

How to Create an Archival First-Aid Kit

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Just as every archives should have a disaster plan, complete with a salvage kit, every archivist should have an “archival first-aid kit.”

Self-Care in the Archives

Archivists have increasingly raised awareness of the value of archival labor—the human beings behind the archives.^{1, 2} But recognizing archival labor begins with recognizing oneself.

When managing contingent positions, physical health risks from working with dusty and moldy collections,³ and emotional labor involved with sensitive and controversial materials,⁴ archivists need the right tools for the job.

Self-care is a form of advocacy. The first step entails taking charge of your well-being and understanding what you need to succeed, including—literally—a toolbox. I posit that the creation of your own archival first-aid kit is an act of self-care.

Sources

1. Norling, Samantha. “Asserting the Archivist in Archival Outreach: A Case Study and Appeal.” *ArchivesAWARE!* (blog). Society of American Archivists Committee on Public Awareness, January 28, 2016.
2. Zanish-Belcher, Tanya. “What About Invisible Labor.” *Off the Record* (blog). Society of American Archivists, August 7, 2018.
3. McLellan, Peter B., and Gordon P. Baker. “Incidence of Allergy in Archival Work.” *American Archivist* 28, no. 4 (October 1965): 581–584.
4. Caswell, Michelle, and Marika Cifor. “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives.” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43.

Applications for Archivists

Multiple groups could benefit from the archival first-aid kit:

- Contract archivists, who move from project to project and may have limited access to institutional resources.
- Self-employed archivists, who may need to carry a core set of supplies when working with clients.
- Preservation archivists, who routinely use the same tools and need a way to stay organized.
- Archives students, who can learn how to use each tool as they assemble their kit and take ownership of their career.
- Everyone!

The Archivist’s Toolbox

The archival first-aid kit is a personal, portable toolbox that supports your work efforts in a proactive and productive way. It will keep you prepared and organized. **You need to take care of yourself before you can take care of the archives.**

Archival Supplies

microspatula	for removing staples (when paired with a piece of polyester film), lifting manuscript pages, and other delicate tasks
nitrile gloves	for handling most photographs, certain objects, and moldy materials
N95 masks	for working with dusty or moldy collections
pocket microscope	for identification of photographs
hake brushes	for cleaning books and paper (preferably, one brush per format to avoid contamination)
pH pen	for testing storage supplies such as folders
bone folder	for crafting custom enclosures for materials
erasers	for removing minor marks from archival documents
pencils and sharpener	for marking items or folders
notepaper	to keep processing notes or make bookmarks
ruler	for measuring or using as a straightedge
bandages	for inevitable paper cuts
page protector	to store notes and important information (for example, I keep handy a copy of “Crafting Your Elevator Speech” produced by SAA’s Committee on Public Awareness)
contact numbers	including 24/7 collections emergency hotlines, such as the National Heritage Responders and Northeast Document Conservation Center

→ These are only examples. Design your own kit with the things you use every day.



I created my archival first-aid kit in 2018 using a plastic box (dimensions 11 x 5.5 x 7 inches) that I found at an art supply store. I filled it with my favorite preservation tools, including a microspatula, pocket microscope, and hake brush.

Putting It All Together

→ To assemble your archival first-aid kit, consider your workplace and daily tasks.

→ Archives-friendly products can often be found at art supply stores. Other archives-specific tools can be found at archival vendors, such as Gaylord Archival or University Products.

→ Remember: Just because a product is marketed as “archives safe” or “archival quality” does not mean that it is. Look for products that are **nondamaging, reversible**, and have passed the **Photographic Activity Test (PAT)**. Research the products you intend to use. When in doubt, ask a colleague. As an archivist, you have the knowledge and experience to make informed preservation decisions.

→ Keep your archival first-aid kit handy in case of emergency.