

# Archival Orientation Workshop

LIS 560 Spring 09

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## 1.0 Introduction

Archival research is often seen as the exclusive domain of graduate students, professors, and ‘serious scholars,’ as many of the older accession donor agreements for holdings in University of Washington Special Collections can attest. However, this assumption is one which should be challenged by archival educators: in view of the dynamic, modern, forward-focused research climate I believe that it is increasingly important to expose students of history to many different (including older) research modalities in order to broaden their understanding and acceptance of the varied sources of valuable historical information. The selective focus of many educators on the newest technologies and the fanciest modern research tools, combined with our society’s own predilection for the many high-tech systems that have become such a part of modern life, often leaves budding students of history and the humanities woefully unprepared when they have to confront and work within older systems and technologies which are far from state-of-the-art. Habits and methods learned in a networked, webbed environment of full-text keyword search may or may not be helpful in this extremely different world of paper, microfilm, card catalogs, and even less familiar systems. However, as Greg Johnson suggests, “By introducing undergraduate students to archival collections, archivists can potentially raise the level of quality research on their campus.”<sup>1</sup>

## 2.0 Lesson Plan: Archival Research Orientation

### 2.1 Objective/ Outcome

- Students will become more comfortable performing research in an archival environment
- Students will understand both the basics of archival organization and many of the specifics of this particular institution
- Student usage of archival materials in research for their class papers will increase

### 2.2 Skills

- Archival vocabulary
- Performing research in an archival environment
  - Research plan

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Greg (2006), “Introducing Undergraduate Students to Archives and Special Collections”, *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13(2): 91.

- The basic rules and structure of archives
- Finding aids (print and online)

### ***2.3 Target Audience***

Undergraduate student life in general is so busy, pressured, and time-oriented that most members of this group normally choose information routes they perceive to be quick and easy when conducting any sort of research. This quick and efficient route most commonly ends up being ‘the internet’, whether this means a scholarly database or Wikipedia.<sup>2</sup> This is true despite the fact that these same students recognize that the information may not be as authoritative as other possible sources: when asked to identify the sources they use most often in their research, 65% cited the internet, while only 2% identified it as the most credible source.<sup>3</sup> Even books and other printed sources (besides the special case of an assigned textbook for a class) enjoy only limited usage (8%) by undergraduates when they are allowed or required to choose their own sources.<sup>4</sup> While library research is reportedly intimidating for undergraduates, archival research in particular is even more intimidating for many reasons: because of the physical space to which it is confined (materials cannot be checked out, high security measures, no noise or food), because it is perceived by many to be a slow and boring process which presents a stark contrast to the comparatively fun, easy, and familiar internet, and because of its traditional association with higher level scholarship. This “archival anxiety,”<sup>5</sup> as Greg Johnson refers to it, in combination with the general undergraduate research behavior of choosing quicker and easier sources, becomes the first barrier which archival educators need to overcome in attempting to increase usage of their institutions by this group.

Johnson offers many specific helpful suggestions, but his article ultimately concludes that “the key to helping students overcome their reluctance or fear is ultimately a matter of education.”<sup>6</sup> By education in this context, he means a face-to-face orientation to the archives offered by an archivist. This may seem to present a ‘catch-22’ situation: in order to get the students more comfortable with coming into the archives, they have to come into the archives for educational sessions. However, the implication of Johnson’s suggestion is that the initial session(s) would need to be specifically targeted at these undergraduates’ needs and designed to challenge their expectations. By representing the usually cold and somber archives with a

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 97. Martin, 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Martin, Jason (2008), “The information seeking behavior of undergraduate education majors: Does library instruction play a role?” *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 3(4): 8.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, 93.

friendly, excited face and explaining the simple reasons for the archive's policies and procedures as well as the important and difficult mission of archival institutions, he suggests that this interaction alone can go a long way towards encouraging use of the archives by undergraduates and even younger groups. While Johnson suggests several possibilities for setting up this orientation and attracting student participation in the face of their obvious reluctance, his clearest recommendation is to contact faculty in departments whose mission or subject area is related to the contents of the archive (such as history), and "offer them the opportunity to bring their classes into special collections for an archival instruction session."<sup>7</sup>

