



The National Archives

What is the policy of The National Archives on wearing gloves to handle documents?

At The National Archives, our policy is that staff and visitors are not required to wear gloves unless easily-damaged material, such as photographs, is being consulted. Staff and readers are asked to ensure that their hands are clean and dry, and to refrain from applying hand cream or licking fingers before handling documents. We believe that the disadvantages of wearing gloves outweigh the advantages:

Advantages:

Perspiration is not stopped by washing and drying hands. People tend to perspire at different rates and exude different amounts and types of chemicals depending upon levels of stress, surroundings and their own body chemistry. Over time, microscopic amounts of contamination could cause serious damage to most objects. Wearing gloves is necessary whenever mounted prints, drawings, photographs and fine bindings are handled, as these have extremely sensitive surfaces which are irreversibly damaged by finger prints.

Disadvantages:

Wearing gloves makes it difficult to handle paper due to the loss of the sense of touch in the finger tips. This is potentially hazardous for fragile materials, as well as being difficult for the reader. Cotton gloves may catch on damaged edges of leather or parchment as well as labels. Ill-fitting gloves make it difficult to get a firm grip on large, heavy items such as books, so there is an increased risk of an item being dropped.