



Tips for Finding & Using Archival Sources

Courtesy of the Northwestern University Archives

How To Locate The Primary Sources You Need

- Frame your research questions well. To identify where primary-source materials might be, 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, the government?
- 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 tend to focus on people and activities that are directly connected to the institution.
- 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fashioned way to find primary sources: start with bibliographies in books on the subject—look at “archival sources” or “unpublished sources.”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 that provide context and background.
- Look the website over carefully to learn about the repository and its holdings, if there are online finding aids, etc
- **Never assume!**
 - *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 Onsite

Understand how archives and special collections differ from a regular library

- Materials are non-circulating—you use them in the reading Room
- You do not browse the stacks—you request materials to be brought to you
- Materials are mostly not books, so they are catalogued differently from regular Library items

PLAN AHEAD!

Before you go, check the website or (better yet) contact the archives by phone or email to determine:

- Exactly what is in a collection—if the folders you've requested contains 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

Make Best Use of Your Time during Your 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 later!**



Citing Archival Sources:

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, Northwestern University Archives, Evanston IL

Bibliography: Melville J Herskovits Papers, 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.
 - 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.
 - 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

Finding Archival Sources Online:

A sampling of individual repositories

- [NU’s Archives, Special Collections, Music, Africana, and more](http://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/) <http://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/> (Note: not all finding aids are on this site yet—so check the individual library’s page as well)
- [Library of Congress Finding Aids](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/faid/faidfrquery.html) <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/faid/faidfrquery.html>
- [National Archives](http://aad.archives.gov/aad/): <http://aad.archives.gov/aad/>
- [Guide to Local \(Illinois\) archives](http://www.ilsos.gov/archivalrepositories/search): <http://www.ilsos.gov/archivalrepositories/search>

Subscription Databases for Archival Collections (get to these from NU Library home page: All Databases)

(These include finding aids from thousands of US archives, special collections, and libraries)

- ArchiveGrid
- Worldcat (go to [Advanced Search](#), choose [Archival Materials](#) from format options

Images

- [Art Library’s list of image collections](http://libguides.northwestern.edu/images) (including ArtStor) <http://libguides.northwestern.edu/images>
- Also remember to ask the repository where you’re looking for textual collections—everyone has photos
- [LOC](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html) (Library of Congress American Memories image collections) <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>

Historical Newspapers

- [Research Guide to historical newspapers](http://libguides.northwestern.edu/content.php?pid=19339): <http://libguides.northwestern.edu/content.php?pid=19339>
- American Periodical Series Online (NU Library Home page: All Databases)
- WorldCat (many available on microfilm)—go to [Advanced Search](#), choose [Serials](#) from format options

Other sites of interest

- Society of American Archivists’ [Glossary of Archives Terminology](http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp) <http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp>
- [Yale Tutorial on Primary Sources](http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/brblsear/brblresguide.html) <http://www.library.yale.edu/beinecke/brblsear/brblresguide.html>
- Getty Art & Architecture Thesaurus: http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/vocabularies/aat/

 ***Good Luck, and Remember: Never hesitate to ASK US!*** 
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