Introduction

Every archive is unique; it’s part of what makes it an archive. It is important to remember that each archive, the records it holds, and the way it works will vary. But when archives are managed and made accessible for research, they all have some things in common. This beginner’s guide will lead you through the basics of using archives in historical research, although its content will be equally relevant to a wide range of projects.

By using this guide, you will learn about what an archive is, different types of archives, how archives are organised, and the types of material they hold, as well as how best to search archives to locate primary source material, how to navigate archive websites, and how to prepare for a visit to an archive.

We recommend that you read through this guide before setting out on your own research, to ensure you are working efficiently and effectively, but you can also dip in and out of it in the future as your research progresses. In particular the archive checklist at the back of this guide will be particularly helpful.

This guide has been created as part of a series by Leeds University Library Special Collections and the School of History. Other packs in the series deal with primary source skills, and can be found on the Special Collections website as well as through the History VLE.

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Further Resources

- Leeds University Library Special Collections: https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-research
- The National Archives: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research
- Archives Hub: https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/guides/usingarchives/
ARCHIVE BASICS: UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHIVE

So, what is an archive?

In the course of daily life, individuals and organizations create and keep information about their personal and business activities. Archivists identify and preserve these documents of lasting value.

These records -- and the places they are kept -- are called "archives." Archival records take many forms, including correspondence, diaries, financial and legal documents, photographs, and moving image and sound recordings. All state governments as well as many local governments, universities, businesses, libraries, and historical societies, maintain archives.

The National Museum of American History
(http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/about/what-are-archives)

TYPES OF ARCHIVE: THE BASICS

Archives can be organised according to a range of factors, such as their location, their subject matter, or how the material in them was created. There are many types of archive in the UK (and beyond), but generally archives fall into the following categories:

National:

National archives are usually the largest archives of a country and are responsible for holding materials relating to the government of a country.

Example: The National Archives, Kew, London.

County Archives/ Record Offices:

Each county will have a smaller archive which holds public records relating to the surrounding areas, such as electoral registers or historical maps. Records of local authorities are at the core of county archives, but they usually also hold items donated to them from the local area, such as personal collections of diaries and letters, as well as records of local businesses, clubs, charities, schools and more. They are often merged with local studies library services.

Example: West Yorkshire Archive Service (Leeds), Morley.

University Archives/ Special Collections:

Some university libraries will also include their own archives - or ‘special collections’- holding items deemed to be historically important. They vary widely in size and hold a wide range of material, dependent on what they collect, often including rare book and art collections as well as other archival material. Most special collections (and archives in general) will be strong in some subject areas but not others.

Examples: University of Leeds Special Collections, Brotherton Library.
Specialist Repositories:

Some archives are created with the purpose of collecting material relating to certain topics, such as individuals, areas, or themes. This include archives which hold a wide range of different material relating to one topic, as well archives of a particular business or organisation. These archives are not always open to the general public but may be accessible to researchers.

Examples: National Football Museum Archive, Marks and Spencer Company Archive.

THE ORGANISATION OF THE ARCHIVE

Getting to grips with the organisation of archives – sometimes known as archival hierarchy- will aid you in your research and make sources easier to find. Archives are not simply huge groups of primary source materials, but are organised into collections (and sub collections), series (and sub series), and files (which also include items, and pieces).

The materials held by an archive are sorted into groups, known as collections. While some small collections will hold all of their documents in one place, most will be then sub-divided into series. These series will hold collections of individual documents, known as files.

For example, an archive may hold a collection of diaries written during the First World War. The diaries in this collection would be sorted into series, according to the person who deposited them perhaps (such as nurses or soldiers). Each file within a given series might relate to one individual, with each item being one of their diaries.

ARCHIVE > COLLECTIONS > SERIES > FILES> ITEMS> PIECES

Each archive might use slightly different terminology to describe the levels of its hierarchy (a file could be called a record, or a series called a sub-collection), and each collection will have different levels of organisation. Understanding the following diagram will help you to quickly recognise the structures of the archive you are working with, but do be prepared to spend time understanding each collection, and do expect inconsistency.
MATERIALS HELD IN ARCHIVES

Archives hold a vast range of materials, from documents including newspapers or letters, objects such as photographs or clothing, to videos and sound clips. The materials you wish to consult can be very fragile and are usually rare, and you may sometimes have to consult copies instead of the real thing. There are several types of material you may consult in an archive, which you may not have come across before.

