



A2A - Guidelines for Collection Level Description

Guidelines for collection level description in A2A

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Introduction

Phase 1 of A2A (April 2000 to March 2002) consisted solely of the conversion of existing catalogues to standardised electronic form. Phase 2 (April 2002 to March 2004) of the programme includes new and improved collection level description as well as retroconversion and it is for those projects undertaking such work that these guidelines are aimed.

Contributors undertaking retroconversion projects should consult *Cataloguing Standards for A2A*.

Contributors undertaking multi-level cataloguing projects should consult *A2A – Guidelines for New and Revised Cataloguing*.

These guidelines are not concerned with other aspects of archival administration such as accessioning or space management.

These guidelines are also not concerned with the technical process contributors use to prepare new cataloguing for submission to A2A. There are a number of options here, such as export from a proprietary database system, such as CALM, or EAD files and there will be related technical guidelines for each.

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Main considerations

- **Access to Archives:** When preparing cataloguing descriptions for A2A the most important thing to remember is the underlying purpose of the Programme – Access to Archives. All descriptions need to be a complete and accurate enough reflection of the original records to enable A2A users to decide if they wish to see them.
- **Data exchange and standards:** Descriptions created now also need to be fit for use in contributors' cataloguing systems. Data exchange demands that descriptions achieve certain levels of consistency and this is only achieved by conformance to standards. The underlying standard for A2A is the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G) - 2nd edition, Ottawa 2000).
- **Depth of description:** Although there is a preference for multi-level description in A2A, as users are mainly interested in descriptions of records they can actually see, collection (fonds) level descriptions will be accepted. Collection level descriptions will need to be richer in elements such as scope and content or administrative history in order to give the user a fully rounded view of what a collection may contain.
- **Rules for minimum conformity:** While descriptions prepared for A2A may use all 26 ISAD(G) data elements, other factors such as resources, local policy and the nature of particular records may necessitate a more skeletal approach. There is a minimum level of description to which all contributors to A2A must conform. To this end it is necessary to adhere to a few basic rules in terms of both structure and content.
 - As A2A usage statistics suggest that a large proportion of new users have never used an archival catalogue before; descriptions should be as clear and straightforward as possible. For example, they should avoid over complexity in

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terms of structure as well as technical language and abbreviations.

- In collection level descriptions the following elements are mandatory: level, reference, title, dates, extent, creator, administrative or biographical history, and scope and content. Access conditions are mandatory where they apply.
- As such information would normally be found at lower levels in a multi-level description, collection level descriptions should also have the language of material and physical characteristics data elements that cover a whole collection when possible.
- The main descriptive elements, whether title or scope and content, should be as full as necessary to give the user a sense of what a particular record or records contain. In particular attention should be drawn to the people, bodies, places, events, activities and subjects with which records are mainly concerned.
- The content of the date element should at all times be that of the dates of creation of the record(s). In order to provide clarity for the user the content of the date element should be expressed simply as the year at levels above file. Uncertainty can be used if necessary but other forms of dating (regnal years, feast days, law terms etc) should not be used.
- Creator names should conform to the NCA's *Rules for the Construction of Personal, Place and Corporate Names* (1997).

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Collection level descriptions

The purpose of a collection level description is to provide enough information for the user to decide whether to investigate the records described, or a fuller catalogue of them, further. The impression gained of the records from such a description is bound to be more superficial than that from a multi-level description.

In order for collection level descriptions to serve their purpose thought should be given to their completeness. Such descriptions may need to be richer in elements such as scope and content or administrative history in order to give the user a fully rounded view of what a collection contains. The same elements found at the fonds level of a multi-level catalogue to the same records may be briefer as some data may be found at the lower levels to which it specifically relates.

