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Please send any questions, suggestions or comments about this guide to archives@yorku.ca
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Archival Research Tutorial

Introduction

Welcome!

Archival materials give you direct access to the time or event you are studying. Using archival materials can help you:

- better understand your topic;
- apply your knowledge and experience in a specific area;
- develop your own ideas;
- gain a sense of "reality" about your project.

Finding relevant archival materials is a new process for many researchers. The goal of this guide is to help you conduct research at Archives and Special Collections. We will go through the research process from choosing a topic and getting started to arranging your visit.

If this is your first time searching for primary resources and/or working with archival materials, you may follow the guide as organized. Or, feel free to go directly to the relevant section.

Good luck!

If you have any questions about this guide or need more information about researching contact us as directed on our Contact Us page.

For a printable version of this guide, please click here.
Choosing your topic

Visiting an archives usually comes later in the research process because archives contain raw materials, much like the ingredients in a recipe. When you don't have a clear idea of what you are looking for, doing research may become overwhelming.

Choosing and focusing your topic are the first steps to take in any research process

Following, is an example of the focusing process:

Original research topic: Community activism and urban development

FOCUS

Community activism and urban development in Toronto in the 20th century

FOCUS

Community activism and urban development in Metro Toronto from 1950-1970

Examples of materials you may wish to consult:
Photographs, Archival materials and thematic guides, Pamphlets, brochures and other published materials

For more examples of the focusing process, see Appendix I.

TIPS
To focus your research, ask questions: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN?

WHEN focus on a particular range of dates (e.g. 1950-1970)
WHERE focus on a particular area, block or address of the city
WHO focus on a business or important family/person

CONSIDER
Length of assignment: 300 pages? Or, 10 pages?

When is your assignment due? Do you have 1 year or 4 days?

To identify archival holdings potentially relevant to your topic, it is helpful to do background research.
Background research

**Primary resources** are sources that are usually created at the time of an event. Primary resources are the direct evidence or first hand accounts of historical events without secondary analysis or interpretation. For example, if you were writing a paper on World War I, a soldier’s diary or a newspaper article written during World War I would be considered primary resources.

Prior to visiting an archival institution, it is important that you understand your topic. To do this, do some reading and background research on your topic.

Try using secondary resources available in your library, such as dictionaries, bibliographies and encyclopedias, when you begin your research journey. Secondary resources often provide you with a historical context for the primary resources that you will find in an archives.

**Secondary resources** "are one step removed from the original [primary] source, usually describing, summarizing, analyzing, evaluating, derived from, or based on primary source materials." Secondary resources offer an analysis, description or interpretation of primary resources (first-hand original material such as letters and diaries). For more information on primary and secondary resources, please go to the Library Research Roadmap and click on the Information Kiosk: [http://www.library.yorku.ca/roadmap/](http://www.library.yorku.ca/roadmap/).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary resource</th>
<th>Secondary resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>diary</td>
<td>article explaining the significance and context of the diary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>letters from a soldier to his mother during World War I</td>
<td>book or encyclopedia articles about World War I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>original sketches/illustrations for a children's book</td>
<td>biography or articles on the artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative records (e.g. meeting minutes) from a non profit organization</td>
<td>Newspaper article or book on the organization’s activities and historical development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep in mind that your research question may evolve as you consult these sources. You will focus your topic many times before you step foot into an archives!

- Try using materials found in the Reference section of a library, such as an general or subject specific encyclopedia.
- Pay special attention to the footnotes and bibliographies of any source you consult! They are often rich sources of information.
- Or, try doing a keyword search in your library catalogue to find some general books written on your area of interest.
- You may also want to search a journal index or database specific to your subject area to find some review articles that will provide you with a general overview of your topic.
- You may also want to speak with a reference librarian, your professor, TA or a scholar about the topic you are interested in researching.

For more information on the research process, you may wish to contact the Centre for Academic Writing or consult the Academic writing guide.
Should you be at an Archives?

Records, not books

Archives contain records, not books. Archivists deal with the records left by a person or organization and the relationship between the record and the activity that generated it. As a result, records have meaning and context in how they witness to the creator's activities.

Records are:

- documents made, received and set aside during the course of an activity
- by-products of an activity, not the purpose
- created by an authorized and qualified person
- available in a variety of formats (textual materials, visual materials, sound recordings, etc.)

