The No-Nonsense Guide to Archives and Recordkeeping

Margaret Crockett

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Margaret Crockett

Introduction

This book is written for all those working in archives and records management, especially those without formal training, but also people managing archives and records management staff and those working closely with archives and records management, such as IT professionals, librarians and museum curators. It is intended as a practical how-to-do-it guide to managing archives and records and covers all aspects of recordkeeping and archives management following the records' journey through the lifecycle. Because of this, the chapters are not of equal length, but divide into the four main work areas: current records; records management; archives management; and archives preservation. The book deals with records and archives in all formats and unless specifically mentioned as paper or digital, the guidance is format-neutral. Reference to 'corporate' records is not intended in the narrow private enterprise sense, but rather the more general 'body corporate'. Similarly when 'business' is mentioned, it is in the sense of the wider work and goals of any organization.

CHAPTER 1

Concepts and context

Archives and records: concepts and terminology

For those of us concerned with managing records and archives it is of paramount importance that we can articulate and advocate exactly what it is that we are looking after. Before discussing how to manage them, let's agree working definitions for the material itself.

Records

First of all, let's look at the term 'record'. Records and archives are inextricably linked, which is why this book covers both records and archives management as one holistic discipline. We need to understand what records are in order to define archives. Records consist of recorded information which provides evidence of decisions, planning processes, financial transactions, agreements – in fact pretty much any human activity. Records can be in any medium or format.

Records usually arise as a by-product of business or social activity: for example the invoice for consulting services is part of the process of letting the client know how much they have to pay on the fulfilment of a contractual (written or verbal) agreement. It is rare for records to be deliberately created for their own sake, although there are exceptions. For example, medieval chronicles, personal diaries or letters can be written with the intent of recording the author's or the author's sponsor's viewpoint.

> **Record:** recorded information in any media or format, providing reliable evidence of human activity.

Records also need to have certain characteristics or features in order to be 'good' records that we can trust and depend on. It is important to know the creator of the record. If the record does not stand alone, it is important to have the links to the other records that together form the comprehensive record. These links and the author provide the context of the record, which in turn allows us to be confident about its authenticity. We also like to be sure that the record has not been tampered with. These characteristics depend upon a variety of things, including:

- the custody of the record(s) over time
- inherent indications in the physical record, such as inconsistencies in script, the physical carrier or the way it is set out
- discrepancies in the audit trail or metadata of digital records.

Figure 1.1 gives some tips on how to assess the authenticity of records.

There is no way to realistically enforce rules on creating records to ensure that they are trustworthy; however, some things to look out for which help to indicate the reliability of records include:

- evidence of the author – we recognize the handwriting perhaps, or know what organization it has come from because of the headed paper or domain name or because it is bound in with or filed with other records in the series, clearly indicating the creator
- the record is complete and final
- with legal records, they are signed, sealed or have a format we recognize and are written by or drawn up by solicitors
- there is a date and/or a serial number to show the record's context.

Figure 1.1 *How can we trust that records are authentic?*

> **Record series:** a group of records that support a specific work responsibility, for example a volume of board minutes or set of social worker's case files, each pertaining to a different instance of the same activity.

In fact, sometimes recorded information may not be a record at all. For instance, an old family photograph without any information about who is portrayed is not a record of anything. However, the school trophy cup engraved with winners of the annual 100-metre sprint does provide evidence of successive victors over time. Good questions to ask are: 'What is this a record of?', 'Is it the original?' and 'Is it evidence of the organization's work?'

With the advent of computers and recorded information in digital format, archives and records management professionals have had to reconsider many of the principles that guided their work for decades. It can be difficult to establish the authenticity of digital records because the author is not always clearly identified. Drafts and versions may not be clearly numbered, so that we might not be sure we have the definitive record. Digital records are easily copied and copies are indistinguishable from the 'original', and so we question which instance is the master. Before computers the fact that records could not be changed was considered to be an essential quality of a reliable record. But we need to change digital records in order to preserve them, not to mention the fact that opening them on different machines in different systems (in the case of e-mail, for example) can change the file format. These are all challenges that have yet to be definitively met and solved. The processes for creating, handling, transmitting and preserving digital records to ensure their authenticity and render them reliable over time are still evolving. However, it is already clear that we need to ensure that certain characteristics are embedded in digital records at the point of creation and need to be considered even before a new computer system is designed, specified or procured, to ensure they have the necessary functionality to create and maintain reliable records.

Archives

'Archives' is a word that means different things to different people, depending on their professional and personal background (see Figure 1.2). It is important that those of us who look after archives and manage records are clear about what they are and how they are distinct from old books, data or information.

