

Exploring Archives: A Glossary of Basic Terms

The online Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology¹ maintained by the Society of American Archivists is the authoritative source on key terms and concepts pertaining to archival research. Following is a selection of definitions from this glossary that you will need to understand as you explore digital archival collections.

Archives: (also **archive**), n. ~ 1. Materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control; permanent records.

Archival: adj. ~ 1. Of or pertaining to archives. - 2. RECORDS · Having enduring value; permanent.

Collection: n. ~ 1. A group of materials with some unifying characteristic. - 2. Materials assembled by a person, organization, or repository from a variety of sources.

Digital Archival Object: (DAO, abbr.) ~ Digital archival objects include graphic images, audio or video clips, images of text pages, and electronic transcriptions of text. The objects can be selected examples, or digital surrogates of all the materials in an archival collection or series.

Finding Aid: n. ~ 1. A tool that facilitates discovery of information within a collection of records. - 2. A description of records that gives the repository physical and intellectual control over the materials and that assists users to gain access to and understand the materials.

Library: n. ~ 1. A collection of published materials, including books, magazines, sound and video recordings, and other formats. - 2. A building used to house such a collection.

Metadata: n. ~ A characterization or description documenting the identification, management, nature, use, or location of information resources (data). Notes: Metadata is commonly defined as “data about data.” Typically metadata is organized into distinct categories and relies on conventions to establish the values for each category. Dublin Core is a standard for structuring metadata that is intended for describing web resources. Dublin Core metadata elements include title, creator, subject, description, publisher, contributor, date, type, format, identifier, source, language, relation, coverage, and rights.

Primary Source: n. ~ Material that contains firsthand accounts of events and that was created contemporaneous to those events or later recalled by an eyewitness. Notes: Primary sources emphasize the lack of intermediaries between the thing or events being studied and reports of those things or events based on the belief that firsthand accounts are more accurate. Examples of primary sources include letters and diaries; government, church, and business records; oral histories; photographs, motion pictures, and videos; maps and land records; and blueprints. Newspaper articles contemporaneous with the events described are traditionally considered primary sources, although the reporter may have compiled the story from witnesses, rather than being an eyewitness. Artifacts and specimens may also be primary evidence if they are the object of study.

Secondary Source: n. ~ 1. A work that is not based on direct observation of or evidence directly associated with the subject, but instead relies on sources of information. - 2. A work commenting on another work (primary sources), such as reviews, criticism, and commentaries.

¹ <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary>

Exercise

Using the “Exploring Archives: A Glossary of Basic Terms” handout, answer the following questions.

1) What is the difference between a **primary source** and a **secondary source**? List a few examples of each.

2) What is the distinction between an **archive** and a **library**?

3) How might you relate **primary sources** and **archival materials**? Is there a difference between them? Do they overlap?

4) If you are interested in exploring the content of an archival collection, what **tool** might you use to discover what is available in the collection?

5) List **four** Dublin Core metadata fields that you think would be particularly important to complete in an archival object description. Explain your selections.
