



Smithsonian
National Museum of the American Indian

ARCHIVE CENTER:
BEST PRACTICES GUIDE FOR ARCHIVISTS,
PROJECT CONTRACTORS, INTERNS,
AND VOLUNTEERS

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Introduction

Effective archival processing depends on two overriding features: attention to detail and consistency. This guide is an effort to codify NMAI Archive Center processing practice so that all staff members, project contractors, interns, and volunteers process archival collections in a consistent manner with the same attention to detail.

Processing is an art; it is a skill that improves the more an individual practices it. To that end, this guide is not meant to be a substitute for direct consultation with an experienced archivist. All staff members are encouraged to speak with an experienced staff member if they are unsure about a particular concept or are faced with a circumstance not covered in this guide.

What is Archival Processing?

Archivists use the term processing to describe the activities of arranging, describing and preserving archival materials. Processing allows researchers access to the collection through a variety of means. After processing is complete, a better sense of what is contained in the collection is conveyed through a number of ways. A collection level description will be written for the catalog directing researchers to the particular collection. The researcher may then view the finding aid, which gives more explicit information about the collection.

Archival arrangement is based on two core principles, **provenance** and **original order** (*respect du fonds*). The principle of provenance states that records should be maintained according to their origin. This means they should be kept together on the basis of who created the collection and not intermingled with records created by a different person or organization despite similar subject matter. Provenance reveals important information about the context in which records were created. The context influences the content and coverage of records and can provide information on the attitudes of the time. Thus, archival records should not be rearranged on the basis of subject, form of material, chronological period, or some other classification scheme when some order already exists within the records themselves. The only time an arrangement is imposed on a collection is when the provenance cannot be determined, or it is so confusing that it prevents access to the records.

Original order or *respect du fonds* means record groups or series should be kept in their original order, and not rearranged by some other grouping deemed more appropriate by the archivist. Keeping records the way the creator kept them again provides information about the context of the records and may be vital to understanding them. Again, reorganizing records because they seem wrong or difficult to understand should not be done unless the original order has been destroyed, or maintaining the original order renders the records inaccessible.

Describing the records is the most important aspect of processing, as description provides information on the context in which records were created, as well as describing the physical characteristics and intellectual contents. Accurate description allows researchers to determine whether the records are relevant to their research.

While arranging and describing material allows access to the collection, preservation ensures its long-term use. Employing basic preservation techniques, such as removing paper clips and photocopying acidic material, will allow the material to survive for future generations.

I. Preliminary Planning

Archival collections are seldom acquired in pristine order with detailed documentation of their origins, internal structure, subject matter, and historical significance. In order to intellectually and physically organize the materials properly and to assemble the documentation necessary to create appropriate finding aids, the archivist must consult a variety of external sources and should study the contents of the collection itself. This work is suffused with, and informed by, a continual process of gathering information about the materials, analyzing them, and applying the analysis to their organization and description. A preliminary inventory of the material will help you understand the types of materials present in the collection and determine whether an original order exists.

The groupings that have emerged during the preliminary sorting form the basis of a **series**. The creation of a series within a collection allows for a structure, which will make the collection as a whole easier to describe and access. A “series” is a grouping of similar material within the larger collection; the material may be similar in format or in purpose. Series are often further divided into subseries, whose characteristics follow that of the series, e.g. the grouping of even *more* like material.



II. Arrangement

The physical arrangement of materials within a folder is typically in alphabetical, chronological or in reverse chronological order (common amongst businesses and organizations). The labeling of folders is done along with physical arrangement of materials.

The following is a list of general guidelines for physically arranging materials:

- Place documents without dates at the end of each folder. However, read the item carefully to identify any clues that may reveal an approximate date.
- Depending on circumstances, folders may be arranged alphabetically or chronologically. The archivist will confirm the system of arrangement to be used in each series or subseries with you.
- Catchall folders are common finds, particularly among administrative papers. Catchall folders carry titles such as “miscellaneous” or “general.” If you come across folders already labeled as such, consult with the project archivist, as their contents can sometimes be readily identified and integrated elsewhere in the series or subseries. If, indeed, you are faced with keeping such a folder, it should be labeled “General” and placed in the beginning of a series or subseries. Do not use the term “Miscellaneous.”
- Unfold and, to the extent that it is possible, flatten documents that require it. Consult with the project archivist if you encounter documents that project above the tops of their folders. Extremely oversized materials (e.g. posters) should be removed. In the case of removal use a separation sheet to document where the oversize material came from and where it will be housed.
- When arranging photographic materials special care should be taken to document the existence and location of originals and copies. The same *image* may have multiple *objects*. (See the NAA Guidelines for processing Photographic Collections).



