

Guide to Managing Your Archives

Items that have strong historical value must be arranged, described, and preserved with care to ensure that they are accessible, discoverable, and available to a wide audience. While researchers and students are usually considered when thinking about accessibility and discoverability, you might want to consider others who will want access to your materials. These might include family or other community members, or even the general public who may have an interest in your collections for reasons beyond formal, academic research. Considering whom you want to have access to your holdings will help you think about how much to **process** (organize and describe) a collection, what security measures to use, and how to store your materials.

Storage and housing

One of the most important things to consider when holding archival material is the storage environment. Doing so will ensure that your collections are **preserved and accessible for as long as possible.**

- It is best to house materials in **cool, dry places where the temperature and humidity will remain stable** despite outside weather such as rain, wind, snow and sun.
- **Limiting both natural and artificial light** will prevent the deterioration of the materials you are collecting.
- You should consider other risks to preservation in your storage area such as **mold, pests, water damage, fires, and theft.**
- It is important to assess the risks to your materials and to make plans to prevent any loss of material should an emergency occur. As an example, you might want to store your boxes on raised shelves if the space materials will be housed in is susceptible to flooding. You can also **create an emergency plan** to salvage particularly valuable materials in the case of an emergency.
- Some collectors choose to house their materials in off-site storage lockers if there is too much material to safely house on-site. However, there can be risks that come with turnover should there be any issues with payment or if the owner of the storage locker passes away. To make sure materials are not lost, **make sure there is a plan in place to save the collection in case there are any changes in ownership or any issues with the storage locker rental.**
- When possible, it is best to store photographs and fragile documents using chemically inert plastic sleeves, and **acid-free folders and boxes with proper labeling.** You may also need oversized folders and sleeves for large items such as posters or maps which should be stored unfolded and flattened. Folders should fit in their boxes snugly, with neither too many nor too few folders so they do not begin to tear or curl. Consider using acid-free spacers or half-size boxes if folders are too loose or putting some folders in another half-size box if they are too tightly packed. Archival supplies can be purchased from

companies like Gaylord Archival or Hollinger Metal Edge. **However, they are not always the most affordable, so you can also use clean cardboard boxes with lids and standard file folders as an interim solution until proper archival supplies can be purchased.**

- If you want to digitize your materials and preserve those files, it is important to consider **whether you have the proper equipment for both digitization and file storage.** For example, if you want to digitize photos and documents you should purchase a high-quality scanner that will not damage your materials and that will provide a higher resolution quality. For other data and digital material such as websites, social media accounts, scientific data, and audio-visual recordings, you should research which storage and software is available and appropriate for your specific collection. If you have an abundance of digital files, you may need additional hard drives, cloud storage, or other storage software to house large amounts of them. More information about digital storage can be found here: [Purdue University's Personal Digital Archiving: https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=595151&p=4117366](https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=595151&p=4117366)

Processing/organizing your materials

Arrangement

How you arrange (organize) and describe your collections will dictate **how accessible your collections are to researchers and other patrons** in the general public. Think about who will be interested in viewing or accessing your collections – is it just family members? Community members? Future researchers? Other individuals who are curious about your family or organization? Would you like all the above to use your collections? If you plan on eventually donating a collection to a repository like a museum or library, you can leave arrangement and description largely up to the archivists at that institution. They will try to keep to your original order of materials to keep that context intact for those viewing the collection in the future. They will also be responsible for creating a **finding aid** that will guide those looking at the collection as to what the collection is about, who created it, and what is documented within it. On the other hand, if you plan on housing your collection on your own, arranging and describing it will **help you keep track of where specific materials are and help visitors decide what to ask for when visiting your holdings**, should you make that access available.

- Physical groupings for storage in archival holdings are often of **similar media or format** such as correspondence, photographs, diaries/scrapbooks, certificates, posters, or other documents. If there are different types of material in the collection, they should be grouped together in containers **to ensure proper storage.** For example, photographs should go with other photographs, manuscript papers should go with other papers, etc.
- Materials can be organized within those groupings in **chronological, reverse chronological, or alphabetical order.** Which of these orders best fits your collection is up to you. If many of your photographs have dates on them, then chronological or reverse chronological order makes sense. If you have letters that are all addressed with names, then alphabetical order makes more sense.

- You should **group materials without dates or names together** and try to find another grouping within that to categorize them. You can also try to estimate the date – for example with photographs, often the background, kind of photo, or the clothes people are wearing in it can indicate the time period in which the photograph was taken.

Once items have been grouped together and put in the proper order, you can begin cataloguing and describing your collection.

