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# Archives 101



You have surely heard the word “archive” before. For many people, this word is automatically associated with “old papers,” “dust” or even “useless documents.” Is this really the case? What are archives anyway?

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## Definitions

### Provenance

The fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection. The principle of provenance or the *respect des fonds* dictates that records of different origins be kept separate to preserve their context.

### Original order

The organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records. Original order is a fundamental principle of archives. Maintaining records in original order serves two purposes. First, it preserves existing relationships and evidential significance that can be inferred from the context of the records. Second, it exploits the record creator's mechanisms to access the records, saving the archives the work of creating new access tools.

### Fonds

The entire body of records of an organization, family, or individual that have been created and accumulated as the result of an organic process reflecting the functions of the creator.

### Archival records

Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs that are preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator.

## What is an archives?

An archives is a place where records deemed to have enduring administrative or historical value are stored and made available for use by researchers.

The word “archives” can also refer to the materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs. These materials are preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance and original order.

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## Are archives different from libraries?

Yes. Generally speaking, libraries contain published material (e.g., books, CDs, and DVDs) and archives contain unpublished material (e.g., corporate records, diaries, photographs, and audio-visual materials). Unpublished materials are called archival records

Books (and other types of library holdings) are what are called “secondary sources”. The information they contain is brought together from a variety of sources, interpreted by one or more individuals and then organized and presented in a standardized format. Libraries usually hold multiple copies of each book.

Archival records are “primary sources” and are one of the sources that will be consulted when creating a “secondary source”. Unlike books, which are created after the events or transactions they describe, records are created during the course of those transactions for purposes integral to the transactions themselves.

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## What kind of records are in an archives?

Records can be of any type or media: textual material, maps and plans, photographs, slides, video-tapes, movie film, computer files, microfilm, audio tapes, clay tablets, or just about anything else imaginable. Textual records - words on paper - are the most common.

\* There are very few clay tablets in the City of Toronto Archives.

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## Who can use an archives?



That depends.

Many archives are public institutions and welcome research inquiries from the general public as well as from public servants. For example, the City of Toronto Archives can be used by anyone who has a question that could be answered by the records in the institution's holdings. Commonly, civic officials use government archives to seek information about past events, policies or decisions that might have an impact on a present situation.

Archives can also be part of a corporation or private institution. Although freedom of access legislation might allow the public to access some records held in these archives, general access to these archives is usually limited to the staff or administration of the parent organizations.

Many public libraries, historical associations, and other community groups also keep archives. These archives are usually open to the public upon request or within limited hours. For example, the West Junction Toronto Historical Society's archives is open to the public only on Mondays and Thursdays or by appointment.

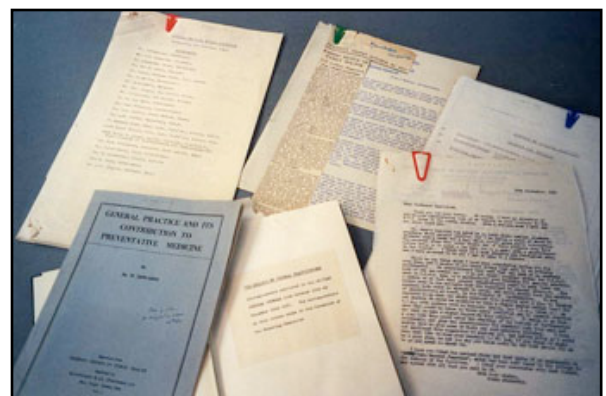
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## Can I borrow archival records?

Unlike libraries, archives do not allow their records to be taken off-site, nor may researchers browse the stacks as is done in a library. This is for two reasons. First, some archival records are fragile and should not be handled without proper care. Two, archival records are rare and must be kept in a secure location to prevent theft or intentional damage.

Researchers must consult an archivist and/or the finding aids to determine which records are relevant to the question being asked. In most public archives, researchers request the records they want to view and an archivist will retrieve them from the stacks. They must be reviewed on-site and usually within a designated reading room area.

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## Definitions

### Finding aid

A tool that facilitates discovery of information within a collection of records. A description of records that gives the repository physical and intellectual control over the materials and that assists users to gain access to and understand the materials.

### Appraisal

In an archival context, appraisal is the process of determining whether records and other materials have permanent (archival) value. The basis of appraisal decisions may include a number of factors, including the records' provenance and content, their authenticity and reliability, their order and completeness, their condition and costs to preserve them, and their intrinsic value. Appraisal often takes place within a larger institutional collecting policy and mission statement.

### Archival bond

The interrelationships between a record and other records resulting from the same activity.

