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Processing Manuscript Collections and Archives

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Processing includes the methods for establishing physical and intellectual control over an archival collection. The three elements of processing are arrangement, description, and preservation. These three procedures take place simultaneously, but require very distinct actions. Many historical societies and other repositories are re-examining their methods and are striving to arrange and describe materials in accordance with professional archives standards. This season's newsletter offers introductory, helpful tips and theory to apply to your work.

Arranging Archival Collections

To enhance accessibility, archivists organize records into logical records groups (fonds) and series. Unlike our museum and library colleagues' predominant organizing techniques, archivists examine materials in groupings rather than working with single items. Documents are part of larger collections, which tell us more about history than individual items.

Two main principles should guide you with your collection arrangement work:

- Sanctity of original order – If there is a logical order to the records in a collection, keep it. If materials are arranged alphabetically, but you would prefer them to be chronological, do not physically rearrange them. If the materials definitely have an order, but it does not make sense to you, do not re-file them. The order may not be immediately apparent and your good intentions to impose a “better” arrangement may destroy the meaning of materials to a researcher. If some materials follow a scheme, but others are misfiled, your goal is to reconstruct the original order. If it is clear that there is no order, you may apply one, but make sure to plan and provide a scheme that is logical and easily accessible. Folders are most often arranged chronologically, alphabetically by record creator, and by type of material (such as correspondence, photographs, financial records).
- Provenance – Archival collections should reflect their origin and relate directly to other deposits from the same place. Additionally, materials from one creator should not be split among various record groups. Try not to arrange your archives by subject by splitting up a donation to place individual items from that collection into a subject scheme.

Basics of Description

Since the physical arrangement of a collection should reflect its provenance and original order, archival techniques provide one with the ability to establish “intellectual control”. Intellectual control provides easy access to collections through various indices called “finding aids”. The standard finding aid is a printed document that includes the following parts” title page, table of contents, biographical/historical sketch, series description, arrangement note, scope and content note, provenance, collection restrictions, literary rights statement, note to the researcher, box and folder list, materials removed list, appendices, and index.

The finding aid is then used to create automated databases using standardized formats created specifically for archives. These two formats are MARC AMC and EAD. They both are based on the archival tenets of organizing and describing in grouping rather than on an item level. So, it is vital that a collection is arranged and described in a standard written finding aid before the collection is automated.

Summary of basics for organizing and describing archival material

- DO NOT try to organize and describe collections item by item
- □ DO NOT separate materials that come in as a single collection
- DO NOT intermingle materials from different creators of donors
- DO NOT rearrange materials that were given an arrangement by their creator

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ARRANGEMENT AND DESCRIPTION SEE:

Archives and Information Consulting Services Links to Arrangement and Description information <http://www.archivesinfo.com/archives/linkproc.htm>

ArchivesInfo also provides links to more information about MARC AMC and EAD <http://www.archivesinfo.com/archives/linkautomate.htm>

Our Summer 2002 newsletter – *Foundation for a Successful Archives Program* - provided additional information about levels of arrangement including record groups and series <http://www.archivesinfo.com/archives/newslettersummer02.htm>