While this session may allay undergraduates' initial fears, reduce their reluctance, and perhaps even pique their interest, there are deeper learning goals which are also important to aim for: Xiaomu Zhou's recent exploratory study reminds archival educators that "learning practices, strategies, and skills requires students to spend time in an archives."<sup>8</sup> He discusses a theory by Elizabeth Yankel and Deborah Torres which defines "archival intelligence."<sup>9</sup> In combination with domain knowledge and artifactual literacy, archival intelligence "is a researcher's knowledge of archival principles, practices, and procedures; strategies for reducing uncertainty and ambiguity during archival research; and intellectual skills, which are the ability to understand primary sources, their surrogates, activities and associated processes."<sup>10</sup> The assemblage of skills and knowledge this implies is clearly extensive, and reflects this study's interest in user expertise, not simply user introduction. In the context of an introductory workshop, the key information needs which would have to be addressed to prepare undergraduates for the archival research process and which are illuminated by this theory are: to describe archival practice and purpose, especially within the context of their organization (this is usually unclear to undergraduates); to raise and discuss the expectation of ambiguity in the course of all archival research, in order to address their worries about not knowing exactly what they are looking for and encourage them to plan their research; and to provide concrete examples directly related to the subject matter of their class to illustrate the relevance of the archival material, the meaning of the term 'primary sources,' and also so they can appreciate the importance of context.

Undergraduates themselves report difficulties with approaching archival materials for a variety of reasons, ranging from fear or intimidation to simple misunderstandings of archival terminology. These misunderstandings would need to be addressed, especially when the misconceptions could lead to bad research habits. For instance, when certain elements of an

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Zhou, Xiaomu (2008), "Student Archival Research Activity: An Exploratory Study." *American Archivist* 71(2): 478.

<sup>9</sup> Yankel, Elizabeth and Deborah Torres (2003), "AI: Archival Intelligence and User Expertise." *American Archivist* 66(1): 52.

<sup>10</sup> Zhou, 477-8.

archive seem similar to a model which they are more familiar with, they are apt to make assumptions about these elements, as this student did about online EAD finding aids: “students accepted online finding aids [a relatively recent addition to archives] as a natural tool...while one student mentioned that her strategy for future archival research would be to search the EAD finding aids first...she did not realize that the BHL had only mounted about 700 EAD finding aids online of its approximately 3000 collections...”<sup>11</sup> This common undergraduate assumption, that ‘everything is online,’ or ‘everything worthwhile or important is online,’ is an example of one of the major challenges faced by archival educators.

Ultimately undergraduates, even fairly senior undergraduates in the History department, have had little to no exposure to methodologies and specific issues encountered in archival research methods. This valuable and educational primary material is directly related to their chosen subject area, and could provide the exact information they might need to compose a successful term paper, but frequently it is either ignored or actively avoided by these students until absolutely necessary: typically for their undergraduate senior seminar or later when they begin graduate school. Any complete series of workshops on archival research intended for the undergraduate history major audience should address this reluctance, include some information on general archival organization and rules as well as their purposes, and introduce specific methodologies for performing focused archival research on the subject of their class in the context of that particular institution. This workshop, intended for beginning undergraduate archival researchers, is intended to be the first in this series. A successful outcome of this workshop would be the partial accomplishment of all of these goals.

## ***2.4 Materials needed***

This workshop will require access to a computer and data projector, in order to demonstrate online finding aids and the Special Collections website. It would also be important to have some pre-selected exemplary materials which are directly related to the students’ class topic so that examples will be immediately relevant to the students. These physical examples of finding aids as well as the physical documents themselves will be vital in capturing the interest of the students and demonstrating to them the interesting nature and usefulness of the archival collection. This workshop should be conducted in close proximity to the archive’s research area, as a tour of the facilities will be important in demystifying the physical space of archives and introducing students to basic research procedures. It requires approximately 50 minutes of time.

## ***2.5. Program***

### **2.5.1 Introduction (10 minutes)**

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<sup>11</sup> Zhou, 491.

As an initial attention activity and icebreaker, divide the students into groups of three and have each group find a document – any sort of paper document – which they happen to have with them. Then have each group trade documents with another group. Have each group see what information they can find in their document in about five minutes. Stress that any information is admissible, no matter how incidental or insignificant it might seem. This open-ended exercise is essentially a constructivist opportunity for the students to both imagine and experience how research works in a world of limited and discrete documents, rather than in the boundless world of the web (Robyler). After the time is up, have a group member from each group describe the different types of information that can be found in their document. Highlight the physical aspects of documents that emerge in the discussion as a lead-in to an introduction on why archives preserve documents, and the sorts of information that can be found in archival documents. It will get students' attention because they probably wouldn't consider the papers they carry around every day to be potential archival sources, and the personal connection will make it more meaningful to them when we later discuss archives and manuscripts. In analyzing their own documents, they will feel less intimidated and reluctant than if we started off by showing them actual archival materials. It will also be relevant because they will be able to use the skills and experience gained through this attention exercise at the end of the workshop in examining the sample archival documents which the teacher will provide. Starting off with an active participation sets the right tone for the workshop since we are trying to encourage their participation in this research environment, and not requiring everyone to speak (only one self-selected from each group) reduces potential anxiety. The instructor should provide encouraging responses to every group in order to build confidence for students (Smalls).