Researchers often deal with the personal papers of a significant person, such as an author, or an organization. Records generally refer to unpublished materials, such as:

- letters
- photographs
- journals/diaries
- notes and manuscripts
- ledgers or account books
- meeting minutes and agendas
- annual reports and project files
- maps and plans
- sound and video recordings
- drawings

Some of the major differences between libraries and archives are illustrated in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archives</th>
<th>Libraries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Closed stacks</td>
<td>Open stacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect original, unpublished material (e.g. letters)</td>
<td>Collect published material (e.g. books, journals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material is organized according to the way in which the collector organized his/her collection (original order)</td>
<td>Material is organized within a classification system such as Library of Congress call numbers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique material (records)</td>
<td>Other copies of the material may be available in other libraries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group of material is described on a number of different levels within the fonds: fonds level, series level and item level</td>
<td>Material is described on an individual level (e.g catalogue record for a single book)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Items do not circulate; you cannot take the material home</td>
<td>Items circulate: you may take the material home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You search for materials on your subject using finding aids (listing of everything in the fonds)</td>
<td>You search for materials on your subject using an online catalogue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Importance of background research

As we discussed in the Background Research section, it is important to remember that the materials that are generally found in an archival setting are primary resources.

Therefore, it is up to you to research the historical context in which the documents or artifacts were created. Remember, secondary resources will provide you with a context and understanding of the circumstances and time period in which the given document (e.g. letter, photograph, or map) was created. Secondary resources will not, however, interpret the document for you. That is up to you!
Basic facts about archives

Important Facts | Organization of Archives | Brief History

Important facts

Archives and libraries are centres of knowledge that support research and learning, and document and preserve cultural heritage. However, archives are rooted in a different tradition of information management, handling and providing access to information in a particular way. It is one that has emphasized the different roles of archives: legal, historical, administrative and cultural.

This archival tradition impacts how you access and use archival materials.

Organization of Archives

Fonds (it’s French)

Records are viewed as a fonds, the totality of records generated by a person or organization throughout the course of its lifetime. The fonds is a hierarchical structure of groupings based on the ways in which the records were used. The highest level is the fonds, followed by the series, file and item levels. The fonds level gives the broadest view of the records; the groupings become increasingly specific.

Model of the levels of arrangement of a fonds

From: ISAD (G) : general international standard archival description : adopted by the Committee on Descriptive Standards, Stockholm,
Principles: Provenance and Respect for Original Order

There are two principles which govern the arrangement of a fonds:

- Principle of Provenance - all records of one creator are kept together
- Respect for Original Order - all records are maintained in the order the creator had them

**Provenance:** Fonds are generally listed by the name of the creator (person or organization). You can search for them by name. This is why it is important to note names during your research.

**Original Order:** Researchers are asked to keep all materials in the order in which they are found.

Brief history of archives

- Archival work aims to preserve the context in which records were created, maintained and used.
- Archives existed in ancient times (including Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome) and housed government or public records. Records were evidence of action taken and decisions made.
- Archives (buildings) were secure and designed to preserve documents as evidence. For example, the Roman Tabularium had hallways and enclosed staircases connecting it to government buildings.
- In France, the *Archives Nationales* allowed the public to access government records in 1794. Prior to this, archives were generally closed to all except a select few.
- In Canada, archival institutions attempt to document Canadian history from all segments of the population and in all record formats. Government archives often hold private papers in addition to government records. This is known as Total Archives.

Access: Finding Aids, Indexes

Finding aids (aka archival descriptions) describe each level of a fonds, according to the standard, *Rules of Archival Description (RAD)*. To learn more about finding aids, how to use them and how to find the right archives - read on.
Introduction

Finding aids or **archival descriptions** help you find materials in a fonds.

Archival descriptions

- can exist for all levels in a fonds
- provide the context in which records were made and used
- begin by describing the fonds as a whole and then moves to the smaller groupings (series, file, item)

You will use the fonds level description to begin your research. It is the broadest level of description (as pictured here) and gives you an overview of what you will find.

Certain fields can help you figure out whether a fonds is related to your research. The following will tell you how.

Most institutions make fonds level descriptions available online. If you want to more about a fonds after having read the description, contact that institution.

Once you are able to read a fonds level archival description, read on to learn how to find the correct archival institution.
Title, Dates, Extent

**Dates:** Indicates the time period covered by materials in the fonds. Knowing the time period can help you determine if the fonds is useful for your research.