Description

You can either choose to create a **general catalog or inventory of items in your collection, or a thorough finding aid**. Finding aids provide more context for your collections such as:

- who created it (Biographical Note),
- a summary of the collection (Abstract),
- what is represented in the collection most prominently (Scope and Content Note),
- and the terms on which the collection can be accessed (Information on Use).

An example of an annotated finding aid can be found on the Society for American Archivist's website. Finding aids organize lists of materials into **series, sub-series, boxes, folders, and items**. The series and sub-series are dictated by those groupings mentioned above that you chose for your collection. **The description or intellectual organization does not necessarily have to match the physical organization used for storage**. For example, although photographs might be stored together for storage and preservation purposes, they might be listed in different series according to the intellectual purpose of the material. Materials stored in the same location might be listed in different series if they are relevant in different contexts.

Your finding aid should have an inventory of your holdings within these groups and should include:

- the box or volume numbers,
- a title for the box clearly stating what it contains,
- the number of boxes or volumes within that series or sub-series,
- the contents,
- dates associated with the contents,
- and any other important notes about the items.

If you prefer not to or do not have the capacity to provide such a specific description of your collection, you can also create a **collection-level description that covers the general scope of the materials**. This should include a description of when, why, and by whom the collection was created and a general inventory or list of what is housed in the collection. Whether the finding aid you make is thorough or not, **it is important for people viewing your collection to be able to know what it holds and the terms on which they can access those materials**. This is so that viewers can decide for certain whether your collection is relevant to their research or their curiosity and, if so, which items to ask for when planning a visit.

Providing access

Archivists are not only dedicated to the collection, arrangement, description, and preservation of historically significant materials. Another important aspect of archival work is **providing as much access as possible to the collections for which they are responsible**. While there are many risks to providing unlimited access to archival materials, it is critical that they be made available, at least in some way, to the viewers of your choice so that the historical narrative of the collection is told accurately. A question that archivists often ask themselves is: **if the archives are not for sharing with the people, what are they for?**

There are security concerns that come with providing open access to archival holdings, especially if you are not asking for identification from those coming to your archives. If you are only sharing your collections with trusted loved ones or community members, perhaps this is not as much of a concern for you. However, if you plan on providing access to your archives to the general public, you will want to put some measures in place to ensure that your materials are not subject to theft or possible mistreatment. This can include:

- not allowing backpacks into your reading room or viewing area,
- hiring a security guard or appointing someone as a security liaison,
- or requiring that visitors register with a valid photo identification.

However, it is important to note that **these security measures will affect different groups of people in unique ways**. Not everyone has valid photo identification, and security guards might police Black people and people of color differently than they would others. You should think about whom you want to have access to your collection and whether your security measures will prohibit that access to some groups of people, particularly Black and Indigenous people of color.

Seriously consider providing more universal physical access to your materials, making sure that your archival repository has ramps and elevators, captions for videos to serve those that are deaf or hard-of-hearing, voice descriptions for those that are blind, as well as access options for online and digital resources for those that are vision-impaired. These are important for providing universal access to archival materials whether online or in person.

Your reading room or viewing area should have set rules to ensure the preservation of your materials. Such rules often include:

- only allowing pencils and not allowing any pens or other ink that might harm materials,
- handling materials as little as possible with clean, dry hands,
- using gloves for photographs and when removing items from sleeves,
- and using weights or cradles when possible and necessary.

If certain materials are particularly fragile or contain high acid levels, such as newspaper clippings or telegrams, **consider photocopying or scanning them onto acid-free paper instead**

of providing direct physical access(ONLY when absolutely necessary as doing so too much can damage the material).

Conclusion

The BMRC is committed to connecting those who document, share, understand, and preserve Black experiences. With this resource, we hope to provide guidance for those who wish to save and provide access to their collections so that the legacies of Black people in the Chicagoland area may be archived properly. We understand that not everyone will want to donate their collections to an outside repository. This guide is intended to address the challenges and outline the processes of archiving historical materials. We hope that providing this resource will ensure the preservation of more Black people's experiences and works throughout Chicago.

DO...

- DO create an emergency plan in case of extreme circumstances such as flooding, theft, or fire.
- DO store items in acid-free folders and boxes when they are available.
- DO keep materials that help identify people, places, or dates within the collection like labels and written notes.
- DO create an inventory of your items to keep track of what is in the collection and where specific items are located.

DON'T...

