

Guide to Managing Your Archives

Historical materials that are important to us must be arranged (organized), described (cataloged), and preserved with care to ensure that they are accessible, discoverable, and available to our chosen audiences. 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 your intended audience will help you think about how much to *process* (organize and describe) a collection, what access protocols to use, and how to store your materials.

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 otherwise unspecified 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 are 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.

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 your materials.
- 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 create an emergency plan to save particularly valuable materials in the case of an emergency. For example, you might want to mark boxes to rescue if an emergency flood is likely to occur or you may store your boxes on raised shelves as a preventative measure.
- 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 issues with the storage locker rental.
- When possible, it is best to store photographs and fragile documents using proper *housing* materials such as chemically stable 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 a temporary solution until proper archival supplies can be purchased. See more information about which housing materials you can purchase on our [Starting Your Archives: Supply List spreadsheet](#).
- 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 will provide a higher resolution quality. For other data and digital materials such as websites, social media accounts, scientific data, and audio-visual recordings, you should research which storage and software is 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. See more information about personal digital archiving and small-scale digitization by watching [Part Two of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#) or looking at our [Personal Digital Archiving & Digitization Resources Document](#).

Once you have the proper housing for your archival materials, you can begin to process, or organize and catalog, them.

Processing your collection

Arrangement

How you arrange (organize) and describe (catalog) your collection will dictate how accessible your collection is to your audiences. Think about who will be interested in viewing or accessing your collection – is it just family members? Community members? Future researchers? Other individuals who are curious about you, your family, or your organization? Would you like all the above to use your collection? If you plan on eventually donating your materials 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 and keep that context intact for future viewers of the collection. They will also be responsible for creating a *finding aid* that will let people know 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, if you make that access available.

- Physical storage groupings of archival materials are often in categories 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 similar containers to ensure proper storage. For example, photographs should go with other photographs in proper sleeves or envelopes, manuscript papers should go with other papers in folders, etc. See more information about which housing materials you can purchase on our [Starting Your Archives: Supply List spreadsheet](#).
- 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 undated letters that are all addressed with names, then alphabetical order by name or location could make 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 the photograph is from.
- Arrangement for materials stored digitally will likely be similar to groupings for analog materials, though there are some differences. Learn more about personal digital archiving by watching [Part Two of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).

Once items have been grouped together and put in the proper order, you can begin cataloging 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 about your collections such as:

- who created it (Biographical Note),
- a summary of the collection (Abstract),
- which materials are most prominent in the collection (Scope and Content Note),
- and how the collection can be accessed or used (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 sections of series, sub-series, boxes, folders, and items. The series and sub-series could be decided by the physical groupings of materials for storage mentioned before, but the description in your finding aid, or *intellectual organization*, does not necessarily have to match the physical organization used for storage. For example, although photographs might be stored together for preservation purposes, they might be listed in the finding aid as part of a different series along with the letters they were originally in envelopes with. In other words, 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 series' and sub-series' 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,
- a summary of the contents,
- dates associated with the contents or a specification that they are undated,
- and any other important notes about the items, including preservation notes (i.e., if a folder holds particularly fragile or at-risk materials).

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 summarized list of what is found 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 materials are in it and the terms on which they can access them. This is so that viewers can decide whether your collection is relevant to their question and, if so, which items to ask for when planning a visit.

Digital materials must also be described properly if they are to be discoverable by your audiences. Learn more about describing digital collections by watching [Part Two of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).

Once your collection has been processed, you can begin providing access to your materials.

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 access to their collections for their chosen audiences. While there are many risks to providing unlimited access to archival materials, it is critical that they be made available to the viewers of your choice so that the collection's historical narrative is told accurately. A question that archivists often ask themselves is: if the archives are not for sharing with our communities, what are they for?

There are possible 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 possible mistreatment or theft. 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 access to them, particularly for 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; and access options for online and digital resources for those that are vision- or hearing-impaired.

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 soft weights or foam cradles when possible and necessary for books or fragile items.

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).

Providing access to digital collections is different from providing access to analog collections. Learn more about providing access to digital collections by watching [Part Two of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).

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 preserved and shared. 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 legacies throughout Chicago and beyond.

Other BMRC Resources for Managing Your Archives:

- Learn more about basic archival practices by watching [Part One of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).
- Learn more about personal digital archiving, and small-scale digitization by watching [Part Two of our Introduction to Archiving Series](#).
- Find links, videos, and our Starting Your Archives: Supply List in our [Archiving Resource Packet](#).

Additional Resources

Links:

[Library of Congress Personal Archiving Project Guide](#)

[National Archives How to Preserve Family Archives](#)

[WITNESS Activists' Guide to Archiving](#)

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

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

[Documenting the Now Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations](#)

[Documenting the Now Web Archiving Tools](#)

[Project STAND Archiving Student Activism Toolkit](#)

[The Blackivists' Five Tips for Organizers, Protestors, and Anyone Documenting Movements - Sixty Inches From Center](#)

[Recollection Wisconsin Digital Readiness Toolkit](#)

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

Books:

[Archives for the Lay Person](#)

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

Videos:

[Alpena County George N. Fletcher Public Library Preserving Family Documents](#)

[The Association for Library Collections and Technical Services YouTube Channel](#)

Key Words

- **Acid-free:** paper that is distinguished from those that have acidic residue from its manufacturing. Residual acid will destroy the paper fibers and make the paper more brittle over time. Preservation includes steps to minimize this deterioration as much as possible.
- **Archives:** records made or received by a person, family/community, or organization that are preserved because of how they represent their legacies.
- **Deed of gift:** an agreement transferring title to or ownership of property without financial compensation. May be for real, personal, or intellectual property. Deed of gifts are usually contracts that establish conditions for the transfer of title to materials and placing any restrictions on access or use.
- **Finding aid:** a document describing the contextual and structural information about an archival collection. Used by viewers of collections to discover and select materials to request.
- **Historical significance/value:** the importance of records that justifies their preservation because of the evidential information they contain that help understand 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.
- **Housing:** how archival materials are stored appropriately in folders, sleeves, envelopes, boxes, etc. to preserve them long-term and protect them from deterioration or damage.
- **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 materials with non-invasive treatment.

- **Processing:** preparing archival materials for use through the arrangement (organization) and description (cataloging) 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.

More definitions are available at the [Society of American Archivists' Dictionary of Archives Terminology](#).

This resource was first created by Jehoiada Zechariah Calvin, BMRC Community Engagement Archivist, in 2020, and edited by him in 2022.