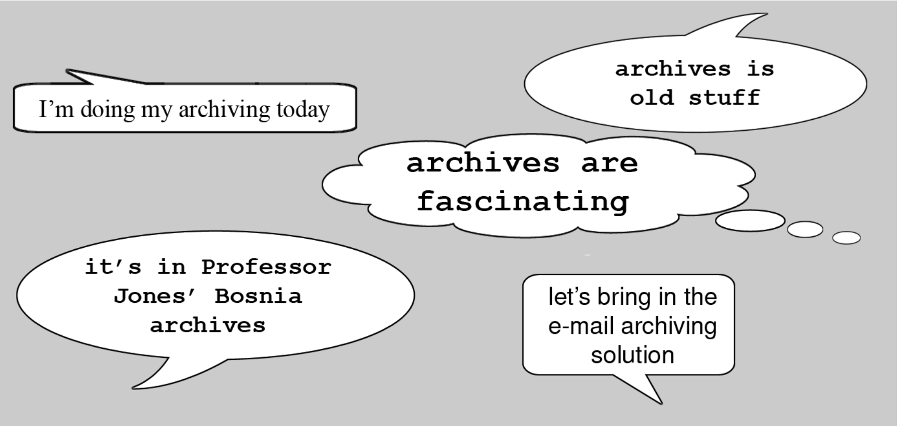
I'm doing my archiving today
archives is old stuff
archives are fascinating
it's in Professor Jones' Bosnia archives
let's bring in the e-mail archiving solution

Figure 1.2 *Popular conceptions of archives*

Often people assume that archives have to be old or that they are no longer useful for current work or everyday life. They will often consider that they are about a subject. They might say they are historical, interesting, important and/or authoritative. Organizations sometimes have an e-mail archiving feature whereby the e-mail gets regularly moved to a different storage area. We often hear people say they are going to do their 'archiving', which means moving older files to storage which is not so accessible.

Whatever ideas you have come up with about archives, they will all be valid and probably most will chime in some way with the concepts that archives professionals keep in mind when taking in, processing and making archives accessible, such as these:

- Archives are records which document the history of organizations, individuals and families.
- They are the primary source, the first hand, contemporary account of what happened.
- They are not just a random collection, but are usually created and received by organizations, individuals or families in the course of business, activities and living.
- All the records in an archive will have been created by the same organization, family or individual, they have the same origin and context.
- Archives are unique (unlike museum objects or books) – there is only one record of an event or decision (even if it consists of different accounts from different sources).
- Archives may be old but archival value does not depend upon age, rather upon the informational and evidential value of the content.
- Archives are selected from the body of records to provide a lasting resource for the history of the family, person or organization that created the archive; they are information-rich and generally provide all the evidence required for the creator's story.
- Not all records are archives: we can't keep every record; some records do not add anything significant to the story; we keep the records which together give the most complete picture of the creator's history.

Archives are therefore the raw material of history; they provide the first-hand account and evidence of the story of the individual(s) or organization. They are selected because they document the key activity without unnecessary detail. It can also be helpful to see records and archives as arising organically from the activity of the creating entity.

> **Archive:** records of one organization, family or individual, selected for permanent preservation because they provide key evidence of the entity's history.

So when people talk about 'doing the archiving' or 'keeping things in the archive', generally there has been no assessment of the historical significance of the records; they have just been moved because the space they occupy is needed for something else (usually for more current records). Published information is not archival because it is not unique and is generally not a primary source providing first-hand evidence. However, publications (including things like annual reports, catalogues of products, anniversary souvenirs) from the creator of the archives are archival, because they are a record of information that the organization felt it important to circulate widely.

> **Provenance:** the archive's creator, be it an individual, family or organization – essentially tells us where the archive came from.

Within an archive, the sub-creators are important, too. The records produced by the accounts department or Great-Uncle William need to be identified and kept separate from those of the marketing department or Granny Mills. Knowing about the relationships between the records and the different parts of the organization, family or the individual's life allows us to identify the separate record groups and understand how they relate to each other. Similarly, the various groups taken together provide more complete evidence and information about the creating entity than any single record, or group, could do in isolation. We should note that users may not be interested in the records in context but respecting the origins and context of the records ensures that their authenticity and reliability are maintained. Archivists also refer to the entirety of records from one provenance as 'fonds', from the French, meaning 'root' or 'origin'. This word allows us to distinguish a single archive from the archive repository and its collective holdings.

Remember, records from a variety of different organizations that have been brought together by an individual or organization in pursuit of research interests, or to satisfy collecting interests, do not form an archive in the strict sense that the records come from the same creator. We should never mix archives of different creators, for example, in a subject-based structure, because we would lose both evidential value and context. However, sometimes an archive is formed because a collector has gathered archival material, perhaps with research notes and copies of published works and/or records, and organized it into his or her own filing system. This would then be regarded as the archive of that collector. Unfortunately, the principle of not mixing archives of different creators is confused by the fact that we also call the building where the archives are kept an archive (let's call it the archive repository) and the repository might house multiple archives with different provenances.