## **Discussion**

Explain that this workshop is intended to provide the students with research skills and methods that will be of immediate use to them in their research for their current class. This should provide every student with an understanding of the direct relevance of the information that will be provided. Ask for a show of hands by any students who have done archival research before. Ask a few students to describe their previous archival research and listen to a few short stories (five minutes or so). This will provide more relevance, as well as allowing students to interact and reflect on their past experiences (which will help their recall of previous skills and demonstrate to students who did not respond that their peers either possess some of these skills already, or, equally important, share their anxiety). Emphasize that this orientation is intended to build on their existing research skills (boosting their confidence), and encourage them to ask any questions they may have during the course of the workshop.

### 2.5.2 Body of the Lesson

### **Skill 1: Archival vocabulary (5 minutes)**

#### **Steps**

- Handout/reference sheet
- Introductory lecture

#### **Method**

This portion of the workshop is unavoidably verbal, as it focuses on vocabulary. However, in order to achieve maximum comprehension by different student learning styles, it will be presented in two formats (printed and spoken) and accompanied by demonstration or at least presentation of the physical and web-based objects under discussion. Offering interaction in the form of questions will also address the need of some students for interaction in the learning process.

#### **Tasks**

- Provide a handout/reference sheet for reflective visual learners
- Introductory lecture on archival terminology (5 minutes)
  - Use both physical examples and website to connect terms with their actual meanings in order to address the needs of concrete learners
  - Encourage questions and check in with students to see if they need clarification on anything

### **Skill 2: Research in an archival environment (35 minutes)**

#### **Steps**

- Short prepared lecture
- Discussion
- Improvised lecture/response
- Tour of the archives
- Wrap up/assessment

#### **Method**

In order to make sure this core section of the workshop reaches all different learning styles, this plan includes a traditional lecture, interactive discussion, and a physical walking tour which will introduce students to the facility. At the end of the workshop, there is time for a short wrap up and evaluation session. Throughout, archival terminology will be used and further explained in order to familiarize the students with the language of archival research.



## Task

- Short prepared lecture (10 minutes)
  - Explain that archives are different from libraries
    - They can't be browsed (closed stacks)
    - Not ordered by subject
    - Explain organization by provenance
    - Stress importance of a research plan
  - Describe different ways to access information in archives
    - Finding aids
      - Online (demonstrate)
      - Physical (demonstrate)
    - Subject indexes (demonstrate)
    - Bibliographies (demonstrate)
    - References in secondary sources (describe)
  - Briefly explain archival rules and their purposes
    - Sign in procedure
    - No food/drink
    - Pencils/loose paper/computers only
- Discussion (5 minutes)
  - Solicit research topic information from students
  - Ask students who provided their research topic what they would want to know more about
- Improvised lecture (5 minutes)
  - Provide some examples of starting places for research based on the topics offered (increases relevance and provides a positive example of what sort of help and guidance students can expect from archivists while developing their paper topics)
- Tour of the archives (10 minutes)
  - Throughout the tour, include more description and linking of the previously covered vocabulary, concepts, and methods to physical locations and materials (this task addresses kinesthetic and concrete learners, while providing a welcome break from lecture formats)
- Wrap up/assessment (5 minutes)
  - Thank the students for their attention
  - Ask if there are any more questions
  - Make students aware of other resources for learning more about archives
  - Distribute evaluation form

- Allow students to look at the pre-selected sample materials before they leave, and ask any questions they may have

### 3.0 Evaluation/Conclusion

#### Summary

This workshop or orientation will reduce undergraduates' archival anxiety, so that they will be more likely to attempt this type of research, and will also increase their ability to use the archives productively in their academic research. Students will learn the basic terminology, methodology, and purpose of archival research. The lesson will be oriented specifically on materials which will be of immediate use in their current studies, demonstrating the relevance of the instruction.