Microfilm and Microfiche:

Some material, particularly large volumes such as newspapers, will only be available on microfilm (reels of film to be used with a projector), rather than in hard copy. Archives will be equipped with microfilm readers which are simple to use, and archive staff will be on hand to help you use these.

Material might also be held on microfiche, which is similar to microfilm, but images are held on a card rather than a reel. While these terms might seem daunting at first, reading documents on microfilm or microfiche is simple to do and shouldn’t put you off!

Born Digital

Many archives now deal with what they call 'born digital' records. All this means is records that only exist in digital form, as opposed to digital copies of paper documents. These might include digital images, e-mails, word processing files, digital audio recordings, etc. Archives are increasingly making arrangements for access to born digital records, either online or via dedicated terminals in reading rooms.
LOCATING ARCHIVES

The first step in your archival research will be to identify which archives you will need to use or visit.

It is important to remember that archives, or at least the material held within them, weren’t created with future historical research in mind. It is extremely unlikely that you will find the archive (or collection) that you want to use by searching for your essay or research title. Instead, think about the types of records you want to use, and where they might have ended up.

Also remember that a large number of historical documents don’t survive, and those that do might have become scattered. It’s likely that you will have to consult more than one archive during the course of your project, as well as face dead ends in your research. Be prepared for your research to lead you in unexpected directions.

There are a number of ways you might go about finding the right archive for you:

- **Archives Hub** and **The National Archives** both have databases of UK archives and collections which you can search online. You can also use broad search terms in google to try and locate potential relevant archives. **AIM 25** is also useful for searching for archives in the London area.

- **Ask the supervisor** of your research, as they are likely to know about many archives which could be relevant to your own project. Also check the **bibliographies** of relevant books and articles, as well as the **acknowledgements**, to see which archives others working in the field have used.

- **Get in touch with the archivist.** This is some of the best advice we can give- archivists often know their collections better than anyone and can advise you on what their archives do (and don’t) hold. If you have identified places that you think might be useful, but aren’t sure enough to visit, the archivist might be able to point you in the direction, or tell you about hidden gems of original material to use.

**BUT**, **don’t expect the archivist to do the work for you.**

When you approach archives, try to give as much information about what you are looking for as possible and suggest resources that you have already identified as useful, rather than sending over your essay question to each archive you find and asking what they have.

Archives are becoming increasingly digital- some archives are now completely online, and many are now digitising some of their core collections. While in the majority of cases you will still need to visit an archive in person, it’s worth thinking about digital access when planning your research.

USING THE ARCHIVE TO FIND PRIMARY SOURCES

Once you have located potentially relevant archives you can start searching for materials that will be useful in your research.

Each archive will have a catalogue, which lists the records that it holds, and gives information on them. There are two ways to search archive catalogues and find primary source material:

1. **KEYWORD SEARCHES**

Much like with a library search, archive catalogues can be searched using keywords.

It’s important to remember that the archives were not created or organised with your specific research questions in mind, so try to use words that relate to the type of record you are looking for, rather than the question you are trying to answer with them. You should use lots of variations of the words you are searching to maximise the success of your search (for example a search for ‘youth’ could also include ‘young’, ‘children’, and ‘teenager’). Think about the historical terms that might have been used when the records were created.

There are other techniques you can use to maximise the success of your searches, especially when your terms bring up thousands of results. Use broad search terms with advanced search functions to narrow down results by factors such as date. Using specific terms or lengthy phrases will most likely be too narrow, producing too few or too obscure results.

You can use Boolean terms to improve your searches:

- **‘Brunch AND Avocado’**
  - Only results that include both ‘brunch’ and ‘avocado’ (narrowing search)
- **‘Brunch OR Avocado’**
  - Results that include either brunch or avocado (broadening search)
- **‘Brunch NOT Avocado’**
  - Results that include ‘brunch’ but not ‘avocado’ (excluding certain records).

