



New to Archives: Things to Keep in Mind

Archives are different than libraries and every archive is a little different. [Here](#) are some handy definitions pertaining to archives. If you are new to archives or new to the Special Collections library at Penn State University, check out this [virtual tour](#) and/or [tutorial](#) on their website. For information about all the collections at Penn State Special Collections, click [here](#) and click [here](#) for all the art education collections. Check [here](#) for materials at our campus libraries.

What are archives?

Archives are defined as the non-current records of a person, family or institution that contain information of enduring value. An archive is also the place that houses those records. They are often situated within libraries, and often they collect (mostly rare) books. However, their collections are different in that they also include primary source material – providing first-hand accounts of history – such as photographs, diaries, historical maps, paper records, electronic records, and sometimes even artwork! These materials are produced over the daily life of a person, family or organization, and are seldom consciously produced for future research use.

What do archivists do?

Historically the profession has been described as a hybrid of librarian and historian, but in the last ten years, information technologist has also been added to the mix. Archivists appraise, acquire, arrange, describe, preserve, and provide/promote access to archival materials. They meet with a donor to figure out what is rare or unique, usable, and of significant research value. They acquire collections through donations and sometimes purchase, and negotiate matters of privacy and confidentiality. Preservation actions include providing a storage environment that is cool, dark, dry, and protected from pests, thefts and (as much as possible) natural disaster. They store records in materials that are acid-balanced, and provide conservation attention when necessary. For their researchers, who include historians, students, authors, media outlets, genealogists, researchers of all stripes, they provide reference services, classes, presentations, exhibits, tours, and do digital projects. Almost always, archival materials must be used within the physical confines of the archives, under supervision of the archivist.

How do archivists process collections?

Collections vary widely in size, formats, and level of organization when they arrive at the door. They come to archives because of a range of reasons and circumstances. In order to make them available for public use, archivists process a collection by working it into intellectually sound levels of description (generally series, subseries and folders) to be able to then describe it in more detail and provide access to it. They follow what is called “provenance”, or original order. This means that they try to adhere as close as possible to the way the creator of the collection made it and used it. This helps the researcher have some understanding of the meaning of not just one item but the collection as a whole.

The Finding Aid

Archivists create a [finding aid](#) for each collection. This is the common access tool for both the researcher and the archivist. The finding aid gives brief information about the collection with as much attention as possible to key search terms that will allow the user to find it and explore it. It has information such as box numbers and folder numbers, file or item titles that give VERY brief descriptions of what the item is, date ranges of the materials, how many items are included, whether or not there are any restrictions on the item, what kind of format it is (photo, text document, audio file, etc.). Finally, the finding aid gives location codes so that the archivist can access boxes for you. Remember, the archives hold a lot of other collections so this code is key. The archivist will pull the entire box so your item will always come to you in the box amongst other contents. Your items may also be saved for you on the cart for a period of time, if you intend to work on them for several days.

What to expect in an archive:

In order to protect the materials, expect that you will be required to leave your belongings in a locker, except for the items that you are allowed to bring into the reading room (laptop, pencils rather than pens, library safe coffee mug, if it is permitted, camera, jump drive: anything that does not, spill, squirt, leak, and/or make noise that disturbs other patrons). Expect that the archivist will not necessarily know as much as you about the Judy Chicago Art Education Collection besides what information is provided on the finding aid. Try to communicate yourself well. Expect that you will have to wait while the archivist gathers your materials. Make yourself at home. Choose a nice spot to work in the reading room, get comfortable. Get your bearings on where things are (computers, scanners, photocopiers etc.). Expect that what you are waiting for is what it is: a box of somebody's stuff. Expect that the items in the box might not necessarily be as organized they seemed on the finding aid. Expect to have to rummage a little. While using the materials, expect that you will have to keep items in their respective folders. When using photographs, expect to wear protective gloves to keep them safe from oils. And finally: Expect the unexpected.

What do I need to do research in archives?

Archives are treasure troves of interesting things to examine, read, listen to, touch, and discover. Besides lots of curiosity, patience, and time, you need to have an open mind. Dive in whole body and mind. Be focused. However, don't be so focused that you miss opportunities for serendipitous discovery.

Archives Elsewhere:

This is a very brief list. Check [here](#) for other materials not at PSU. In terms of digital archives, [CPANDA - Cultural Policy and the Arts National Data Archive](#) is an interactive digital archive of data on the arts and cultural policy in the United States. The [Smithsonian](#) is a great option too. There are two from the UK: [VADS](#) (visual arts data service) and the [Arts and Humanities Data Service](#). In addition and although not specifically art related, there is the [directory of open access repositories](#) and the [National Archives](#). Also, keep in mind that as more and more archives are connecting their finding aids to the web, a quick google search that includes a name or collection title with the words, "records and manuscripts" or "papers" can bring up a lot of archival holdings at varying locations.