#### Assessment/Evaluation

Student assessment is through formative methods; the instructor should monitor the class during instruction for evidence of understanding of the materials being presented. This three-level rubric provides a reference for determining student skill level and progress, and may be used to assist the instructor during observation and post-class evaluation. Students beginning this workshop are assumed to be at the basic or intermediate level on this scale, and the workshop aims to move them at least one level up in the table.

	<b>Beginner</b>	<b>Intermediate</b>	<b>Advanced</b>
<b>Awareness/comprehension of archival organization</b>	Knows that the archive exists, and that it is different than a library	Knows that an archive is not organized by subject, can request items by using finding aids	Understands the reasons for archival organization by provenance
<b>Familiarity with archival vocabulary</b>	Unfamiliar with archival terms	Recognizes basic archival vocabulary	Employs archival terms in interactions with archives staff
<b>Familiarity with archival resources</b>	Unaware of what archives can consist of	Some awareness of record formats, willingness to approach research in certain formats	Open to wide ranging research across various formats, seeks help when questions arise about archival resources
<b>Ability to use finding aids</b>	What are finding	Aware of the	Can use finding aids

	aids?	purpose of finding aids, comfortable using online finding aids	in all formats, as well as bibliographic and subject indexes
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## 4.0 Further Training

Past studies have determined that “Little to no association appears to exist between “one-shot” library instruction sessions and the sources used by students in their research. Serious consideration needs to be given to multiple library instruction sessions and to for-credit library courses over one-shot classes.”<sup>12</sup> While this particular study was focused on library rather than archive use, it seems like it is an even greater challenge to increase undergraduate use of archives, which are even more intimidating to them than libraries. This is a direct challenge to the efficacy of a design for a one-shot workshop on archival research methods, and raises the question of whether it would be more valuable or effective to design a complete curriculum which would be integrated with the coursework in appropriate departments, such as History. At the minimum, it would be helpful to advocate in these departments for more participation in archival orientation sessions such as this one. Each session would be targeted at the subject matter covered in the class, so while students would be exposed to multiple orientations which would cover similar methods, they would see a different facet of the collection each time. This progressive process might be more effective in familiarizing students with the functions and utility of the archive, as well as the holdings of the archive.

Other learning goals or topics that would be appropriate for future workshops in this series would be contextualizing and interpreting archival resources, and archival services (or, “what we can do for you”).

## 5.0 Bibliography

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<sup>12</sup> Martin, 5.

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## **Appendices**

Appendix A: Workshop handouts

# Archival Vocabulary

*A list of key terms and their definitions for reference*

- **Accession:** Materials physically and legally transferred to a repository as a unit at a single time; an acquisition.
- **Finding Aid:** A finding aid is a document containing detailed information about a specific collection of papers or records within an archive. They are used by researchers to determine whether information within a collection is relevant to their research. The finding aid for a collection is usually compiled by an archivist or librarian during archival processing. Finding aid includes a wide range of formats, including card indexes, calendars, guides, inventories, shelf and container lists, and registers. Finding aid is a single document that places the materials in context by consolidating information about the collection, such as acquisition and processing; provenance, including administrative history or biographical note; scope of the collection, including size, subjects, media; organization and arrangement; and an inventory of the series and the folders.
- **Manuscript:** Any text in handwriting or typescript (including printed forms completed by hand or typewriter) which may or may not be part of a collection of such texts. Examples of manuscripts are letters, diaries, ledgers, minutes, speeches, marked or corrected galley or page proofs, manuscript books, and legal papers.
- **Record:** 1. A written or printed work of a legal or official nature that may be used as evidence or proof; a document. – 2. Data or information that has been fixed on some medium; that has content, context, and structure; and that is used as an extension of human memory or to demonstrate accountability. – 3. Data or information in a fixed form that is created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference.
- **Provenance:** a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, group, or organization that created or received the items in a collection. According to archival theory and the principle of provenance, records of different provenance should be separated. In archival practice, proof of provenance is provided by the operation of control systems that document the history of records kept in archives, including details of amendments made to them.

Definitions from the Society of American Archivists Glossary: <http://www.archivists.org/glossary/index.asp>

Appendix B:  
Workshop Evaluation

How relevant did you find this workshop to be to your studies?

What did you learn from this workshop that will be the most useful to you?

What aspects of this workshop did you think were the least useful?

Do you wish more time or explanation was provided for any topics covered in this workshop? If so, what topics?

Are there topics that you wish were covered in this workshop? If so, what are they?

How would you change about this workshop to make it more useful or interesting for future participants?