. In the course of their regular activities, individuals, archival repositories, and other institutions may also consciously acquire and assemble records that do not share a common provenance or origin but that reflect some common characteristic, such as a particular subject, theme, or form. Such collections are part of the holdings in most institutions and must be described in a way that is consistent with the rest of the holdings. All of these materials may be described using this standard.

Principle 2: The principle of *respect des fonds* is the basis of archival arrangement and description.

The records created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together (i.e., identified as belonging to the same aggregation) in their original order, if such order exists or has been maintained. They ought not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body. This dictum is the natural and logical consequence of the organic nature of archival materials.⁴ Inherent in the overarching principle of *respect des fonds* are two sub-principles—provenance and original order. The principle of provenance means that the records that were created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained by an organization or individual must be represented together, distinguishable from the records of any other organization or individual. The principle of original order means that the order of the records that was established by the creator should be maintained by physical and/or intellectual means whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between the documents and the evidential value inherent in their order. Together, these principles form the basis of archival arrangement and description.

In the context of this standard, the principle of provenance requires further elaboration. The statement that the records of one creator must be represented together does not mean that it is necessary (or even possible) to keep the records of one creator physically together. It does, however, mean that the provenance of the records must be clearly reflected in the description, that the description must enable retrieval by provenance, and that a descriptive system must be capable of representing together all the records of a single creator held by a single repository.

The Relationship between Arrangement and Description

If the archival functions of arrangement and description are based on the principle of *respect des fonds*, what is the relationship between arrangement and description? While the two are intimately intertwined, it is possible to distinguish between them in the following way. *Arrangement* is the intellectual and/or physical processes of organizing documents in accordance with accepted archival principles, as well as the results of these processes. *Description* is the creation of an accurate representation of the archival material by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing information that

⁴ S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin. *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*. Translation of the second edition. Chicago, Society of American Archivists, 2002, p19. "An archival collection is an organic whole."

serves to identify archival material and to explain the context and records systems that produced it, as well as the results of these processes.

Principle 3: Arrangement involves the identification of groupings within the material.

Arrangement is the process of identifying the logical groupings of materials within the whole as they were established by the creator, of constructing a new organization when the original ordering has been lost, or of establishing an order when one never existed. The archivist then identifies further sub-groupings within each unit down to the level of granularity that is feasible or desirable, even to the individual item. This process creates hierarchical groupings of material, with each step in the hierarchy described as a level. By custom, archivists have assigned names to some, but not all, levels of arrangement. The most commonly identified are collection, record group, series, file (or filing unit), and item. A large or complex body of material may have many more levels. The archivist must determine for practical reasons which groupings will be treated as a unit for purposes of description. These may be defined as the entire corpus of material of the creator (papers, records, or collection), a convenient administrative grouping (record and manuscript groups), or a reflection of administrative record-keeping systems (series and filing units).

Principle 4: Description reflects arrangement.

Archival repositories must be able to describe holdings ranging from thousands of linear feet to a single item. The amount of description and level of detail will depend on the importance of the material, management needs and resources of the repository, and access requirements of the users. That being the case, an archival description may consist of a multilevel structure that begins with a description of the whole and proceeds through increasingly more detailed descriptions of the parts, or it may consist only of a description of the whole. Within a given body of material, the repository may choose to describe some parts at a greater level of detail than others. A single item may be described in minute detail, whether or not it is part of a larger body of material.

The Nature of Archival Description

Archival holdings are varied in their nature and provenance, and archival description reflects this fact. If archival materials are to be described consistently within an institutional, regional, or national descriptive system, the rules must apply to a variety of forms and media created by, and acquired from, a variety of sources.

Principle 5: The rules of description apply to all archival materials regardless of form or medium.

It is acknowledged that archival materials come in a variety of forms and media, and rules for archival description must therefore accommodate all forms and media (and the relationships between them). Inherent in the principle of provenance—that the records created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together—is the assumption that no records are excluded from the description because of their particular form or medium. Different media of course

require different rules to describe their particular characteristics; for example, sound recordings may require some indication of playing speed, and photographs may require some indication of polarity and color.

Principle 6: The principles of archival description apply equally to records created by corporate bodies, individuals, or families.

The documents that are the product of the functions and activities of organizations may differ in extent, arrangement, subject matter, etc., from those that result from the activities of individuals or families. While there may be valid reasons to distinguish between them in the workflow of a repository, the principles of archival arrangement and description should be applied equally to materials created by individuals, families, or organizations.

Principle 7: Archival descriptions may be presented at varying levels of detail to produce a variety of outputs.

The nature and origins of a body of archival materials may be summarized in their entirety in a single collective description. However, the extent and complexity of archival materials may require a more detailed description of their various components as well. The resulting technique of multilevel description is "the preparation of descriptions that are related to one another in a part-to-whole relationship and that need complete identification of both parts and the comprehensive whole in multiple descriptive records."⁵ This requires some elucidation regarding the order in which such information is presented and the relationships between description(s) of the parts and the description of the whole.⁶

Principle 7.1: Levels of description correspond to levels of arrangement.

The levels of arrangement determine the levels of description. However, because not all levels of arrangement are required or possible in all cases, it follows that not all levels of description are required. It is understood that description is an iterative and dynamic process; that is, descriptive information is recorded, reused, and enhanced at many stages in the management of archival holdings. For example, basic information is recorded when incoming material is accessioned, well before the material is arranged.

Furthermore, arrangement can change, particularly when a repository receives regular accruals of records from an ongoing organization. In that situation, the arrangement will not be complete until the organization ceases to exist. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that description reflects the current state of arrangement (whatever that may be) and can (and does) change as a result of further arrangement activities.⁷

Principle 7.2: Relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated.

While the actual work of arrangement and description can proceed in any order that makes sense to the archivist, a descriptive system must be able to represent and maintain the relationships among the various parts of the hierarchy. Depending on the point at

⁵ *RAD*, p. D-5.

⁶ The rules for multilevel description are found in *RAD*, rule 1.0A2 and in *ISAD(G)*, 12.

⁷ *ISAD(G)*, Statement I-3, p. 7.

which the descriptive system is entered, an end user must be able to navigate to higher or lower levels of description.

Principle 7.3: Information provided at each level of description must be appropriate to that level.

When a multilevel description is created, the information provided at each level of description must be relevant to the material being described at that level. This means that it is inappropriate to provide detailed information about the contents of files in a description of a higher level. Similarly, archivists should provide administrative or biographical information appropriate to the materials being described at a given level (e.g., a series). This principle also implies that it is undesirable to repeat information recorded at higher levels of description. Information that is common to the component parts should be provided at the highest appropriate level.

The Creators of Archival Material

An important aspect of understanding archival materials is the description of the context in which they were created.

Principle 8: The creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described.

Since the principle of provenance is fundamental to the arrangement and description of archival materials, it follows that the provenance, or the creator(s), of archival materials must be described as well. Except in cases where the creator or collector is truly unknown, this means that the creator or collector of the materials must be identified and included in (or linked to) the description of the materials. Moreover, the functions or activities of the creator(s) that produced the archival materials must be described.

Finally, standardized access points must be provided that indicate not just the primary creator but also the relationships between successive creators, for example, the parts of a corporate body that has undergone reorganization(s). *DACS* includes rules for providing all of this information in a consistent way. The repository as collector does not need to be described.