You can also use the following symbols to search more efficiently, if you need to:

- **ASTERIX**
  - Use to truncate words, finding variant ending (e.g. histor* = history, historian, historical).
- **? QUESTION MARK**
  - Use a question mark to search for a variable character (e.g. Organ?ation will search organisation and organization. This is useful for finding American and British spellings of words).
- **“” SPEECH MARKS**
  - Use text within speech or quote marks to find specific words or phrases.
2. BROWSING COLLECTIONS

While keyword searching is the quickest way to search an archive, browsing the archive’s catalogue will produce more useful results and give you a better idea of how the records have been organised.

Some archive websites will have pages or research guides to their core collections, although most often you can locate relevant collections by first doing a keyword search, and identifying where any relevant materials have been organised. For example, once you have found a report on wartime morale in WWII Britain, you may find that this is part of a series, or whole collection, of similar files that you can browse.

Sometimes online catalogues will include PDF catalogue descriptions or research guides relating to series and collections, which will give you more information on what is held in the documents and the way that they are arranged.

Do make an effort to understand the archival hierarchy of the records you are browsing— it will help you identify materials more quickly and effectively. Even where the rest of the collection isn’t relevant, you can use the rest of the series or collection as an indication of how the materials have come to the archive or why they might have been kept.

EXPECT INCONSISTENCY!

While most archives have catalogues, most archives will also have backlogs of material to catalogue, so you should always expect inconsistency. Some collections will be catalogued down to the very small detail, some will only have basic information and indications of their structure. This is all part of the nature of archival research, so don’t let it put you off— but do consider it when planning what material you will use, and what you can tackle in your own timescale.
**Classmark / Reference:** This is used by the archive to identify the record, and it is important to note this down when identifying relevant material. Some records may have the same title but a different classmark, and you will need to reference this when you request items.

**Title and Description:** The title and description is another method of identification for each record, and can give some indication of the contents. Some catalogue entries will include detailed descriptions, others, like here, will simply include a title.

**Collection Details:** Every website is different, but there will almost always be a link back to the collection from which the item comes from, or at least some information pointing to it, as well as a pointer to which level you are looking at. This will help you to explore other related records, and understand where the record has come from. Sometimes this information is shown in a sidebar or tab, as above, and sometimes it is included in a pdf link on the screen. Understanding how each catalogue displays collections takes time, but is hugely helpful.

**Other Information:** Catalogue entries usually include other information too, including author, date, type of document, condition and more (depending on the archive and the document).

**Persistent Link:** As well as the title and classmark, it might be useful to note down the persistent link for the items you are looking at. This will take you directly back to the catalogue entry, so that you don’t have to scroll through search results again to find it.

Remember that each catalogue is different; the information available and terminology used can vary from item to item. The general pointers above should help you to quickly understand and use the catalogues of most archives, but do be prepared to take a little time getting to understanding the structures and layout of the ones that you are using.
Some more examples of online catalogues:

ARCHIVES HUB

Out of Step, Journal of a Conscientious Objector

This material is held at: University of Manchester Special Collections
Reference: GB 133 JDA/1/1/1/3/2
Dates of Creation: 1940-1942
Physical Description: 2 bxc.
Direct Link: https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/data/gb133/jda/1/1/1/3/2

Scope and Content
This is Dawson Jackson’s account of his experiences as a Conscientious Objector during the early days of the Second World War. Two copies, one includes an appendix titled ‘Later in the War. November 1942’.

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Infra-red observations of Sputnik II

Ordering and viewing options
This record has not been digitised and cannot be downloaded. Request a quotation for a copy to be digitised or printed and sent to you.