### Arrangement

The process of organizing materials with respect to their provenance and original order, to protect their context and to achieve physical or intellectual control over the materials. The organization and sequence of items within a collection.

### Accession

(noun) Materials physically and legally transferred to a repository as a unit at a single time; an acquisition.

(verb) To take legal and physical custody of a group of records or other materials and to formally document their receipt. To document the transfer of records or materials in a register, database, or other log of the repository's holdings.

## How do I find the records I'm looking for?

In order to help researchers find what they are looking for, archivists create a variety of finding aids which provide access to their records and which researchers can examine to help them focus their search. A finding aid is the archival equivalent of a library's card catalogue or database. Because archival material does not lend itself well to subject classifications and other library descriptive conventions, finding aids tend to be quite long and detailed. A finding aid can be maintained as part of a database, in hard copy, or both.

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## Why don't archives put their records online?



In a word, money. Scanning and posting original material is a time-consuming and expensive business, which is well beyond the financial resources of most archival institutions. As well, the physical characteristics of original documents can contain valuable contextual information, which would be lost in the scanning process. In other cases, digitization might actually harm the original document.

Some repositories put up scanned images of photographs, as part of virtual “displays” on websites. Digitisation is also a very useful tool for distributing and providing access to selected items in the archives. Nevertheless, the best compromise that an archives can reasonably attain is to make its finding aids accessible electronically so that users can do background research at a distance.

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## What does an archivist do?

No, an archivist isn't an old man in a white lab coat working in the basement filing away yellowed papers. And archivists don't necessarily like dusty rooms either. So what exactly do they do?

Archivists are responsible for appraising, acquiring, arranging, describing, preserving, and providing access to records of enduring value, according to the principles of provenance and original order. They protect the materials' authenticity and context. In many organizations, archivists are also responsible for the management and oversight of an archival repository or of records of enduring value. Specific tasks might include:



- reviewing an archival collection to determine which records should be kept and which should be discarded.
- arranging archival materials to improve access to records.
- describing records or groups of records using a standardized method.
- preserving fragile records to protect against damage due to dust, light, humidity, insects or other elements.
- curating virtual exhibits of archival material to make it possible for researchers to consult records without having to handle them.

In some organizations, an archivist may be responsible for management of active, inactive, and archival records. In other organizations, an archivist may be responsible only for those records transferred to the archives. In a large repository, a practicing archivist may specialize in only one or a few archival functions noted above. A teaching archivist may not be currently responsible for collections but is familiar with the theory and practice of archival functions.

Archivists use a variety of methods to preserve archival documents. They keep documents in special boxes or sleeves. They wear gloves when handling archives and they store the boxes of archives in humidity- and temperature-controlled rooms.

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## How do you arrange archival records?

Archival materials are less managed and less manageable than library materials.

Archives have no subject categorization schemes as libraries do. Archives are arranged according to provenance and, where possible, original order is maintained. Records are not dispersed into subject areas, but are kept as evidence of the creating body. The concept of provenance is crucial to the authenticity of the archival record. That is, records accumulated by a creator and kept intact tell us more about the creating body than would any sum of their parts if we broke it up into subject groupings or removed specific media from it without ensuring that appropriate intellectual arrangements were in place.

Archival material can be physically arranged for long-term preservation and intellectually arranged to preserve archival bonds. What is intellectual arrangement? Archival practice requires that the records of a person or agency be kept together, and, in addition, be kept in the same order as they were originally arranged. Sometimes this is not possible because some materials in an archives must be preserved differently from others. For example, maps might be physically removed from a group of papers to be stored more safely in a special cabinets; however, any finding aids would include reference to those maps. Their contextual existence would be secure.

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## How do you describe archival material?

There are a number of standardized systems for describing archival material, some more popular than others.

In Canada, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) uses a system developed in the 1980s and '90s called the Rules of Archival Description (RAD). RAD is a system for creating archival descriptions in the form of “finding aids” that identify and describe archival records and provide access to the information they contain. It is based on the principle that each archival document exists as part of a group and is linked to all other records in that group in specific ways that come about as a consequence of the way each was created, used and maintained. The archival term for such a group of records is a “fonds”, meaning all of the records created, used and accumulated by a single organization, individual or juridical person during the transaction of daily business. RAD is used to describe groups of records with the same provenance (source) or arising from the same function or activity. It does this by:

1. identifying the provenance of the records, when they were created, how much of them there are and what their physical characteristics are;
2. providing information about the administration that created the records; and
3. providing information about the content of the records.

Using “multi-level description,” RAD determines what information an archivist will have to capture and how s/he will present it, including authorized punctuation formats. The advantage of using RAD is that it helps institutions to eliminate idiosyncracies in their finding aids, makes it easier for users to find what they are looking for, makes it easier to transmit archival information electronically and generally results in higher quality finding aids.