III.

Description

As you process a series or subseries, take sufficient notes or make photocopies of significant materials that will enable you to describe—not interpret—it afterwards. Ask yourself the following questions: What, in general terms, does it document? How revealing is it? What topics predominate? Is there anything of outstanding interest? Are there any shortcomings? Does it contain a line or two that is particularly evocative of the person's thinking?

When you have completed a series or subseries, you should write a description of what you processed. It need not be the last word, but as the processor you are in a unique position to comment on the material you have arranged. It is safe to say that no one will be as close to the material as you. Description of the material is vital in processing. Poor description will prohibit researchers from knowing what is in the collection, while accurate description will allow researchers and archivists to find material more quickly.

III.

Appraisal (Removals and Discards)

Appraisal is the process of determining whether records and other materials have historic value. The first hurdle to overcome is to understand that not every item or record should be kept. The basis of appraisal decisions may include a number of factors, including the records' provenance (origin) and content, their authenticity and reliability, their order and completeness, their condition and costs to preserve them, and their intrinsic value.

- Remove duplicates. In deciding which document you will retain, the following criteria should be used: the presence and quality of annotations, including **original** signatures, the legibility of the text, and the condition of the paper. If uncertain, consult with the project archivist.
 - Remove insignificant material. Material unconnected with the main themes of the main entry's existence, such as a bill from a garage, a brochure from a resort, a FedEx receipt, an appeal letter from a charity, an annual report from an unrelated business, or a statement from a bank should be discarded. What is called flotsam—transmittal notes which have no value without the document to which they were once attached (e.g. the enclosed is for your information), or insubstantial messages (e.g. call Mr. Smith or a fax coversheet with nothing more than the recipients name and fax number)—should be discarded as well.
 - Material that is replicated with minor variations in large quantities, such as form letters, should be reduced to a representative sample, but consult with the archivist before acting. Multiple of personal documents, such as articles and speeches, should generally be reduced to one, providing the latest version can be identified. Again, consult with the archivist before acting, as this is not a hard and fast rule.
- (Appendix II)**

- If you encounter documents that appear to have been misfiled (e.g. their contents bear no relation to the subject under discussion elsewhere in the folder), and the correct location of the item is obvious, please put it there. However, sometimes seemingly unrelated documents can be found together for reasons that are not apparent. If you are unable to ascertain where the item should be placed, consult with the archivist.
- Discard newspaper clippings or other material photocopied for preservation purposes.

➤ Envelopes are only kept if they have clear evidential value. For example, if a letter has not date, but was in an envelope with a post mark or otherwise clearly dated, it is kept.



IV.

Preservation

Care in handling, as well as providing a stable environment, are critical to preserving paper collections. Please consult with the archivist for the level of preservation needed for your project.

The following is a list of basic preservation guidelines to be considered during processing:

- Place materials in acid-free boxes and folders.
- Photocopy extremely fragile materials or highly acidic items (newspaper clippings, construction paper, telegrams, carbon copies, thermofax) onto acid free paper. Materials selected for preservation photocopying should be flagged by placing a yellow flag in front of the item to be copied. If an item is in extremely poor shape and will not survive repeated handling, consider making the photocopy immediately. Discard clippings after photocopying originals. **(Appendix III)**
- Bring serious mold, bug infestation, and/or water damage to the immediate attention of the archivist or the Curator of Manuscripts.
- Remove fastenings, such as metal and plastic paper clips, staples and rubber bands. If fastening strongly resists removal, consult an archivist.
- Remove any organic material included in the collection, such as pressed flowers.
- Remove material from picture frames.
- Remove material from binders when possible. Prior to this, make sure that any identifying information on the binder is replicated elsewhere; otherwise photocopy this information onto acid-free paper, and place the photocopy at the beginning of the relevant folder.
- Separate oversize items either in an oversize flat box or in the map case. A Separation Sheet should be completed for each removed/separated item. **(Appendix IV)**
- Enclose damaged items in polypropylene sleeves.
- Consult with the archivist before separating audiovisual materials and photographs.
- Alert your supervisor to any damaged material, such as torn paper. You may be instructed to make simple paper repairs using archival-quality paper repair tape.



V.

Measurements

Collection volume is calculated in linear feet.