Reference: AVA/6/25963
Description: Infrared observations of Sputnik II
Date: 1958 Jan 01 - 1958 Dec 31
Held by: The National Archives, Kew
Former reference in its original department: Tech Note RAD 729
Legal status: Public Record
Access conditions: Access on transfer
Record opening date: 26 October 2006

Context of this record
All departments:
AVA - Records created or inherited by the Ministry of Aviation and successors, the Air Registration Board, and related bodies
Records of the Royal Aircraft Factory and the Royal Aircraft Establishment (later the Royal Aerospace Establishment)
AVA A - Ministry of Defence and predecessors: Royal Aircraft Factory, later Royal Aircraft Establishment, later Royal Aerospace Establishment: Reports
AVA A/C/5563 - Infrared observations of sputnik II
PLANNING A VISIT

ONE MONTH BEFORE

✓ Book an appointment in advance

Most archives will require an advance booking for you to consult their records—from just the day before up to a month or more. This is to ensure that there is a seat for you in the search room (a designated space for you to view documents), and allow the team to retrieve the items you want to view beforehand. While some archives may allow you to simply turn up, there is no guarantee, so it’s always a good idea to book in advance. Check individual websites for advance booking, making requests, and opening times.

Remember that items in archives are reference only. You won’t be able to take them away with you, so think about how much you can manage in a day and be prepared to spend a substantial amount of time there.

Bookings and requests are usually done by email or a booking request on an archive website.

✓ Request Initial Items

Again check individual guidelines for each archive, as some may require that you request items weeks in advance. It’s always a good idea to reserve some items so that you can get started right away when you arrive, even if you need to request items again during the visit.

When you email to request items, remember to include both the title of the record you want to view, and the class mark/reference number.

✓ Check the Archive Regulations

Each archive has its own set of rules and regulations, which you need to check when planning a visit. As well as advance booking and item requests, consider how long you are allowed to stay at an archive, if there are any costs for entry, if you can take photographs of items and if there is a cost associated with this (taking photos for free will allow you to take copies of longer material home to read, and shorten the length of your trip).

✓ Get as informed as possible

Research can be a lengthy and unpredictable process, and to an extent the ‘not knowing’ is what makes your work research. However there are some things you can do in advance in order to work as efficiently and smoothly as possible. Is there anyone you can ask about the types of records you will see, and how long that might take? Are there any similar records nearby—such as in the range of records you can find in Special Collections—that you can use to become accustomed to either the content or type of record? Above all, be prepared for return trips, and open minded about dead ends in the research or paths leading to other archives.

THE DAY BEFORE

✓ Sharpen Up, Wrap Up and Pack Up

You will only be able to use pencils in search rooms, so make sure to pack these instead of pens, and/or take a laptop.
Search rooms are often cold too (temperature controlled to preserve the records), but you won’t be able to take coats in with you so packing a cardigan or jumper is always a good idea.

There might not be access to plugs either, so charge up your laptop, phone, or other devices to be on the safe side.

Finally, many archives are in obscure places and might not be close to amenities such as shops and cafes. As well as making sure you know where you are going, think about whether you will need to take food and drink with you.

✓ Take ID or the relevant ticket

You will need ID to enter most archives, or a relevant ticket if you have visited before. Archives operate different policies—some will accept photo ID, some will issue you with a specific ticket for their facilities (like a library card), and most local record offices use a CARN ticket which you can use at any participating archives. Check archive websites for their requirements beforehand, but as a rule, take some photo ID with you address on and your student card to be safe.

WHEN YOU ARRIVE

✓ Lockers

You won’t be able to take your coats and bags or food and drink into the search room, and instead will have to store your belongings into a locker or other designated area. It’s therefore a good idea to have all of your pencils, papers, notes etc. collected together and easy to access, so that you are ready to take them in with you.

✓ Sign in

You will also be expected to sign in at the main desk usually, and hand over any ID or relevant ticket.

✓ Search rooms

You will then be able to enter the search room and view the documents you have requested. Archives don’t have their items on open shelves to browse like libraries, so as mentioned above you might have to wait for items if you have pre-requested them.

TOP TIPS FOR THE SEARCHROOM

✓ Before starting to make notes on content, take down as much information as possible on the records you are viewing- including reference numbers, dates and descriptions. Remember that you might be looking back at these notes in a few months time and you probably will have forgotten what a source looked like, or where the information you are reading came from.

✓ If you can take photographs of the material, take a picture of the reference number or label first- this will separate each items in the folder on your phone or camera, allowing you to easily identify individual items and where they have come from afterwards.

✓ Note what isn’t there too- keeping a record of what isn’t useful will ensure that you don’t waste time requesting the same material twice.