> **Original order:** the organization of archival records as they were when last used by the creating entity.

A final point to make about archives is that the links between records within the archives are important. These links, and the way the individual records were organized and related to each other when created and used by the creating entity, need to be maintained and documented, because they form part of the authenticity and credibility of the archive. They also usually reflect activities and functions. We should not, and indeed do not need to, devise or make up a suitable organization for the archives. Rather, we seek to identify the original order in which the archives were organized when the records were current.

The difference between records and archives: although all archives are records, not all records are archives. Records are the greater group of primary source material from which archives are selected.

Record media and formats

We have to manage all records and archives, regardless of their media or format. Let's identify and define the common record media and formats.

Media

Medium: the physical carrier of the record.

It is important to note that the record medium does not have a bearing on whether it is a record or not. For example, a record can be a roll of parchment, a bound volume or a set of web pages.

Thinking about records in context, the archives of a person or organization may include paper records, computer records and/or audiovisual materials such as film or photographs. Even record series themselves may contain records in different formats; for example, a correspondence series may start off as letters written on paper and then become e-mail held on computer.

Archives can be found on the following kinds of media:

- paper
- parchment
- wood (e.g., tally sticks)
- stone (e.g., gravestones)
- photographic prints
- photographic slides
- glass plate negatives
- silent/audio film
- magnetic film
- compact, hard or floppy disks.

This list is not comprehensive and we can reasonably expect it to be ever-growing! You may also be wondering about records that are 'in the cloud', which will probably be on servers managed by the cloud computing service provider, depending on the communication or storage solution used. Servers are, of course, hard drives.

Format

> **Format:** 1. (Physical) construction of a record. 2. (Intellectual) characteristics of a record. 3. (Digital) layout of data according to program type.

If the medium is the physical carrier, then the format is the way the information or data is arranged within or on the carrier. It may be the physical construction of the record, for example a bound volume or a ring binder. It may be the intellectual characteristics of the record, for example diaries or registers, where content usually follows a set pattern. With digital records it will refer to the organization of the data itself such that the program will be able to recognize, read and display it – we are all familiar with formats such as Microsoft Word, Open Office and rich text format. Table 1.1 gives examples of different formats for various types of media.

Table 1.1 *Media and formats*

Medium	**Examples of formats**
Paper	• bound volume • file with treasury tag • ring binder • bundle of folded documents • deeds • diaries
Wood	• tally sticks
Parchment	• roll • chronicles • deeds • laws
Stone	• gravestones • memorial stones
Photographic prints	• black-and-white • colour • 3″ x 5″ • contact prints
Photographic transparency	• plastic slide
Glass plate negatives	• collodion wet plate negative • gelatin dry plate
Movie film	• 35 mm film • 3D film
Magnetic film	• 16 mm • super 8
Compact disk	• Microsoft Office programmes (MS Word, Excel, PowerPoint, etc.) • e-mail browsers • internet browsers • databases
Hard disk drive	
Floppy disk	

Types of archive repository

There are many different kinds of archive repositories and this section is intended to introduce you to the main kinds of archive institutions found in the UK, but also with reference to what there is in other countries. UK archive repositories – or rather their contents – reflect the age and diversity of culture, communities and individuals that have lived in the British Isles since the Middle Ages. These archives include the records of national and local government, the established and non-conformist churches, universities and guilds or professional associations, schools, hospitals, museums, charities, landed estates, businesses, social clubs and societies, not forgetting individuals and families. In fact any kind of organization or activity that results in records or documentation can probably be found in an archive somewhere.

To give a more concrete idea of the extent of archives in the UK, *British Archives: a guide to archive resources in the UK* , by Janet Foster and Julia Sheppard (Palgrave, 4th edition, 2001) contains 1231 entries giving details of places holding records which, in some way, are made available to the public. The ARCHON Directory[1] hosted by The National Archives contains more up-to-date but less detailed information on British archives. In June 2015 it contained over 2500 entries. The aim of this introductory chapter is to give an overview of the breadth and depth of records and archives and their role in society.

National archives

Most countries have a national archive institution which takes in and looks after the records of central government. However, their mandates and resources vary greatly. The French national archives, or *Les Archives Nationales*, established in September 1790, was the earliest national archives institution of this type. A law dating from 1794 sets out three principles, which still guide French national archival management:

1 The national archives are managed from the centre.
2 There is free public access.
3 There should be a national network of archives (realized as an archives service in every French *département*).

In the UK the Public Record Office (PRO) was established in 1838 to 'keep safely the public records', but the remit for provision of access to the public was less clear and there was no mandate to control a network of local government archives in the way the Archives Nationales does in France. Since 1838 the nature and role of the Public Record Office has evolved, with the authority of a series of Public Records Acts, to include the provision of free public access (both in the sense that the holdings are generally open and there is no charge to view records on site). In 2003 the PRO changed its name to The National Archives (TNA).

