

SECTION 5: DESCRIPTION

What is archival description and why do we need it?

Once you have arranged your archive, the next essential step is to produce a description of it. By description, archivists mean a list, spreadsheet or database, compiled in such a way that anyone using the archive can discover a document, find it, and understand how it relates to the rest of the collection, that is, its context. This is also often called a catalogue.

You may have seen various types of finding aid or catalogue if you have previous experience of using archives. The archives you are looking after now may even have some of these and they can provide a useful starting point for further work. Such finding aids may be of several types. A calendar is a detailed summary of individual documents, usually a number of letters. A box list records the number of a box on the shelf, a brief note of the contents or title and sometimes covering dates. Both are useful. However, neither of these are truly archival description in the way that professional archivists would understand the term today as they do not consider the archive in context.

The process of archival arrangement and description recognises that each unit of an archive is linked in a hierarchical relationship based on the processes of its creation and use. It begins with the whole, which then divides into subcomponents, then subcomponents of subcomponents and so on, until the individual item is reached - the names for these components will be discussed later. If a unit is intellectually divorced from the whole, although the information within it remains the same, some of the value is lost. This is what distinguishes archive collections from other collections of information such as printed works in libraries. In general, removing a book from a library does not change its value as a source of information.

The rules: ISAD(G)

Unlike library cataloguing, archival description has very few rules. You will find that there is very little that is definitively right or wrong. What we do have is an accepted professional standard called the International Standard of Archival Description (General), or ISAD(G) for short, . Despite being used by professional archivists all over the world, it is simple to understand and based on fundamental principles.

1. Elements of Description

Describing archives is a matter of deciding what it is about the archives that needs to be recorded. ISAD(G) breaks down the description of any archival unit into its logical parts. It analyses these parts and highlights the elements that may be present. The complete list of elements may be seen in the Collection Level description given in the appendix. This may seem like a huge amount of information to record but, the elements do not need to be presented in such detail, separated into different fields or made explicit. However, in practice, it is common for archivists to use this layout.

Crucially, not all of the elements are considered essential. Only the six given in the Identity Statement area need to be included.

Essential elements

Reference: This is a unique identifier for the unit that is being described and usually makes the hierarchical arrangement of the archive collection clear. The convention is to use letters and numbers separated by slashes, each slash representing a change in hierarchical level e.g. ABC/1/10, but other formats are acceptable.

Title: Unlike books, archival resources generally do not have given titles, and when they do, they can be misleading or inadequate. Archivists therefore usually supply them, composing titles that uniquely and clearly identify the resource. This is particularly important for electronic descriptions which are being searched, rather than being browsed,

Creator: the person or organisation responsible for the creation of the archive as a whole (not necessarily the author of the material). Usually this is only recorded once for the collection at the highest level. The name and dates of existence should be recorded.

Date of creation: These are the dates when the documents in the unit being described were originally created or the date that an event or image was captured.

Extent of the unit of description: this may be given in whatever way is most useful to you, for instance, three boxes, 20 volumes, 3 metres of shelving, 100 folders. Although it is often only given once, at the highest level, if you have the time it can be logistically helpful to give it at each level.

Level of description: when there have been references to hierarchy, to levels and subdivisions above, that is the element known as 'levels of description', a complex but crucial part of archival description.

2. Levels of Description

Every properly arranged archive collection has a multi-level hierarchy, from the general i.e. the collection as a whole, to the specific. ISAD(G) has definitions and preferred names for each level as shown below but, in practice very few collections will follow a defined pattern like this. Use them to attempt to describe what is there rather than changing the arrangement to fit the ideal.

The best way to understand the concept is to try to apply the level definitions to an organisation you are familiar with -your own! Ideally, the hierarchy and organisation of your archives should try to mirror that of your community or congregation. If you

drew out a 'tree' showing the links in your organisation, and the hierarchy of the archives, they should look broadly similar. Another way to understand is to think of a 'family tree' with the common ancestor as the 'Collection' level and the levels below being the various branches of the family over time.

For a familiar example, we could take a hypothetical religious order called the Sisters of St Mary. Like many, it is a charity limited by guarantee and run by its superiors, who are trustees, from a mother house. There are various daughter houses, each with its own community who are responsible for their own day to day administration and recordkeeping. These are the examples in red type.

Collection (Fonds): the whole of the records created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family or corporate body in the course of the creator's activities and functions

Example: Records of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Mary

Section (Sub-Fonds): a subdivision of a Collection or Fonds containing a body of related records corresponding to subdivisions of the originating agency or to major chronological, functional or similar groupings of the material itself

Examples: St Mary's Convent, London; St Mary's Convent, Oxford

Series: documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they result from the same accumulation or activity; have a particular form; or because of another reason arising out of their creation, receipt or use

Examples: St Mary's Convent accounts; Management of convent building; Personal papers of Sisters

File: an organised unit of documents grouped together either for use by the creator or in the process of archival arrangement, because they relate to the same subject, activity or transaction

Examples: Accounts 1975; Refurbishment of main building; Papers of Sr Mary Elizabeth Jones

Item: the smallest intellectually indivisible (not necessarily physically indivisible) archival unit

Examples: Auditor's report 1975; Act of Profession of Sr Mary Elizabeth Jones; Photograph of new kitchen 1930

The examples given are relatively simple -if necessary, there can be as many sub levels as needed such as sub-sections or sub-series. Also, a collection can be very simple, consisting of one or two items in which case a collection level description, and item level description would suffice.