**Title:** Usually the creator - an individual or group responsible for the origin or existence of records by creating or collecting them. If you know the name of an individual or group prominent in your field of study, you can use the name to search archival indexes and databases.

**Extent:** Indicates the amount and format of records in a fonds. This can help you decide if you should visit or roughly plan how much time you need. If there are a number of materials to go through, you may need more time.
Biographical Sketch / Administrative History:

Judith Cowan, author, translator and professor, was born on 21 September 1943 in Sydney, Nova Scotia. She received a BA in Modern Languages and Literature in 1965 and an MA in French Literature in 1969, both from the University of Toronto. She received an MA in English Literature in 1970 from York University where she also lectured during the 1970–1971 school year. She completed her PhD in Canadian Comparative Literature at l’Université de Sherbrooke in 1983. She has been a professor of Canadian, American, and English Literature at l’Université de Québec at Trois-Rivières since 1971. Cowan has translated numerous poems by Quebec writers for Ellipse magazine, a magazine that specializes in translations of Canadian literature. She has also translated whole works by authors such as Gérard Godin and Yves Préfontaine. She was awarded a Governor General’s Award in 2004 for “Marabel,” her translation Pierre Gregoire’s “Lignées sémées.” She has authored and published several collections of short stories, including “Gambler’s Fallacy,” and has several novels in progress.

The fonds consists of chronologically-arranged correspondence files that are both personal and professional in nature. Copies of letters received and, in many cases, copies of letters sent by Cowan herself, make up a significant amount of correspondence with Cowan’s own family as well as copies of letters received from and to Cowan, and David Reling, among others. Fonds also consists of notes and drafts for “Marabel” as well as correspondence with the respective authors, notes on collected and uncataloged professional files consisting of tenure and sabbatical reports, and other material that documents her lengthy career as a professor at the university. Fonds also includes copies of essays and papers written by Cowan’s BA and her MA.

The fonds is not arranged to reflect any particular filing system and professional files are in French.

Access restrictions apply. File 2003-027/013/04 is closed until after Cowan’s death. No restrictions apply.

Accruals: The fonds comprises the following accessions: 2003-027, 2004-044, 2005-014. Further accruals may be expected.

2003-027
2004-044
2005-014

Scope and Content:
This provides more detailed information about material, specifically the document types, functions and activities in which records were used. This can give you a better idea of major groupings in the fonds and main record types. This is useful in deciding whether materials are relevant to your research.

Notes: A series of notes follow the Scope and Content. One of the most important outlines the availability of records to consult. At ASC, it is called, Restrictions on Access and Use. These notes are very important. They can tell you how and if you can use some or all of the materials in a fonds, if any photocopies can be made, and any other important information.
Finding an archives

Now that you have completed the background reading on your focused research question and determined that the information on your topic may be held in an archives, you are ready to proceed to the next step: finding an archives.

Archival records may be found in a variety of places:

1. government institutions (local, municipal, provincial and federal)
2. businesses (both public and private)
3. religious organizations (churches and denominations)
4. institutions (universities and colleges), especially those with research collections.

With over 800 public archival institutions in Canada, finding the information you need may seem like a daunting task. How do you narrow your search?

Some tips include:

1. Remember Canada’s Total Archives tradition.

   Because of Total Archives, you will find records:
   - in all formats in Canadian archives, including slides, photographs, sound and video recordings.
   - are kept as close to their place of origin as a possible.

   Note: If a person or organization was significant in a particular place or region, the records will likely be found in an archival institution there.

2. Note major research collections during your secondary research.

   - Institutional research collections focus on specific areas and will collect materials in those areas.

Archival Toolbox

To make this step easier, Canadian archival institutions offer researchers some excellent searching tools.

Please click on our Access page, for more information about searching for archival resources at the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University.
For municipal, provincial, national and international archival resources, please consult our Other Links page.
To make this step easier, Canadian archival institutions offer researchers some excellent searching tools.

Please click on our Access page, for more information about searching for archival resources at the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University.
Visiting Archives and Special Collections

Closed Stacks | Registration | Handling of materials | Timing | Contact Us

We welcome researchers and visitors. However, a visit to Archives and Special Collections (ASC) is a different experience from visiting another department or section of the library. Much of what you will experience stems from one of the traditional roles of archives, as discussed in Basic Facts. This also affects how you do your research and the amount of time you need for your visit. Here are some things you should know prior to contacting ASC to make arrangements for your visit.