- DON'T house your materials in unstable environments that could be affected by water damage, mold, pests, fires, and theft.
- DON'T leave materials unorganized and scattered, as this can affect the preservation and accessibility of the collection.
- DON'T assume that all materials can be stored together. Research what different kinds of storage is needed by certain materials, such as cold storage (40°F or below) for color photographs and negatives, or room temperature storage for papers and manuscripts.
- DON'T leave your materials exposed to artificial or natural light for long periods of time.

Additional Resources

Links:

[Library of Congress Personal Archiving Project Guide:](https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2016/05/how-to-begin-a-personal-archiving-project/)

<https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2016/05/how-to-begin-a-personal-archiving-project/>

[Austin History Center Starting an Archive:](https://library.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/u124/starting%20an%20archive.pdf)

<https://library.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/u124/starting%20an%20archive.pdf>

[National Archives How to Preserve Family Archives:](https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives)

<https://www.archives.gov/preservation/family-archives>

[Activists' Guide to Archiving:](#)

<https://archiving.witness.org/archive-guide/>

[National Museum of the American Indian Archive Best Practices:](#)

http://files.archivists.org/groups/museum/standards/4.%20Arrangement%20and%20Description/NMAI_archives_processing_guide.pdf

[Purdue How to Read a Finding Aid:](#)

<https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=352889&p=2378063>

[PBS DIY Creating a Digital Archive:](#)

<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/blog/diy-creating-a-digital-archive/>

[Lyrasis Digitization Guide:](#)

<https://www.lyrasis.org/services/Pages/Digital-Toolbox-Digitization.aspx>

[Lyrasis Guiding Questions for Getting Started in your Digitization Project:](#)

<https://www.lyrasis.org/services/Documents/Digital%20Toolbox/Getting%20Started%20in%20Your%20Digitization%20Project%200215.pdf>

[Purdue University Personal Digital Archiving: The Basics:](#)

<https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=595151&p=4117366>

Books:

[Archives for the Lay Person:](#)

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Archives_for_the_Lay_Person/Eaj4Xf-Y1TsC?hl=en&gbpv=0

[Born Digital: Guidance for Donors, Dealers, and Archival Repositories:](#)

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Born_Digital/QQDkoQEACAAJ?hl=en

[Starting an Archives:](#)

<https://catalog.lib.uchicago.edu/vufind/Record/1619042>

[Personal Archiving: Preserving our Digital Heritage:](#)

<https://www.discoverbooks.com/Personal-Archiving-Preserving-Our-Digital-Heritap/1573874809.htm?cond=0002>

[Don't Throw it Away!: Documenting and Preserving Organizational History \(UIC\):](#)

<https://library.webhost.uic.edu/libweb/DTIA.pdf>

Videos:

[Alpena County George N. Fletcher Public Library Preserving Family Documents:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLhhiMCTbTE)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nLhhiMCTbTE>

[The Association for Library Collections and Technical Services YouTube Channel:](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvPEK3a3Qb0GMCSzqoZDnlg)

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvPEK3a3Qb0GMCSzqoZDnlg>

Key Words

- **Acid-free:** paper that is distinguished from those that have residue from the acids used to break up wood fibers during its manufacture. Residual acid will destroy the paper fibers and make the paper more brittle over time. Preservation includes measures to minimize this deterioration as much as possible.
- **Archives:** records made or received by a person, family, or organization that are preserved because of their historical and continuous value.
- **Deed of gift:** an agreement transferring title to property without monetary compensation. May be for real, personal, or intellectual property. Deed of gifts are usually contracts that establish conditions for the transfer of title to documents and placing any restrictions on access/use.
- **Finding aid:** a document describing the contextual and structural information about an archival resource or collection.
- **Historical significance/value:** the importance or usefulness of records that justifies their preservation because of administrative, legal, fiscal, or evidential information that helps with understanding the human past. This is not about whether the person, people, or organization that created the collection were/are famous, but about how they have contributed to their communities. Materials do not have to be old or perfectly organized.
- **Intellectual control/organization:** the creation of catalogs, finding aids, or other guides that help researchers locate materials relevant to their interests.
- **Preservation:** the protection of materials through minimization of chemical and physical harm, injury, decay, or destruction to prevent the loss of information and extend the life of cultural property with non-invasive treatment.
- **Processing:** preparing archival materials for use through the arrangement and description of the collection.
- **Repository:** a space or institution that cares for and stores archives.
- **Title:** the rights/privileges to control and dispose of property. Also, legal evidence of ownership.

These and more definitions are available at the [Society of American Archivists' Dictionary of Archives Terminology: https://dictionary.archivists.org/index.html](https://dictionary.archivists.org/index.html)

This resource was created by Tanya Calvin, BMRC Community Engagement Archivist, 2020.