At first, this may seem time consuming and unnecessarily repetitive. To avoid this in practice, ISAD(G) has four rules relating to multi-level description

1. Description should pass from the general to the specific
2. Information should be relevant to the level of description
3. Descriptions should be linked
4. Avoid repetition of information given at a higher level, unless necessary for aiding on-line searches.

Your collection level description will probably be the longest – some can run into thousands of words! Item level descriptions usually need only be a sentence or two. If you find yourself writing repetitive and lengthy lower level descriptions, consider if you should put the information at a higher level.

Cataloguing in practice

You will now understand the theory of archival cataloguing but, perhaps be completely at a loss as to how to start putting this into practice and struggling to remember everything that needs to be included. As with many things, the easiest way to learn is to do.

The method that follows is a suggestion as to how to proceed. Other methods may be used -remember that archival description is not something with wrong and right answers. It has the advantages of being relatively 'low-tech' and easy for the beginner.

1. Create and print out some A4 paper sheets with the following headings on each sheet:
Level of description
Reference
Title
Creator
Dates of creation
Extent
Scope and content
Conservation
Archivist's note
Location

Those in red are not part of the six essential elements but you may find them useful. Scope and content is used to provide a fuller description than the title if this is necessary. Conservation is a place to record any physical problems the

document may have, or any work that has been undertaken to remedy these. An archivist's note is generally used to record anything else which might be useful to know that does not fit elsewhere -if you find yourself using this on a regular basis to record the same type of information then you may need to add in another of the non-essential ISAD(G) elements. Location is where the document is stored so you can find it again when you need it

Remember to leave enough space on your sheet to write. You might want to create a form that can be easily copied or printed.

2. Fill in one copy of the form each time for the smallest unit of description that you are undertaking. This will usually be file, so a bundle of related documents, or item, a single indivisible unit, (remember that not everything needs an item level description). Once you have done this, either make a copy and attach it to your archive material in a safe and temporary way e.g. using a plastic or brass paperclip, placing inside the same folder or wallet, or make sure that it is obvious which form relates to which file or item.

At this stage, your archive collection may not have reached a stage of arrangement where you can assign the final reference numbers. If so, temporary reference numbers, not necessarily hierarchical, are a good way to keep track of the work you have done. These can be anything that makes sense to you.

3. Although, as previously discussed, you should avoid rearranging archive collections, some minor changes are often necessary, especially where the collection has become physically disarranged over time. This is where the printed sheets come in useful, as you can arrange and rearrange the sheets until you arrive at something you are happy with and assign final reference numbers. They also allow more than one person to work on a collection without using multiple computers or software licences.

At this point you should also create a sheet for each higher-level description. At the collection level only, try completing as much as you possibly can of the sheet given in the worked example at the end.

4. Once you are happy with your arrangement, references and the content of the sheets, your collection is essentially catalogued. At this point it would be possible to arrange them in hierarchical order in a folder as a browsable hard copy archive catalogue. However, if you can, producing a digital version is very helpful. For smaller collections, this could simply be typing it all out into a word-processed document or pdf. These can be searched using the command Ctrl+F and easily uploaded to a website or emailed to researchers.

If you can create a spreadsheet or database to record the information, the advanced searching and filtering capabilities will make the catalogue much more useful. Microsoft Excel is a readily available and straightforward programme to use. Most software will also have a way to export the information to an easily readable and printable format if this is needed.

Archival cataloguing software: yes or no?

Many, although by no means all, professionally run archives use software programmes designed for archival cataloguing. Usually this is commercial software where you purchase licences and pay a yearly subscription for customer support and other services. This is a database package already set up to catalogue archives, with all the ISAD(G) elements built in and hierarchies easily displayed. They can be easily searched by users to locate records, sometimes online or remotely. The capabilities would render many of the steps described above redundant.

These are not universally used owing to the considerable disadvantages of such packages, particularly for smaller institutions with a limited budget. The licences and subscription may be expensive, and the pricing structure can be opaque. Although training and support are provided, the archivist responsible usually needs a level of IT knowledge and competence to solve everyday problems and use the software to its full potential. There are open source alternatives but even here there can be a price in terms of configuration and support. Continuity also needs to be considered. While you may feel confident using a particular software programme your successor may not, or your organisation not be able to afford the subscription in the longer term.