Data elements

The following elements are mandatory for collection level descriptions (the ISAD(G) reference is given in brackets):

- Reference (3.1.1)
- Title (3.1.2)
- Dates (3.1.3)
- Level (3.1.4)
- Extent (3.1.5)
- Creator (3.2.1)
- Administrative / biographical history (3.2.2)
- Scope and content (3.3.1)
- Access conditions (3.4.1) (if applicable)

The following elements are recommended if applicable:

- Language of material (3.4.3)
- Physical characteristics (3.4.4)

All other ISAD(G) elements may be used.

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Reference

ISAD(G): 3.1.1

Content Guidelines

Give a short code that is unique to the fonds being described within a repository. Follow your own repository's normal practice in assigning a reference. If you are not tied to any particular scheme, the following notes should help:

- The code may be best made up of letters, perhaps based on the title of the collection, although numbers may be used as well.
- Uppercase should be used in preference to lowercase and a mixture of cases should be avoided.
- There should be no punctuation

For A2A, there is no need to include the country and repository codes as these are automatically inserted into catalogues on the A2A database.

Examples

Q

ABH

2D81

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Title

ISAD(G): 3.1.2

Content Guidelines

Give a brief natural language statement that uniquely identifies a fonds. It should be made up of two elements: the name of the creator in natural language order, and an indication of the nature or form of the collection. This should be a basic description, such as 'archives', 'papers' or 'records'; detail about specific types of records can be given in scope and content.

Examples

Bradford Musical Union Records

Collection of Chinese Cookery Recipes

Family and Estate Archive of Tempest Family of Tong Hall

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Creation dates

ISAD(G): 3.1.3

Content Guidelines

Give the date(s) of the creation of the records as a year or span of years. For copies this means the date of the copy rather than the date of the original, which should be included in the title or scope and content.

Only an indication of period covered is needed by the user and precision is unnecessary. Detailed dates with days and months should, therefore, not be given. If the simple date is likely to mislead the user then explanation can be given in scope and content.

While inference and uncertainty indicators (such as square brackets, c, or ?) may be used at this level there is really no need to do so. First and last dates should be separated by a hyphen and no other punctuation should be used.

Examples

1877-1979

1324

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Extent

ISAD(G): 3.1.5

Content Guidelines

This element is necessary to give the user a general indication of the size of collection being described. There can be two types of entry.

The most useful is an estimation of the number of units in a collection. Most appropriate for small fonds is the actual number of records. It is better to give generic types of record than use either precise definitions of record types (such as minute book or deeds) or simple phrases such as documents or items.

For larger fonds the precise number of actual documents may not be known or be so large as to be meaningless to the user. For such collections, it may be more appropriate to give the number of series.

Second, a linear or cubic space measurement may be given. Render units in full to avoid confusion.

Examples

15 files and volumes

16 series

3 linear metres

61 cubic metres

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Creator(s)

ISAD(G): 3.2.1

Content Guidelines

Give the name(s) of all the corporate bodies, person(s) or families that created or originated the records in the fonds being described.

Each separate name should be formed in accordance with the NCA' s *Rules for the Construction of Personal, Place and Corporate Names* and A2A – *Authority Controlled Terms and minimum conformity*.

These names are included in the special interest searches in the A2A database and when a name already exists in the database it is this form of the name that should be used.

Examples

Bradford Musical Union

Breeze, Gabrielle Ruth Slater, d 1921, physician

Tempest family of Tong Hall, West Riding of Yorkshire

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Administrative / biographical history

ISAD(G): 3.2.2

Content Guidelines

Give a concise narrative statement of the administrative or biographical history of the creator(s) of a fonds designed for the better understanding of the material by the user.

Record information that relates to the period covered by the records, such as official name, date of existence, enabling legislation, functions, purpose and development, administrative hierarchy, changes of name for corporate bodies; full names and titles, dates of birth and death, pertinent activities, occupations and offices, significant achievements for individuals.

Examples

Gabrielle Ruth Slater Breeze obtained her M.D. at London in 1898, and in 1910 when these papers were written she was with the Women's Medical Mission at Tangier. Her name is not found in the Register after 1921.