In the interest of statistical analysis, anyone processing a collection must calculate the size of the collection before it has been processed and once again after it has been processed. In the course of processing, the volume of a collection can decrease as much as 10%-30% owing to the proliferation of duplicate copies and flotsam throughout a given collection. However, depending on the type of materials within a collection, the size can stay consistent or even increase as much as 10%, particularly when adding oversized material or memorabilia.

Calculating Linear Feet

Box measurements"

Archival document box (regular size): .42 lf

Archival document box (half-size): .21 lf

Record center box (letter): 1.25 lf

Record center box (legal): 1 lf

Oversized: measure the height of the box

To quickly calculate the linear foot measurement of multiple records center boxes use the following formulae:

(where "x" is the number of boxes)

Legal: $\frac{(12" \cdot x)}{12}$ = total linear feet (or just total the number of boxes)

Letter: $\frac{(15" \cdot x)}{12}$ = total linear feet

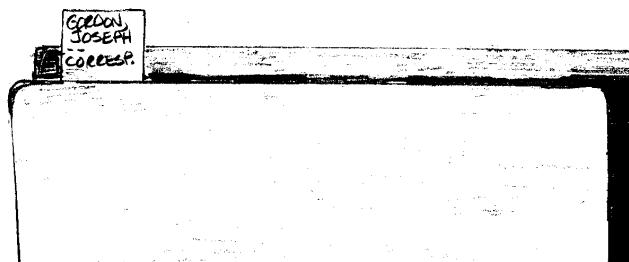
**When photographs and audiovisual materials are included in a collection count the number of items per box or folder so the total can be included at the collection level.



VI.

Folder Titles

Depending on the level of description and arrangement needed on your project, you may record and/or create new folder titles for the collection. Before discarding the folder you are replacing, transcribe its title, which should include a description and a date, on a yellow post-it note and affix this information to the tab of the folder you are creating. The non-adhesive portion of the post-it note should project above the top of the folder, allowing data entry to take place easily (see below).



➤ Only transcribe a folder title, however, if it is accurate and adequate. Having arranged the documents in the folder, you should be in a position to make this judgment, but if you are doubtful, take a moment to look at them more closely. However, if you find the old folder title accurate you may physically place the old folder in the very back of the new folder you've just created. If you feel that there are shortcomings in the folder title, consult with the archivist. Folder titles need not be complex, but they must correspond with the subjects, however broadly defined.

Examples of folder titles:

Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation, 1965-1970
Dockstader, Frederick., 1960-1963
American Indian Movement, 1962-1967
American Indian Movement—Means, Russell., 1964-1968 (indicates a sub-subject split of material)
American Indian Movement—Memoranda, 1965-1966 (indicates a form/genre split of material)

➤ The folder title should also include the date or date range of the documents to which they relate. A year is often sufficient but months may be included to signify a break in the material between folders. If months are included they should be written in the following format:

1970 February-June
1970 July-December

➤ Specific dates of material are usually not required but special circumstances do arise. Again, consult with the archivist if you have a question.

Use the following guidelines when dating material:

- 1960 (means the date is actually on the item, supplied at the time of the item's creation)
- circa1960 (means an intelligent guess would place the date "around" that *year*)
- 1960s (means the decade is certain)
- circa 1960s (means the *decade* is an intelligent guess)
- undated- (no year date)
- 1960 June-August (means the contents of the folder contain items created in the months of June, July and August 1960)
- Donot abbreviate the words "circa" or "undated." (See DACS 2.4)

➤ Archival boxes should also be labeled with post-it notes, identifying the name of the collection and the series and, where applicable, the subseries of which they are a part. A temporary number should also be assigned to each box, identifying its position within each series or subseries to help you keep the collection in order and accessible.



VII.

Style and Consistency

As many individuals, both professionals and the students they train, process many collections, it is imperative that all finding aids and folder titles are consistent. Refer to the following points often as you process a collection and enter data into the inventory.

Naming Standards

Larry Beck Papers
Reuben Snake Papers
National Congress of the American Indian Records
Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation Records
American Indian Ephemera Collection

Alphabetical Arrangement within a Series or Subseries

- When appropriate, alphabetical arrangement schemes are preceded with a “General” category:
- To qualify the contents of a particular series or subseries, qualifying terms are placed in parentheses and *not considered part of the alphabetic arrangement*. However, use this method of qualifying folder contents in moderation.

Exhibits—Echoes of the Drum, 1987
Exhibits—Echoes of the Drum (Advisory Council Report), 1988
Exhibits—Echoes of the Drum, 1989
Exhibits—Echoes of the Drum—Correspondence—A-Z (by Name), 1987

Folder Title Standards

- In titles, capitalize the first word, the last word, and all words in between except articles (a, an, and the), prepositions under five letters (in, of, to), and coordinating conjunctions (and, but). These rules apply to titles of long, short, and partial works as well as folder titles.