Another option is to use one of the two national portals for archives, which both offer repositories a mechanism whereby they can both catalogue and make accessible collections they hold. The National Archives' Manage Your Collections system uses a simple Excel spreadsheet format, while the Archives Hub, provided through the academic network Jisc, offers a tag-based format. Both can accommodate any level of listing, from a single collection-level description to a detailed catalogue.

So how do these cataloguing principles work in practice?

Here is a worked example for the imaginary order mentioned above, the Sisters of St Mary.

Collection level

IDENTITY STATEMENT AREA

Reference code(s): SSM

Title: Archives of the Sisters of St Mary

Creator: Sisters of St Mary

Date(s) of creation: 1880-

Extent and medium of the unit of description (quantity, bulk, or size): 50 linear metres

Level of description: Collection

CONTEXT AREA

Name of creator(s): Sisters of St Mary

Administrative / Biographical history: The order was founded in 1880 by Miss Mary Smith, later Mother Mary Anne Smith. The first convent was in Oxford, and there were later foundations in London (1885) and Birmingham (1887). The sisters

were mainly involved in the provision of education, running convent schools and latterly providing staff for local church schools. At its peak, the order consisted of some 150 members. The Birmingham convent closed in 1970 and Oxford in 2010.

Archival history: This collection represents the paper archives accumulated by the three convents of the order from their foundation until 1999. Records after this date are still considered to be in current use. Each convent was responsible for the care of their own archives until all heritage collections were amalgamated at the London convent in 2010.

Immediate source of acquisition or transfer:

CONTENT AND STRUCTURE AREA

Scope and content: Records of the Sisters of St Mary, a religious order within the Church of England, working within the field of education

Appraisal, destruction and scheduling information: In 2010, when the archives were amalgamated, an appraisal exercise was carried out, destroying duplicates and material not deemed to be of archival importance. A copy of the appraisal guidelines used is kept at..... It is anticipated that further appraisal will be carried out during detailed cataloguing of the collection.

Accruals: Further accruals to this collection are expected.

System of arrangement: The records of each convent form a section or sub fonds within the collection. Below that, the series reflect the arrangement of records that would have been used in each separate convent.

CONDITIONS OF ACCESS AND USE AREA

Conditions governing access: Access is currently at the discretion of the leadership team

Conditions governing reproduction: Only with the permission of the leadership team

Language/scripts of material: English

Physical characteristics and technical requirements: Most of the collection is comprised of paper of A4 size or smaller with some larger sheets. Larger folders or binders should be acquired to prevent these having to be folded. Outsize material is noted in the catalogue. There are also 20 bound volumes. Documents are held in acid free folders and staples have been removed and replaced with brass paperclips, unless doing so would damage the integrity of the item. Photographs are enclosed in melinex sheets.

Finding aids: Catalogue to file level in Word and Excel format prepared by Sr Mary Jones, Archivist, April 2019

ALLIED MATERIALS AREA

Existence and location of originals:

Existence and location of copies:

Related units of description:

Publication note:

NOTES AREA

DESCRIPTION CONTROL AREA

Archivist's Note: Catalogued by Sr Mary Jones

Rules or Conventions: ISAD(G)

Date(s) of descriptions: 1 April 2019

Section level

Level of Description: Section

Reference: SSM/OXF

Title: St Mary's Convent, Oxford

Creator

Dates of Creation: 1880-2010

Extent: 15 linear metres

Scope and Content: Records of St Mary's Convent Oxford

Conservation:

Archivist's note:

Location: Archive Room, Shelving sections 1 and 2

Series level

Level of Description: Series

Reference: SSM/OXF/3

Title: Management of Convent Building

Creator:

Dates of Creation: 1880-2010

Extent: 3 boxes

Scope and Content: Records relating to day to day management, maintenance and refurbishment of the convent building. Maps, drawings and photographs are also included here.

Conservation: Rolled maps and drawings require assessment by a professional conservator

Archivist's note:

Location: Archive Room, Shelving section 1, shelf 3

File level

Level of Description: File

Reference: SSM/OXF/3/24

Title: Refurbishment of Main Building

Creator:

Dates of Creation: 1928-1931

Extent: 3 folders

Scope and Content: Papers relating to an extensive refurbishment of the main convent building. This includes correspondence between Reverend Mother Mary Anne Smith and the firms of architects and builders, quotations for the work, drawings, and photographs of the finished work.

Conservation: Good, however many photographs are in poor condition

Archivist's note:

Location: Box 12

Item level

Level of Description: Item

Reference: SSM/OXF/3/24/37

Title: Photograph of New Kitchen

Creator:

Dates of Creation: 1930

Extent: 1 photograph

Scope and Content: Sr Mary Clark can be seen standing next to the convent's first ever refrigerator.

Conservation: Black and white photograph, tear in bottom right corner

Archivist's note: Stamped copyright of Joseph James, photographer, Oxford

Location: Box 12