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## What is multi-level description?

Multi-level description is a way of describing a group of records according to the structure of the administrative body that created them (their external structure) and the way in which the records are arranged (their internal structure). Describing records using a multi-level format begins with a description of the records at the broadest and most general level and then proceeds downward through its component parts, describing the records in increasingly specific terms at each level. Information about the records and their creators is captured in various data elements.

RAD uses six levels of description: the fonds (the broadest level of description), sous-fonds, series, sub-series, file and item. They are arranged hierarchically; that is, each level is a part of the level above it and the record descriptions at each level include a reference to the levels above or below. Sous-fonds and sub-series are not explicitly detailed by RAD because they are described in exactly the same manner as fonds and series. Before continuing further it will be necessary to define these terms.

### **RAD Levels of Description**

- **The fonds:** Descriptions of archival material begin with the broadest intellectual unit; the fonds, which basically is the sum total of all the records created by a single entity. In large, complex administrative bodies it can be difficult to figure out what does and does not constitute a fonds. Common sense will help: the City of Toronto is obviously the creator of a fonds. But is the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto? Do the Department of Highways records constitute a fonds, or should we look to the provincial government itself before applying this designation? The following criteria may be useful. For an administrative entity to be the creator of a fonds it must: have a legal identity, an official mandate, a defined hierarchical position, be capable of conducting most of its business without reference to a higher authority and have a defined and recorded organizational structure.
- **The series:** A series is a group of records within a fonds that are created or accumulated from the same function, activity or subject, because they have a particular form or because of some other relationship related to the circumstances of their creation or use. "Personal Correspondence" or "Financial Records" might be the titles of record series. The series links the fonds (and the administrative structure that created it) to the actual records that were created.
- **The file:** The file is the smallest aggregate unit within a fonds. It consists of documents filed together in a way that reflects particular activities, subjects, etc., and that bear the same title. A file may consist of any number of individual folders. Folders are merely physical document storage units while files are groupings used to impose intellectual order on records.
- **The item:** The item is the lowest level of description and the smallest intellectual entity within a fonds useful for descriptive purposes. Like files, items are intellectual - not physical - units and can include many separate things. A letter in a correspondence file is an item, as is a ledger book, a photograph or an architectural drawing. Remember, however, that a letter may have several (or several hundred) individual pages. A set of committee minutes might include reports, correspondence and an agenda as well as the minutes themselves. Similarly, a sound or video recording may be so large that it is recorded on several cassettes or film reels, yet it is still the same item. Finally, items can be found in files or can exist independently of them.

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## Four rules of multi-level description.

The four basic rules of multi-level description are:

1. go from the general to the specific;
2. include only information that pertains to the level being described;
3. do not repeat information; and
4. provide a link between levels.

Ideally this description will reflect the pre-existing arrangement of the records. Records are created and maintained in the first place according to a certain arrangement which reflects their function, purpose and use. The archivist must analyze the records, identify that arrangement and then use RAD to describe it. It is not the archivist's job to impose a structure on records unless their original order has been disturbed or never existed in the first place. In the former case the archivist must try to reconstitute original order and in the latter case must create one. The prime principle here is respect for original order which means keeping things the way you found them.

At each level of description the archivist will record information specific to that level only. This is to avoid repeating information. At the fonds level the archivist will include information about the entire organization and all of its records in a general way. When writing up each individual series description the archivist will only include information specific to the records of that series and those parts of the organization that created them. Descriptive elements will be repeated at each level, but the information presented will not be repeated. For example, if access to the entire series "Financial Records" is restricted, there is no need to include a restriction note in the description of the file, "Accounts Receivable".

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## Why are archives so important?

Similar to museums, galleries and libraries, public and community archives are cultural heritage institutions. The records held in archives can be interpreted to provide insight into the lives and experiences of the people who created, used and maintained these records. In addition, records such as diaries, photographs, and videos document the culture in which they were created. Writers and historians can also use these records as primary documentary sources with which to craft their stories and narratives. To this end, archives are the keepers of cultural and community memory.

Archival records can also be used to uphold and support human rights. In many cases, archival records have been used to prove citizenship (*e.g.* the case of the Acadian People of Canada), reveal government sanctioned atrocities (*e.g.* the case of the Indian residential schools), and show discrimination based on sex, gender, race, religion, and class (*e.g.* the cases of the 1982 Bathhouse Raids in Toronto and the 1942 prosecution of homosexual men in Edmonton, Alberta). Archives house the evidence necessary for justice.

Without archives, there is a past but no history.