Board of Trustees—Council of the Heye Foundation
Salaries—Outside Comparison with Other Museum Salaries

- Titles of books should be underlined on folder tabs (use a ruler) and *italicized* in Archivists’ Toolkit; titles of “papers and articles in quotes.”

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson
“Deconstructing John Gray’s Gendered Paradise” by Susan Hamson in *Taking Sides: Controversial Issues in Human Sexuality*.

- If the current title of a folder looks to be misspelled, check the folder’s contents—it is quite possible that the misspelling was *intentional*. In the case of these intentional misspellings, insert the notation “[sic]” immediately following the word. This will note to both the individual doing data entry, as well as to the researcher, that the misspelling was intentional and not accidental.

Archives Listserv [sic] Documents
Udderly [sic] Smooth Hand Cream

- As a general rule, spell out all abbreviations and acronyms.

N.J. State Assembly *should be* New Jersey State Assembly
Cmte. on Women's Studies *should be* Committee on Women's Studies

- Exceptions to this are abbreviations or acronyms of organizations or other entities that are so common they are often used interchangeably with the full name. In cases such as these, the first entry should include the abbreviation or acronym with the full name of the entity spelled out in parentheses. All subsequent entries may use the shortened form exclusively. Note that it has become standard form to use acronyms *without* periods after each letter.

Museum of the American Indian/Heye Foundation (MAI)—Correspondence
MAI—Minutes of Meetings

Names and Personal Titles

- Titles of individuals can be a bit tricky, but the examples below should serve as a good guide (be aware of punctuation):

Charles, Prince of Wales
Anderson, Dame Judith
Smith, Rev. Stanley S.
Horton, Mrs. Arthur
Moffett, Mrs. James, Sr.
Stevenson, Adlai E., III

Academic titles like Professor and Doctor, used before a name, are not retained, nor are abbreviations of degrees following a name, like Ph.D., M.D., or LL.D.



Additional Grammar Notes

Though they seem obvious, use these general rules to guard against the unconscious mistakes we are all bound to make at one time or another.

The Apostrophe

- Plural:

1970s (**not** 1970's; **not** '70's)

Although '70s is a grammatically permissible form, it is not DACS compatible.

- Possession:

Singular nouns (including those that end in *s*) get an apostrophe:

It is the **press's** right to print unpopular view

The **Director's** office is in Audubon Terrace.

- Plural nouns that do not end in "*s*" get an apostrophe:

MAI's history can be traced back to the nineteenth century.

Michael likes to browse in the **men's** department.

- Plural nouns that *end in s* get only an apostrophe added after the word:

The **School of International and Public Affairs'** lecture series begins on Monday evening.

The **archivists'** beer bash was a rousing success.

- Do not confuse some of the possessive pronouns with contractions that look and sound similar:

Possessive Pronoun	Contraction
your	you're (you are)
its	it's (it is)
their	they're (they are)
whose	who's (who is <i>or</i> who has)

Refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style* for additional grammatical questions.

Folder Labels

It is important that when writing information on archival folders to PRINT legibly using upper and lowercase letters with no loops or personal attributes. In order to prevent the words from becoming light in color and losing their "crispness," always write with a sharp #2 pencil.

The label format is as follows:

On the Tab Across the Front of the Folder:

- *Left Corner:* Name of Collection
- *Left Corner Below:* Collection Number
- *Middle:* Series or sub-series title (if appropriate) AND Folder Title
- *Right Corner:* Inclusive dates of materials within folder
- *Right Corner Below Tab:* box and folder number within the box (**save this for the very end of your processing, as the numbers are very likely to change!!**)

<i>Reuben Snake Papers</i>	<i>Correspondence: A-Z</i>	<i>1932-1950</i>
<i>NMAI.AC.012</i>		<i>B 1.1</i>

It is also acceptable to write the name of the collection on the left side of the front of the folder beneath the tab, as in the example below, particularly if the collection has a complex arrangement of series and sub-series. **Basically, write the hierarchy of the collection on the file folder as it would appear in the finding aid, starting on the left and ending on the right.**

<i>Biographical/Personal</i>	<i>Resumes</i>	<i>1966-1972</i>
<i>Larry Beck Papers</i>		
<i>NMAI.AC.017</i>		<i>B 1.1</i>

In this example, Biographical/Personal is the series title; Resumes is the folder title; and the dates are the folder inclusive dates; Larry Beck Papers is the collection title. It is Box 1, Folder 1.