Guy's Hospital School was established in 1949 to enable children in the hospital to continue their education, maintain their interest and encourage their recovery. After 1965 it was staffed by the Inner London Education Authority.

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Scope and Content

ISAD(G): 3.3.1

Content Guidelines

Give a terse narrative statement designed to enable a user to judge whether a fonds is worthy of further investigation. The names of the people, bodies, places, events, activities and subjects most associated with a fonds should be included.

It may be necessary to provide a fuller description than one would for a multi-level fonds scope and content. In order to give a complete picture of a fonds, one may need, for example, to include a description of a particular record (or records) that would be properly described at a lower level in a multi-level description. This is not to say, however, that the scope and content of a collection level description should consist of detailed file-by-file descriptions.

With large fonds it is useful to indicate the structure of the collection as a whole, but this should not consist of a listed table of contents, which may be more appropriate in the arrangement element (ISAD(G) 3.3.4).

More detail can be given about the form and period covered by documents, if the simple statements in title and dates might mislead.

Examples

Records of Bradford Musical Union, including minutes 1878-1978, reports 1905-1930, rules 1877-1946, membership 1877-1964, financial 1930-1961, photographs 1933-1942, lists of songs performed 1928-1979 and programmes 1936-1978.

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Mandatory data elements

Records of the Tong family of Tong Hall, including estate, family and township bills and receipts 1573-1841; estate, family and township correspondence 1587-1894; deeds mainly for the Tong Hall estate and also with references to Drighlington, Birstall, Hunsworth, Adwalton, Bowling, Tyersal and Northumberland 1327-1957; estate records including field books 1674-1806, estate and farm accounts 1590s-1841, coal mining and stone quarrying accounts 1755-1841, estate rentals 1642-1854, papers re tithes 1754-1843, papers and accounts re wood 1806-1837; family records including household and family accounts 1620s-1797, extracts from parish registers 1682-1884, letters of attorney 1558-1710, marriage settlements 1572-1694, wills 1322-1885, papers re family genealogy 1100-1886 including official records including Acts of Parliament 1761 and 1846-1849, game certificates 1787 and 1837, papers re knighthood of Sir Henry Chomley 1641, canvas of votes in Tong for parliamentary election 1807, Tong township papers re collection of land tax 1760 and 1795-1861 with land tax assessments; township records including apprenticeship indentures 1660-1840, churchwardens' accounts 1628-1870, constables' accounts 1785-1839, examinations 1715-1839, filiation orders 1715-1834, surveyors' accounts 1789-1874, overseers' accounts 1763-1849, various township officers' accounts 1768-1826, removal orders 1711-1840, settlement certificates 1691-1832, censuses 1801, 1811, 1821; miscellaneous records including accounts of cloth from Hamburg 1682-1693 and list of horses to be run at Preston 1776.

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Access conditions

ISAD(G): 3.4.1

Content Guidelines

Give a general statement of any access conditions affecting the fonds as a whole or a major part of it. This is only necessary where access is restricted and there is no need to have general statements that access is available to records, such as 'All records are open'.

For collection level descriptions it may also be necessary to include access restrictions affecting discrete groups of records that would be noted at an appropriate lower level in a multi-level description.

Examples

All records under 75 years old are unavailable

Patients' records are closed for 100 years from the date of the last entry in the file

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Language of material

ISAD(G): 3.3.3

Content Guidelines

If the fonds is wholly, or in significant part, in a language other than English then state the language(s).

Examples

Latin

French and English

German

French, English and Latin

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Mandatory data elements

Element: Physical characteristics

ISAD(G): 3.4.4

Content Guidelines

If there is anything about the physical nature or condition of the fonds, or significant part of it, that may affect its use, then state this briefly.

Examples

Large parts of this collection are badly damp-stained

Many records are badly damaged