Introduction to Archives

Savvy Researcher Workshop, April 18, 2017
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Definitions: What is an “Archives”?

The organized noncurrent records of an institution or organization, or individual retained for their continuing value in providing:

• a) evidence of the existence, functions, and operations of the institution or organization that generated them, or b) other information on activities or persons affected by the organization

• Can refer to a repository as well as an aggregation of material, as in someone’s personal papers
What kinds of materials do archives have?

- Can comprise many **different types**, or genres of material (e.g., correspondence, journals, diaries, photographs, scrapbooks, drafts of manuscripts, laboratory notebooks, reprints of articles, Twitter feeds, email)
- Can be in a **variety of formats**, not just paper-based material, but also audiovisual and born-digital material
For what can you use archives?

- Uncovering information
- Finding evidence
Definitions: Informational and Evidential Values

- Evidential value: n. "The quality of records that provides information about the origins, functions, and activities of their creator." –relates to the process of creation
- Informational value: n. "The usefulness or significance of materials based on their content, independent of any intrinsic or evidential value."
Example of Evidence and Information: Letter from Francis Crick to Carl Woese, February 27, 1970
Definitions: Provenance

• The origin or source of something; information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of a collection
• The individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in the collection
Definitions: Original Order

- The organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records
- The principle of archival arrangement according to which the creator's arrangement of files and documents within a deposit should be maintained.
- Preserves existing relationships and evidential significance that can be inferred from the context of records
Types of Repositories

There are many different types of repositories where you can do research. Here are a few examples:

- University and College Archives (e.g., University of Illinois Archives)
- Government Archives (e.g., Archives for the City of Dallas)
- Corporate Archives (e.g., IBM Archives)
- Historical societies (e.g., Historical Society of Pennsylvania)
- Museums (e.g., Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Archives)
- Religious archives (e.g., Daughters of Charity Provincial Archives)
- Special Collections (e.g., Beinecke Library at Yale)
Finding an archives

How do you find archives that might have materials that relate to your research? Beyond Google searches...

- Bibliographies in works related to your research - what kinds of archives are consulted?
- Talk to experts in your field - which repositories have they visited?
- #AskAnArchivist!
Websites and Databases

The next step is to get a sense of materials that will suit your research needs in an individual archives.

- Check the repository’s website - Are new collections listed? Are topic guides available?
- Are links to catalogs or databases available on the website? How can you search for the materials? By keyword? Can you browse subjects?
Finding Aids and Collection Descriptions

- A finding aid (sometimes called inventory, collection listing, register, or calendar) is a text document providing a description of the contents of a collection.
- A finding aid helps a researcher get an understanding of a collection in its entirety, to be able to see the relationships between its component parts, and locate the portions of a collection pertinent to research.
- Finding aids sometimes provide information about how the collection was formed, how the archives acquired it, etc., and processing and preservation actions taken on the collection by archivists.
Finding Digital Materials

Many archives digitize and/or have born-digital materials. Note that digitized materials often represent only a fraction of a repository’s holdings. Some examples include:

- University of Illinois Library Digital Collections (https://digital.library.illinois.edu/)
- Europeana (http://www.europeana.eu/portal/en)
- Digital Public Library of America (DPLA, https://dp.la/)
Planning your visit

If the materials germane to your research are not available online, you will have to visit the archives in person. Some tips to consider before making travel plans:

- Contact the archives well ahead of your planned visit (several weeks if possible)
- Confirm the archives’ visiting hours and that the repository will be open during your trip
- Check if the material needs to be requested ahead of time (i.e., located in offsite storage)
- Are there any restrictions on materials? Do you need to secure permission for access?
Become familiar with the archives’ policies and guidelines

- What are the reproduction policies? Can you photocopy and/or scan the materials? Can you take photos of items?
- Does the archives provide Internet access?
- What can you bring with you? Can you have your laptop? Can you use a notebook for taking notes? Pencils?
- Are there limits to the number of boxes and/or collections you can view at a time?
- Do you have to store your bag in a locker?
In summary, what you need to know:

- Find the archival materials relevant to your research
- Plan ahead
- Contact the archivists (ahead of time)
- Find out how you can access the materials (are there restrictions, do you need to request boxes several days in advance?)
- What tools are you allowed to use for taking notes? How can you make copies of materials?
- More info? See: http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives
Thank you!
References and Resources

Illustrations
• Stamp, Jorgen. www.digitalbevaring.dk (licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 Denmark).

Bibliography