If you find that you need more space, move the information further down on the folder. For example, for a really long subseries title, it is acceptable to move the series title down to the actual face of the folder above the collection title, rather than on the tab portion of the folder.

- Folders are numbered consecutively per box, not consecutively throughout the entire collection.

Exceptions to above standards:

Do not write the title of the collection on the file folder for collections processed to minimal and preliminary levels – all Level 1s and many Level 2s. Later possible changes in the collection title and additions make labeling the folders unnecessary. However, it is crucial that the box labels be accurate for these collections.

The title of the collection will be written or stamped on the archival folder when a collection is processed to a Level 3 or 4. In some cases, the title should also be written or stamped on the folders for collections processed to a Level 2, if the processing work is more detailed and falls somewhere between a Level 2 and 3 (See Processing Proposal).



VIII.

Restrictions

Entire collections or material within collections may be restricted from public access. Restrictions to access may be agreed upon with the donor or department that transferred the material to the repository. In addition, material may also be restricted due to legal and privacy concerns. While processing be alert to material that contains information such as social security numbers, medical history, and other information that must be protected under the law.

- **ANY records that detail student information (i.e., health, grades, disciplinary action, etc.) are confidential and access is restricted for the lifetime of the student.** Student records are protected under FERPA (Family Education Right and Privacy Act: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>). As a matter of processing practicality, student records are restricted for a period of 80 years from the date of the record.
- Collection materials are sometimes restricted due to conditions set forth in the donor agreement. Consult your supervisor with regard to any restrictions that may apply to a particular collection before beginning processing.
- Records can also be restricted due to cultural sensitivity issues, including, but not limited to, burials, human remains, ceremonies, and any affiliated items. See the overall NMAI Collections Management Policy and Archive Center Collections Management Policy for specifics on this issue.

- **If the collection, or part of a collection, is subject to restrictions this must be indicated by affixing a FLOURESCENT restriction label on each box.** If the entire box is restricted for the same length of time, use the following label:

<p>RESTRICTED Material restricted until [date]</p>

➤ If the collection is restricted for indefinite amount of time due to cultural sensitivity, please note it in this manner:

**RESTRICTED:
CULTURAL SENSITIVITY**

➤ If a box contains folders that are restricted for two or more different time periods then each folder should be flagged with a red paper noting the length of the restriction (Appendix III). This flag can be easily removed on the date indicated thus making the folder accessible. The box, however, must be labeled as follows:

**RESTRICTIONS APPLY
TO FLAGGED FOLDERS INSIDE**

There is no particular rule that dominates your choice of fluorescent label color except the following: for the "RESTRICTED" label, use the same color throughout the collection for consistency. If you need to apply an "ADDITIONAL RESTRICTIONS" label, use a different fluorescent color and use it throughout the collection for consistency.

IX.

Boxing Folders

Improperly boxing folders can very easily undo all of the careful work expended to this point on preserving the documents in your care. A folder may remain untouched for a decade, but if it is improperly boxed its contents may have been seriously damaged.

➤ Folders should be placed within a box so that the contents are snug. You should be able to place your hand down into the center of the box contents—fingertips touching the box's base—and feel both sides snug against your skin. If a box is packed too loosely, folders will jiggle when the box is shaken. Over time they can curl or slowly open and allow the document within them to fold over or to curl.

➤ If a full-size document box is unable to be filled completely, consider using a half-size box to house the folders. If a half-size box is too small, then use rigid acid-free spacers that can be folded and placed behind the last folder. This will allow the folders to stand upright, thus better protecting the documents inside them.

➤ Just as a box loosely filled is dangerous, so too is a box that is packed too tightly. If the box is bulging forward and the flip-top lid cannot be easily lowered in place, or you have to force your hand down into the center of the box's contents and feel folders on either side tight against your skin, then you need to remove folders. Boxes too densely packed can cause documents to bend, tear, or crease.



X.

Data Entry and Description

For an in-depth treatment of entering data into the contents list, consult the NMAI Archive Center document *Creating an EAD Finding Aid in Archivists' Toolkit*.

ACCURACY IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT!

For this reason, it is highly recommended that after the entire contents of each box has been entered, you count the folders within the box to make sure the folder total matches the total number of folders listed in AT.



XI.

Box Labels

Format

Box labels are produced using 3 1/3" x 4" address/shipping labels (Avery 5164); format as indicated below—all text is centered except for the box number, which is justified to the right.

