Tips for Finding & Using Archival Sources

Courtesy of the Northwestern University Archives

How to Identify The Archival Resources You Need

- Understand how archives and special collections repositories work and how they differ from libraries
- Frame your research questions well. To identify where primary-source materials might be found, first think about how your topic would be documented. What kinds of sources would be likely to contain pieces of the puzzle: letters, diaries, founding documents, newspapers, reports?
- Think about who or what would have produced or generated information about your topic: Which individuals? What groups—committees, clubs, corporations, governments?
- Think about connections: Was there a specific person involved? If so, was that person affiliated with a group or organization or academic institution that has an archives? (Many corporations do—but those can be hard to get into because they’re not really set up for public use).
- Some archives specialize in certain types of collection—labor-related, social welfare, Chicago literary figures, etc.
- State or local historical societies usually collect papers and official records that reflect the geographic location.
- University archives focus on people and activities that are directly connected to the institution. Special collections hold documents, manuscripts, rare books, and other formats covering a wide range of eras and topics.
- Don’t forget the old fashioned way to find primary sources: start with bibliographies in books on the subject—look at “archival sources” or “unpublished sources.” Let earlier scholars help you get started!
- You may need to adjust your topic to fit the materials available
- You will most likely use more than one resource in the archives, including secondary sources for context.

Archival Research Rule #1: Never assume! And never hesitate to ask!

- It’s not all online, so if you think something might possibly be in a repository, ask!
- All the answers may not be in a single collection. Ask if there are related collections that you may not know about, and also ask about photos, clippings, serial publications, etc., that relate to your topic
- Ask about other repositories or resources the archivist may know about that hold related material

The Research Trip: Using Archives or Special Collections Repositories ON-SITE

PLAN AHEAD! Before you go, check the website AND contact the archives by phone or email to find out:

- Exactly what is in a collection—if the folders you’ve requested contain one piece of paper or 200, if correspondence files contain both incoming and outgoing letters. This will help you plan how much time you’ll need to spend—or if the collection even has what you need
- If you need to make an appointment
- If you can request materials to be ready for you on your arrival. Many archives have holdings stored offsite. It can take hours or days to retrieve these.
- The registration procedure: You may need a letter of reference from your advisor, or a letter describing your project
- Open days and hours AND whether they close for lunch (to make sure you schedule enough time for your visit)
- What the procedure is for obtaining photocopies or scans—and if you can bring in a digital camera
- Whether you can bring your laptop
- Other rules and regulations that apply to the use of the specific archives’ materials

Making Best Use of Your Time during Your On-site Visit

- Consult with the archivist once you get there
- Know what collections you want to use—it helps to bring a copy of the online finding aid
- Expect to spend a lot of time looking through things.
  - You might be reading handwritten documents that are difficult to decipher
  - You might have to look through many folders and boxes before you find what you need
  - You might find more than you thought—or less
- Allow time for getting items paged, and for following up leads
- Remember that most of your archival research is note-taking and “upfront gathering” -- you will do your synthesis and analysis later!
- Get full citation information for each item you use! This saves MUCH time and heartache later!
Citations:
See your style guide (Chicago Manual of Style, MLA, or other) for the approved format for “Unpublished materials,” but if you get the following information you’ll be set for all purposes:

Description and date of item; box/folder location; collection title; series or call number; repository name; repository city/state/country

For Example:
Hurston to Herskovits, Nov 12 1934; Box 12, folder 5; Melville J Herskovits Papers (Series 35/6); Northwestern University Archives, Evanston IL

Examples for your finished product (using Chicago Manual of Style):
Footnote: Hurston to Herskovits, Nov 12 1934, Melville J Herskovits Papers, Series 35/6, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston IL
Bibliography: Melville J Herskovits Papers, Series 35/6, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston IL

Accessing Archival Resources from a Distance

• Consult with the archivist by email or phone
• Request further information and arrange for photocopies or scans.
  o Some repositories have online forms to fill out for this purpose. It's always good to consult the archivist by phone or email even if there is a form.
  o There are almost always charges for copies. Check the repository’s fee and permissions schedule. Expect long waits to get your copies, and be aware of copyright restrictions.

Examples of Online Databases and Sources for Archival Research:

The big guys in the US

Essential Databases
• ❤ ArchiveGrid (hundreds of repositories represented; mixed formats; related searches; faceting) https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/
• WorldCat (collection-level records): go to Advanced Search, choose Archival Materials from format options (access through NU Library’s electronic databases for best results)

A few examples of collections and portals focusing on regions, countries, or fields of research
• NU Library’s Manuscripts and Archival Collections Portal: http://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/
• Chicago Collections Consortium http://chicagocollections.org/ (Local Chicago-related collections)
• Guide to Local (Illinois) archives: http://www.ilso.gov/archivalrepositories/search
• History of Medicine http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/consortium/ (19 institutions, 3000 finding aids)
• Social Welfare Archives https://www.lib.umn.edu/swha/ (thematic collection at U of Minn)
• Online Archive of California http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ (large consortium of CA. repositories)
• Archives Hub http://www.archiveshub.ac.uk/index.html (hundreds of sources in colleges/ universities in the UK)

Images
• NUL Guide to finding and using images (including ArtStor): http://libguides.northwestern.edu/images
• Also remember to ask the repository about photos when you’re looking at its textual collections

Sources for Historic Newspapers & Periodicals (access through NU Library’s databases search)
• Historic Newspapers Series (ProQuest)—through NUL’s databases (major city papers)
• American Periodicals Series (ProQuest)—through NUL’s databases
• 19th Century US Newspapers Digital Archive (Newsbank)—through NUL’s databases (small city & town papers)
• WorldCat (many available on microfilm)—go to Advanced Search, choose Serials from format options

Other Sites of Interest
• Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives
• Getty Research Vocabulary Thesauri: http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabularies/index.html
• And yes, even Google and Wikipedia have their place.

Learning to Love Archives: The Thrill of the Chase
The University Archives staff can help you find the archival and manuscript resources you need, whether at NU or in collections around the world. We also offer training in using databases, finding-aids, microfilm, and other esoteric formats. Call us, schedule a visit, plan a workshop.

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