

A2A - Basic Archival Principles for New Cataloguing projects

The catalogues created as part of an A2A project are to be 'archive' catalogues, that is the material (papers, files, photographs, films, CDs etc) is to be treated as 'archives' or 'records'. This means that when arranging and cataloguing such material the nature of archive material and how it differs from library material, for example, needs to be understood. There are also some basic principles that must be adhered to.

What are Archives?

Archives are the documents produced as part of everyday human interactions or transactions. An invoice is produced when someone buys something from someone else, for example. More complex transactions may include many documents, the papers relating to the execution of a project for example.

Archives hold evidence of these transactions, which can (at least partly) be recreated from them in the future. Archives, therefore, have evidential value, which is not only to be found in each separate document but in the relationships between documents.

That archives have evidential value is reflected in the fact that they are also often called 'records'. While all archives, so long as their context is preserved, are records, not all records are archives. Archives are those records that archivists have chosen to keep permanently.

Arrangement

When arranging archives this value as evidence must always be kept in mind. Nothing should be done in arranging the material that means a loss of evidence. The archivist is, therefore, said to be responsible for the 'moral defence' of the material in their care. In order to do this, archivists must adhere to two related principles when arranging material.

Provenance

The principle of provenance states that the archives of a particular body must be kept together as a whole. This grouping of the archives of a single organisation is often referred to by the French term *fonds* and the principle is also known as that of *respect des fonds*. This means that the material for each institution or person must be kept separately rather than being mixed together or treated as a single entity. In this way the 'context' of the archives will be preserved and the evidential value with it. By context here we mean information about the 'creators' of the archives. This context can be expressed in the answers to (many) questions, such as:

- When and how was a body set up?
- What did it aim to do?
- How was it funded?

- When and why did it stop functioning?

The term 'archive creators' also needs defining. By this we do not necessarily mean that a body or individual authors all the documents in a collection. An archive collection will also include all those documents accumulated by a body while carrying out its business. This will then include documents authored elsewhere but received and used by an organisation for example.

Context is not only important in relation to the body as a whole, but also within it. Particular parts, offices or individuals for example, will have had particular functions and created records accordingly. These relationships should also be understood and preserved where possible.

Original Order

Related to the principle of provenance is that of original order. This states that documents should be physically kept in the order established by their creators. They should not, therefore, be arranged according to an order perceived as useful to a particular group of users, such as subject or chronological order.

Again this principle works at all levels of the collection. The records of particular offices or people should be kept together. So too should groupings, or series, of records created as part of the same function, which are often physically similar, such as minute books or files of invoices. Finally such files should also be kept as found and not broken up.

If on first sight a collection appears not to have 'original' order then some detective work will be necessary in order to recreate it. Most of the contextual information needed will be found in the documents themselves. Look for physical similarities and reference number systems as well as who created particular documents and for what purpose they were created. Secondary sources such as administrative histories may be useful as will any information about the custodial history of the material since it left the custody of the creator.

Only if, after such investigation, no original order can be found, is it permissible to impose an order that seems to best reflect the context of the creation of the records and the needs of users.

Cataloguing

The principles of provenance and original order have an effect on the way archives are catalogued and distinguish archive catalogues from those of library books or museum objects. The latter may simply be lists of separate objects and there may be no information about the way any one book or object relates to any other. The archive catalogue, however, has to represent the relationships between documents in order to ensure that the context in which they were created is evident to the user.

When creating an archive catalogue then the archivist is creating a representation of the collection in question and each separate collection (*fonds*) will have a separate catalogue. In order to represent the relationships between documents it is necessary to have information within the catalogue about who created the documents and why, as well as information about an individual document's relationship with other documents in the collection. As each document also need to be described, an archival catalogue may have three broad 'levels' of description:

- **Contextual:** This will include information about the collection as a whole and what the creating organization or person did and why. This level is known as *fonds*. There may be a number of 'sub' levels (*sub-fonds* etc) relating to the individual people, offices or functions that have created records.
- **Record Groupings:** Within the contextual groups will be found groups (or *series*) of records that have a similar function, and are often physically similar. Examples would be collections of minute books or play scripts. Again within such *series* there may be *sub-series*.
- **Individual documents:** At the lowest level are the documents themselves. There is often a sub-level here. A *file* for example will consist of many individual papers or *items*.

From this it follows that archival catalogues are hierarchical or multi-level. The main set of guidelines for creating such catalogues is the International Council on Archives' *General International Standard Archival Description* (Ottawa, 2000) often simply called ISAD(G) (see <http://www.ica.org/test/biblio.php?pdocid=1>). This gives a set of four rules for multi-level description and lists a set of data elements that descriptions at all levels must be broken down into. There is also a set of guidelines created for A2A contributors that explains the relationship of the rules in ISAD(G) to catalogues created for A2A (see A2A - Guidelines for New and Revised Cataloguing: http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/partnerprojects/a2a/pdf/cat_guide_multi.pdf). All new catalogues produced for A2A projects must conform to these guidelines.

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