

A Stable Foundation: creating the future of artifact processing at Iowa State University

The problem?
No process, no product!

350+ artifacts sat uncataloged while more came in, and no records were being created. **This couldn't go on.**

Breaking Down the Problem

What **wasn't** happening?

Artifact cataloging.

Why not?

Lack of clear

responsibility, process, or standards.

How important is it?

Very.

Who should do it?

Student workers.

How can we make that happen?

Assign responsibility, **establish** a process, and **create** standards.

What's the best way to do that?

By transforming personal knowledge into institutional resources: through **documentation.**

Developing the Solution

Assign responsibility

Who was responsible determined how detailed the process and standards should be: **student workers** were ideal for the task (ongoing, high-value, repetitious, low-effort), if we could make the instructions clear enough.

Establish a process and create standards

Working in tandem, we tackled the problems of creating artifact records. This developed into a **learn, do, teach** model, which developed into **test, train,** and **document.**

Learn

In order to codify personal knowledge, we had to gain it first, by wrestling with Past Perfect and existing instructions.

Do

We created and compared separate records, then wrote a walkthrough.

Teach

We had an expert test the walkthrough and provide feedback.

Repeat

This is an iterative process, incorporating feedback and accommodating new needs and uses as they arise.

Building the Foundation

Test:

Student workers tested the new walkthrough; their feedback was instrumental in writing the full manual.

Train

We trained student workers using the manual, assigned them artifacts to catalog, and reviewed the new records with the students to address any issues.

Document

A PDF of the current manual is saved in a network location for student workers to reference, and we handle trainings as necessary.

Takeaways

- Find your best creative time
- Trade tasks as well as sharing them
- Establish what "good" means and how to get there
- Test common examples and edge cases
- Prioritize function when choosing format
- Maintain consistent language
- Make expectations clear
- Explain the "why" and the "how"

“A Stable Foundation: creating the future of artifact processing at Iowa State University” Handout

Learn

We read existing departmental PastPerfect documentation and reviewed PastPerfect records to see what information was recorded and how.

We searched the PDF artifact catalog on our website to see what information is visible to researchers.

Each of us cataloged a similar object using existing documentation and compared our records before discussing what to change and what information should go in a complete record.

Questions we asked:

- Who uses these artifacts and why?
- What would an archivist need to describe, locate, or retrieve an object?
- What information would a researcher need when searching for an artifact?
- What information would a researcher use to find artifacts related to their topic?

Do

One person wrote a walkthrough for navigating PastPerfect and creating a complete catalog record. The other person tested the walkthrough by cataloging a new object.

We repeated the process and edited the walkthrough until it successfully framed what a complete record should look like.

It took ten hours over six weeks of dedicated work time to turn the walkthrough into a manual.

During the working meetings, one person wrote while the other used the software. We discussed, compared impressions, and tried different approaches until we agreed on the process and wording.

For questions of vocabulary, standards, and completeness, we leaned on professional best practices balanced with institutional needs.

Test and Train

We asked an expert (another archivist familiar with artifacts) to test the draft manual, then made revisions and included navigational screenshots.

A student worker tested the manual and noted language or sections that needed more detail. We reviewed the student feedback, revised, and repeated this step.

We organized a meeting with students and went over the manual in detail. We taught them how to create subject terms and use the PastPerfect lexicon. From the revision step, we knew students struggled with those two tasks.

As part of the training process, students are assigned three to five artifacts to catalog. We check the records for completeness and review them with the student.

The department codified the manual and responsibility into an existing workflow for student projects.

Takeaways

Figure out your team’s best creative time and schedule a recurring meeting to discuss, write, and edit the manual.

Test the manual with comparable artifacts for consistency and edge cases for completeness.

Don’t assume base knowledge. The students required very clear instructions about how and when to use specific fields. We couldn’t assume they knew what fields to use.

Keep language consistent between software and manual, explain what the catalog fields are and why we want that information. Provide examples.

Tables were useful for organizing catalog fields, conditions to use them, and obligation levels.

Review records with students, focusing on “good enough” rather than “perfect” records: sometimes there aren’t exact matches or complete information, and that’s okay.