Materials at Archives and Special Collections can be viewed only in our Reading Room. Please note our business hours and retrieval times (when applicable) for materials.

Closed Stacks

In libraries, researchers can walk through the stacks (bookshelves) and can browse for items. ASC’s stacks are closed to the public. To browse and search for holdings, researchers use archival descriptions in finding aids and indexes. Researchers then request materials.

This means that researchers:

- fill out call slips so that staff can retrieve materials.

Registration

All researchers fill out a registration form.

Researchers:

- are given a Reader Number.
- sign the Reader Register upon each visit.
- present staff with a piece of identification (Sessional Card, YUCard, Driver's Licence) while consulting materials.
- store jackets and bags in designated areas.
Handling of materials

Materials are often fragile, rare and unique.

- Use care when handling items, such as when turning pages or lifting them from their folders.
- Gloves and book supports are provided as needed.
- Use pencils while consulting materials.

Timing

It is very important to set aside enough time to conduct your research at ASC. As you have read so far, there are a lot of other things to take into account, such as the availability and accessibility of materials.

We recommend that you contact ASC staff prior to your arrival to discuss your research topic.

ASC staff can:

- Make sure that you have identified and located all materials related to your research;
- Answer questions you have about accessing materials and material availability;
- Help you read and understand finding aids and guides.

Contact Us

For more information about planning your visit to ASC, please contact us as directed on our Contact Us page. You can also explore our website where you can find links to our acquisitions policy, descriptions of our holdings (including Virtual Exhibitions), and research guides.
Policies

Prior to your visit to Archives and Special Collections, please familiarize yourself with our services and policies by visiting our Services page.

If you have any questions or require further information, please feel free to contact staff at archives@yorku.ca.
Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed the Archival research tutorial. We've discussed quite a lot of material in this short tutorial.

- **How to chose and focus your topic**
  - choose your topic
  - focus and define your topic - ask questions: Who, What, Where, When
  - create a work plan and confirm your assignment due date
  - take into consideration the length of your assignment

- **How to do background research**
  - use reference materials
  - study the footnotes and bibliographies of the reference sources
  - to find books on your topic, do a keyword search in your library catalogue
  - search for articles in a journal index or database
  - speak with a reference librarian, professor, TA or scholar

- **The differences between libraries and archives**
  - Key idea: Archives contain records, not books

- **Some basic facts about archives**
  - Overview of the brief history of archives
  - Definition of fonds
  - Discussion of archival principles: provenance and original order

- **How to read a finding aid**
  Discussion of the 4 section of a finding aid:
  1. Introduction
  2. Title, dates, extent
  3. Biographical sketch/ administrative history
  4. Scope and content notes
How to find an archives

• Canada's Total Archives tradition

• Links to searching tools created by Canadian archival institutions

What to expect when you visit the archives

• Closed stacks

• Registration

• Care and handling of materials

• Timing

Overview of policies such as photocopying and copyright

We hope that you now have the tools and information you need to feel comfortable finding, using and understanding archival records and collections. See Appendix II a checklist to use to help keep you on track.

If you have any questions left unanswered, please feel free to contact staff at Archives and Special Collections at 416-736-5442.
Appendix 1 : Choosing Your Topic
Examples

More examples of the focusing process

**Literary** | **Historical**

**Literary**

*Original research topic:* Canadian literature and the diasporic experience

Canadian literature and the *South Asian* diasporic experience in the 20th century

Examples of materials you may wish to consult:
- Archival materials and thematic guides
- Special Collections items, including pamphlets, brochures and other published materials

**Historical**

*Original research topic:* Labour History in Canada

Trade Unions and strikes in Ontario in the 20th century

Examples of materials you may wish to consult:
- Photographs
- Archival materials and thematic guides
- Pamphlets, brochures and other published materials
Appendix 2 : Tutorial Checklist

Archival Research Checklist

Before you visit:

- Focus and refine your topic
- Do your background research
- Search for archives to visit
- Check the hours to make sure that the archives will be open when you visit
- Contact the archives or library to let them know that you are planning to visit. This will probably save you time!
- Browse the website of the archives. You will often find very useful information about the collection you are interested in researching. Sometimes, you may find an A-Z listing of online finding aids to the institution’s archival collections.
- Bring some cash for photocopying.

When you visit:

- Register!
- Familiarize yourself with the forms that you should use to request material, photocopies, etc.
- Have patience.
- Bring your identification