Some national archives (such as Canada, Ethiopia and Iraq) have been merged with the national library, to form a joint agency for archives and bibliographic material.

Holdings

National archives hold the records of central government; however, the exact composition of the holdings of a national archives will depend on its legislative or regulatory mandate and the history of the country and nation, in accordance with its collecting policy.

In countries where there is a long history of centralized government, holdings will include the records of departments which no longer exist because of reorganization. Holdings might also include the records of former companies that were nationalized: a UK example is the records of the Great Northern Railway Company, which became part of British Rail. Similarly, national archives might hold records of government entities that have been privatized, another UK example being the records of the British Railways Board, now British Railways (known as British Rail).

Where the government has its roots in a monarchical government, the national archives would also include the records of the royal family, particularly those records relating to the management of its possessions and estates, including the country or countries the monarchs ruled.

Depending on the mandate of the national archives, its holdings might include the records of individuals or organizations of national significance. Some national archives hold ecclesiastical, court and school records. With the advent of digital records, national archives may also hold large datasets emerging from government surveys or even academic research.

Services

The responsibilities of and services offered by national archives will vary according to legislative and cultural context, but all national archives will be taking in records, cataloguing them and storing them in the best possible physical environment to ensure future preservation and access. Most national archives will provide on-site access to the archive material by the public and also probably a range of research services at a distance, for example a copying service and answering enquiries about the holdings.

Some national archives have a remit to supervise or manage a network of local government or decentralized government archives around the country – this can even extend to the archives of all public bodies, such as universities and schools.

National archives are also usually concerned about records management practices within the departments and other public bodies whose records they receive. Again, depending on their mandate, they will offer guidance or issue instructions for records management to ensure that the quality and organization of the archives is good at the point of transfer to the national archives.

Sometimes the national archives will be responsible for related government functions which are not strictly speaking archival. This might include keeping registers of private records and archives of national significance of which it does not have custody, acting as ombudsman for access to information legislation or running the government's publishing operation.

Mission

Again, the national archives' mission will vary according to the legal and cultural context of the country but the aims of the national archives might include:

- protecting and safeguarding government archives for use by future generations
- providing access facilities and information to support the use of the records
- ensuring accountability and transparency through the provision of records management policy and guidance
- ensuring that the documentary evidence in the archives represents the 'story' of the nation.

Apart from taking in and looking after the records of UK government as explained above, TNA also takes responsibility for assisting government departments in managing their current records. Their explicit powers in this respect are limited but they offer guidance and, as the records become less current and closer to the 20-year deadline when they must be deposited in TNA, TNA staff become more proactive in setting out requirements for record selection and the provision of record inventories.

TNA incorporates the Office of Public Sector Information, which is responsible for policy, standards, and supporting the re-use of public sector information in accordance with UK law and EU Directives. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, responsible for publishing UK Acts of Parliament and other official information, is also part of TNA.

The Historical Manuscripts Commission forms part of TNA. It carries out a function established by Royal Warrant to gather information on privately held archives and to provide advice to owners. However, unlike many national archive institutions, TNA generally does not take in private archives of national importance.

TNA traditionally had a small inspectorial role with respect to other archive repositories in the UK which was limited to those archives wishing to hold public records of local interest (for example court records). However, this inspection role has evolved such that TNA is now part of a partnership, the Archive Service Accreditation Committee, which has introduced an accreditation scheme setting a standard for the management of archives and offering 'a badge of external recognition and endorsement of [the] service'.[2] This is in accordance with The National Archives' increased and more explicit leadership role in the archives sector in the UK.

A final point to make about the UK national archive situation is that Northern Ireland and Scotland have their own national archives (the National Records of Scotland and the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland respectively) for records of the devolved governments' administration as well as records of the UK government departments pertaining exclusively or mostly to Scotland or Northern Ireland.

State archives

We find state archives in federal states, such as the USA, Australia and Germany (where they are called *Staatsarchiv*). As you might expect, these archival authorities have remits and holdings similar to those of national archives with respect to the records and archives of their governmental responsibilities and jurisdictions. Sometimes the archives authority is also the records management adviser and authority, sometimes it has jurisdiction over local government and advises and/or takes in records of cities and other local territorial archives such as counties. State archives can also be joined with the state library service.

Local government archives

Most UK county, city and borough councils maintain their historical archives, even though the legislative basis for this, the 1972 Local Government Act, is fairly weak. It has quite a lot to say about depositories for community and parish documents and allowing electors to inspect local authority proceedings and accounts, but the concept of an archive to keep historical records does not shine through the difficult legal wording. Local government archive repositories usually take in the records of the authority and its predecessors, including those whose functions are defunct, such as the poor law administration. Local government archives also usually collect the records of local individuals and businesses.