

What Does an Archivist Do? A Brief Primer*

Archivists are the custodians of an organization's or person's records. The archivist's job is to

- 1) identify records and papers of enduring value to add to the collection they supervise,
- 2) preserve them, and
- 3) make them available to people for study and research.

Identifying Records and Papers

Identifying records and papers involves deciding what materials to collect, figuring out who has those types of materials, and approaching them about donating them to the repository. Archivists look for unique materials—those not duplicated elsewhere—that have a high ratio of valuable information relative to the overall size of the collection. They look for materials that involve people, places, and events that will be important to researchers.

Donating personal or organizational papers is an important step both for the donor and for the facility that accepts the materials. Donors want to be sure the facility is the best one to safeguard their materials and make them available for study and research. Because it is expensive to process archival materials and permanently house them, facility staff want to be sure they are bringing in items that will be very desirable to present and future users.

Preserving Materials

Preserving a collection of materials involves three processes:

- a) Organizing the materials in a logical way, then creating what is known as a “finding aid” that
 - describes the overall content,
 - presents information about the person or organization that created them, and
 - describes in detail the contents of each individual box of materials.
- b) Putting them in special boxes and taking other measures to protect them from physical damage and deterioration. These boxes are made of materials that don't have acid in them so that contact with the box itself will not cause damage. Think about an old, brown, brittle newspaper clipping—it deteriorates because of acid in the paper.
- c) Making sure the records are safe from natural disasters and damage by humans. The institution should have a disaster plan in place for events such as hurricanes, fires, and tornadoes. It should also have policies in place that keep users of the materials from damaging them or making off with them. These policies include having users store all their belongings except notepad, pencil, laptop, and camera; wearing gloves when handling photographs that aren't in protective covers, using only one folder at a time from a box and marking its place in the box, and not photocopying fragile items.

Making Materials Available

Making materials available has two facets:

- a) giving users access to the materials and helping them find what they're looking for
- b) outreach and promotion to make people aware of the records and the valuable information they contain. Collections are promoted using exhibits, presentations, Web sites, newspaper articles, and press releases.

Evaluating a Repository for Your Personal or Organizational Papers and Questions to Ask*

Preserving Your Materials:

- Who will organize the materials and create a description of them (called a “finding aid”) to make them usable to people doing research?
- What are that person’s credentials?
- How will digital materials be preserved?
- How soon will the materials be ready for use?
- How in-depth will the processing of the materials be? Will the contents of each individual box be described, of each individual folder?
- What kinds of storage containers will be used?
- Where will the materials be stored?
- Is the storage area for the materials properly climate controlled (70 degrees, 50 % humidity if accommodating people and archival materials, lower if accommodating archives only)?
- Does the facility have a disaster plan in place in case of fire, hurricane, tornado, etc.?

Making Your Materials Available:

- Does the facility have a trained archivist? What are his or her credentials? How well does he or she know the materials?
- What hours is the facility open for research?
- How will a researcher locate your materials? Where will the finding aid be posted (library catalog, web site, printed aid only, no finding aid available)?
- What measures are in place to protect materials from both theft and damage while it is in use?
- Is the facility easy to get to? Is parking available nearby?
- How far in advance does an appointment to view materials need to be made?
- How will your papers be promoted?
 - Will any of the materials in the collection be digitized and made available online?
 - Will there be exhibits, programming, press releases related to your materials?

Other Considerations:

- Does the repository have a collections policy for manuscript materials? Review it to see how your materials fit in with the overall plan.
- Does the repository have a written gift agreement that you and they will execute together?
- If you have concerns about keeping some of the contents of your materials private, how will they be handled?
- How will the facility ensure that researchers give you proper credit for use of your materials in papers they present, books they publish, etc.?
- How can you be sure the facility won’t discard some or all of your materials without your knowledge?

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North Carolina Collection
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2011, updated 2015