Introduction to
Describing Archival Materials

Purpose and Scope

Part I of *DACS* contains rules to ensure the creation of consistent, appropriate, and self-explanatory descriptions of archival material. The rules may be used for describing archival and manuscript materials at all levels of description, regardless of form or medium. They may also be applied to the description of intentionally assembled collections, and to discrete items.

While the rules apply to all levels of description and forms of material, some repositories may wish to describe particular media at item level or at a level even more detailed than the item, such as sequence, shot, and so on. These rules do not govern such detailed levels of description because of the varying nature of institutional requirements in this area. Incorporating all possible rules for various types of media would result in a very large volume that would require regular monitoring of a number of specialized standards and frequent revisions of *DACS* as other standards changed. Where more detailed guidance is required, archivists are referred to Appendix B, which lists specialized standards for various types of material.

Data Elements Are Mutually Exclusive

The purpose and scope of each element has been defined so that the prescribed information can go in one place only. In some cases there are separate elements for closely related but distinct information, such as the several elements relating to conditions of access and use. The stated exclusions for each element indicate which other element can be used to provide the related information.

Order of Elements

Archival description is an iterative process that may suggest a certain sequence or order of elements in a given repository or output system. However, neither the arrangement of these rules nor their content mandate a given order. Archivists should be aware that some output systems may enforce a particular order of elements, and institutional or consortial guidelines may recommend or even require a given order.

Sources of Information

All the information to be included in archival descriptions must come from an appropriate source, the most common of which is the materials themselves. In contrast to library practice, archivists rarely transcribe descriptive information directly from archival materials; rather, they summarize or interpolate information that appears in the materials or supply information from appropriate external sources, which can include transfer

documents and other acquisition records, file plans, and reference works. Each element has one or more prescribed sources of information.

Options and Alternatives

Some rules are designated as optional; others are designated as alternative rules.

- Where a rule represents an instruction that may or may not be used, it is introduced by the word "optionally." A repository may use it or not as a matter of institutional policy or on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the archivist.

- Where a rule represents an alternative equal in status and value to another rule, it is introduced by the word "alternatively." A repository must use one or other as a matter of institutional policy or on a case-by-case basis.

These provisions arise from the recognition that different solutions to a problem and differing levels of detail and specificity are appropriate in different contexts. The use of some alternatives and options may be decided as a matter of description policy at the institutional level to be exercised either always or never. Other alternatives and options can be exercised on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of the archivist. Institutions are encouraged to distinguish between these two situations, and to keep a record of their policy decisions and of the circumstances in which a particular option may be applied.

Professional Judgment and Institutional Practice

The rules recognize the necessity for judgment and interpretation on the part of both the person who prepares the description and the institution responsible for it. Such judgment and interpretation may be based on the requirements of a particular description, on the use of the material being described, or on the descriptive system being used.   The rules highlight selected, though certainly not all, points where the need for professional judgment is called for, using phrases such as "if appropriate," "if important," and "if necessary." While in no way contradicting the value of standardization, such words and phrases recognize that uniform rules for all types of descriptions are neither possible nor desirable, and they encourage institutions to develop and document a description policy based on specific local knowledge and consistent application of professional judgment. Furthermore, it is recognized that a particular data element may be formulated differently depending on the intended output system. For example, a scope and content note may be much more extensive in a multilevel finding aid than in a catalog record.

Descriptive Outputs

The application of these rules will result in descriptions of various kinds and the rules do not prescribe any particular output. It is up to the repository to determine what descriptive products will be produced and how they will be presented to the end user. Elements can be combined in a variety of ways, such as through use of punctuation, layout and typography, labels, etc. It is essential for the archivist to understand the

particular output system being used. For example, a system may automatically display hierarchies and create links between different levels of description, or create links between a unit of description and other information such as appraisal or scheduling information, in such a way that a textual explanation of the relationship(s) is not necessary. Archivists should keep in mind, however, that standardization of the presentation or display of archival descriptive information greatly enhances recognition and understanding by end users.

Examples

The examples in Part I are illustrative, not prescriptive. They illustrate only the application of the rule to which they are appended. Furthermore, the presentation of the examples is intended only to assist in understanding how to use the rules and does not imply a prescribed layout, typography, or output. Some examples include citations for the body of archival materials from which they were drawn to help clarify the application of the rule to a particular level of description.

While the rules themselves are output neutral, examples are encoded in EAD and MARC 21, two widely used output mechanisms for archival descriptions, at the end of each chapter or section in Part I. The EAD examples frequently include attributes within elements. These are intended to illustrate aspects of the rules, and do not indicate that a specific attribute is required.[1] The MARC 21 examples include a blank space before and after each subfield for the sake of clarity. The fields that do not consist of standardized codes have a subfield a (‡a) at the beginning. Some systems require that ‡a be made explicit; others assume the ‡a is always the first subfield. Where MARC 21 two-position field indicators are not required or are not defined, a "b" (blank) is given in their place.

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[1] See the *EAD Tag Library* for available attributes and their use.