



Institutional Guidelines For Archives

About These Guidelines

These guidelines are addressed not only to those who wish to manage the archives of institutions and associations, but also to municipalities, businesses, religious organizations, local and regional historical societies. In addition, administrators responsible for such bodies need to understand what is involved in establishing and maintaining "an archives". Upon reflection, a more appropriate decision may be to deposit records in an existing archives rather than make a substantial, on-going investment in essential staff and essential physical resources. In any case, it is important to remember that if archives are to be available for public use now and in the future, their keepers must adhere to recognized archival principles, standards and practices that govern certain archival functions set out below.

Information is available from provincial archives and the National archives and archival associations and councils that will assist institutions in their decision to establish and maintain an archives.

What Are Archives?

An archives is a permanent establishment dedicated to:

- appraising, selecting and acquiring the archival records of its sponsoring institution (normally its primary goal) and/or the archival records of corporate bodies, organizations or individuals relevant to its sponsoring institution or to a defined community or thematic interest; conserving the archival records or the information accepted;
- arranging and describing the archival records according to accepted archival principles;
- making the archival records available for continuing use under defined conditions by the sponsoring institution and by the public.

Recorded information in any form or medium, created or received and maintained by an organization or person in the transaction of business or the conduct of affairs, and of continuing value, otherwise known as "archival records"; forms part of the collective memory of an individual, an organization, and ultimately society if they are preserved in an archives.

By What Authority?

Archives should be established by a clearly recognizable institution, such as a business, municipality or historical society, with a commitment to continuous and regular (but not necessarily daily) operation and office hours. General policy must be approved by the institution in consultation with the archivist. The Archives has a corporate administrative responsibility for records and record-keeping policies and procedures and accordingly should report to an official in the organization having responsibility for its legal and administrative affairs.

Mandate

No archives should exist for long without a clear mandate of its acquisitions policy endorsed by the institution. The mandate of the archives should articulate the focus of the records that will be acquired and the institutional, geographic and subject concentration of its acquisition activity. This will help avoid conflict with neighbouring repositories and should be part of a joint acquisition strategy for the region. The institution must also decide whether the archivist shall receive its older records at regular intervals, including records in electronic form (e.g., word processing documents, spreadsheets, e-mail), which will involve an understanding of records management. When receiving any records appraised as having archival value, personal privacy must be respected, but unreasonable limitations on access by the public to documents should be avoided. The wishes of donors of private archives must also be taken into consideration.

The Duties of an Archivist

Archivists appraise, acquire, preserve, arrange, and describe records that may have archival value. It is they who should decide what is permanently valuable to prospective users, and what records can be destroyed, such as routine "housekeeping" records (e.g., cancelled cheques and vouchers, etc.) which need only be kept for a limited period of time to serve an immediate administrative purpose after which they may be scheduled for destruction as part of a comprehensive records management programme.

Archivists should become familiar with the principles of records management, which is a closely related field.

Archival principles which govern the arrangement and description of records, require that where possible, they must be maintained in the order in which they were created and not re-arranged arbitrarily by subject. The subject is reached through the "finding aids": lists and inventories, summary descriptions and indexes. The source of the documents and collections received must always be recorded in an accessions register. The archivist must try and assess the level of description most useful to most users; an overall series of brief descriptions of the holdings of a repository is generally more useful than detailed description of a part at the expense of total neglect of the rest. Archival education and training for this work is absolutely essential.

Archives and the User

Since users cannot "browse" among the documents, public service revolves around finding aids and the provision of reference service by the archivist, when additional information is required beyond that provided by the finding aid system. A reading room for research is essential, along with copying and other facilities and equipment that provide access to records in multimedia formats. A brochure on the scope and facilities of the repository is highly recommended, with warnings about copyright restrictions.

Preservation

Archivists hold documents for their use today, and in trust for the future. Although simple techniques are sometimes appropriate, restorative conservation (repair) is usually very costly; preventive conservation should be practiced from the moment of acquisition onwards. Correct storage and handling to avoid damage by chemicals, water, fire, dirt, mould, and insects is essential and should take place within an environment of 22° Celsius and 50% Relative Humidity. Keeping air free from dust and pollution further prolongs the life of documents. Direct sunlight must be excluded and ultra-violet filters should shield lights where documents are exposed.

Archives must be made secure against theft, fire and water damage. Careful attention must be made to ensure that the physical space for storage of documents is protected and that researchers register before consulting archival materials.

Training

There are a variety of opportunities for archivists to acquire professional qualifications through graduate archival studies programmes at universities across Canada. Archivists responsible for small archives who have not had any formal training at the outset should consult the provincial/territorial archival council or association in their area for information about archival training and continuing education courses that may be offered. Workshops and short courses are offered from time to time and these should be taken at the first opportunity by those without any training in archives. Information about education and training opportunities can be obtained from provincial/territorial archival associations and councils.

Select Resources

The following publications are recommended as useful references for archivists to guide them in the successful administration of their archives:

Canada:

Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives, The ANLA Resource Binder for Small Archives. St. John's, Newfoundland: Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives, 1998.

Baird, Donald A. and Coles, Laura M., A Manual for Small Archives. Vancouver: Archives Association of British Columbia, 1988, 222 pp., illus.

Bureau of Canadian Archivists / Canadian Council of Archives, Rules for Archival Description / Règles pour la description des documents d'archives. Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists/Canadian Council of Archives, 1996.

Bureau of Canadian Archivists - Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, The Archival Fond: from Theory to Practice. Edited by Terry Eastwood. Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1992, 225 pp.

Cardinal, L. et al. Les instruments de recherche pour les archives. La Pocatière: Documentor, 1984, 123 pp. (Collection Accès à l'information administrative).

Couture, Carol and Rouseau, Jean-Yves, The Life of a Document: a Global Approach to Archives and Records Management. Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1987, 357 pp. [Translated from Les archives au XXe siècle: une réponse aux besoins de l'administration et de la recherche]

Australia:

Ellis, Judith, Keeping Archives, 2nd edition. Victoria: The Australian Society of Archivists Inc, 1993.

United States:

The Society of American Archivists regularly publishes and updates its Basic Manual series, which includes such topics as appraisal, reference service, arrangement and description, etc. These can be obtained from The Society of American Archivists, 600 South Federal, Suite 504, Chicago, IL. 60605, USA.

International:

International Council on Archives, General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD-G). Adopted by the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards. Stockholm: ICA, 1993

International Council on Archives, International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families (ISAAR(CPF)). Prepared by the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards. Paris: ICA, 1995.

About the Canadian Council of Archives

Founded in 1985, the Canadian Council of Archives assumes leadership within the Canadian archival community and provides coordination and strategic planning. It advises the National Archives of Canada on national priorities, policies, and programs for the development and operation of a national archival system. Included in the CCA's mandate are such matters as:

- studies needed in developing the Canadian archival system;
- the establishment of principles, standards, and national priorities;
- the allocation of resources, grants, and services;
- the design of new programs, grants, and services to assist the development of the Canadian archival system;
- strategic planning to make the needs and concerns of the Canadian archival community better known to policy makers, researchers, and the public;
- and the coordination of joint projects within a national archival system.

The Council, in addition to the chair and vice-chair, is made up of one representative from each provincial or territorial council/association, and two representatives of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, as well as the National Archivist. Among the observers are representatives of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the National Library of Canada, and the Bureau of Canadian Archivists.

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