

Undergraduate Archival Research Considerations¹

Archival research offers rich possibilities for interdisciplinary learning. Archival research provides opportunities to hone skills in self-directed learning, textual and contextual analysis, problem solving, and communication. These skills are valuable not only for graduate study in the humanities and social sciences, but also for a variety of career paths in such diverse fields as education, finance, journalism, law, and many others. Depending on your interests and the advice of your faculty mentor, you might use selected archival materials to supplement your research project, or you might anchor your entire research project in an archival collection. Whatever the scale of your engagement, the following considerations will help you prepare for a meaningful experience in the archives.

Expect different experiences in different archival spaces. Layers of security and protocols for accessing materials will vary from archive to archive. For example, you can request documents in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Room at the Benson Latin America Collection at the University of Texas at Austin without a formal orientation, whereas at the Harry Ransom Center you must complete a registration process that includes a video orientation before you can request materials. By contrast, the holdings of the Human Rights Documentation Initiative are largely digital, so you can access many materials online. Be aware that working with certain vulnerable or very old artifacts may require special training. Respect the rules of the archive you want to explore; recognize that security policies are in place in order to preserve the archival materials long-term so that students like you can continue to access them in the future.

Recognize that the archives exist for your study and exploration. Many students are excited by the opportunity to work with exclusive collections, while others feel a bit intimidated by the layers of security at some archives. Keep in mind that archives are built and maintained *for* student researchers like you. Don't be shy about approaching the archivist in charge of the collection. It is the archivist's job to help you identify archival materials pertinent to your research interests. In order to get the most out of your archival research experience, start by exploring the online **finding aid**. Although it is usually the case that only a percentage of archival holdings are represented through digitization and online finding aids, searching the finding aids will give you an idea of what is available and allow you to open a conversation or correspondence with an archivist about what other materials you might integrate in your research process. Consider writing a paragraph about your interests and ideas to share with the archivist, and be open to his or her suggestions for how to proceed with a research plan. **Start early.** Avoid approaching the archivist under a tight deadline. The archivist will need time to help you identify relevant materials, and you will need time to explore the materials.

Bring your critical thinking skills to the archive. Archival research entails working with primary sources. Since primary sources often consist of individuals' testimonies or observations about events in history, they are subjective. Therefore, it is important to interpret archival materials critically. Critical interpretation practices include: verifying facts and the credibility of claims and

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sources; identifying bias and unstated assumptions; recognizing logical inconsistencies and compromised lines of reasoning; and distinguishing between weak and strong arguments.²

In addition to thinking critically about the materials you encounter in the archive, cultivate a critical awareness of the archival collection itself. What can you learn about how the archival collection was constructed? Whose stories are told? What voices and perspectives are not represented? The UT Center for Women’s and Gender Studies Archival Research Tutorial³ offers a series of ethical considerations to help you to “conduct a dialogue with the speakers in the archives rather than just viewing them as objects of study.” As you study a given artifact or document, think about the following questions:

- What were the creator’s historical and cultural contexts?
- What were the steps between the creation of this material and my viewing of it?
- What materials are absent from this collection? What stories are not told?
- What responsibilities do I have in representing this collection in my work?

Embrace the exploratory, experimental nature of archival research. Think of the archive as a “laboratory” of the humanities and social sciences where you can test your hypotheses about currents in intellectual, cultural, social, and political history.⁴ Do the archival materials reinforce, contradict, or raise questions about expert opinions you have read or heard? Approach the archive having done some outside research about your topic, but be prepared to adapt your research question and process based on what you find is available (or not available) in the archive. It is fine—even expected—for your research plan to shift and change as you delve into the archival materials. Give yourself plenty of time to sift through broad swathes of material so that you can identify the most useful, compelling artifacts and so that you can access the unique sense of context offered by the archive.

Be aware of special skills you might need to engage with certain collections. For example, in order to access the Digital Archive of the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive available at UT, you need Spanish language skills as well as an understanding of how the Guatemalan National Police was historically structured, since the organization of the collection mirrors the organization of the bureaucracy. Consider what knowledge and skills you need to approach certain archives, and think about how your language and other skills might open up possibilities for you to engage with particular archival collections.

Seek mentorship. Discuss your archival research interests with your faculty mentor or another professor who can offer advice on your research plan. If this professor works with archives, consider asking him or her whether there might be opportunities for you to assist with small research tasks, in order to gain exposure to and practice working with archival materials. You might also ask if your professor can suggest a graduate student who works with archives in your field and who might be willing to informally mentor you. Although archivists and reference librarians are

² See Marcus C. Robyns, pg. 368. “The Archivist as Educator: Integrating Critical Thinking Skills Into Historical Research Methods Instruction.” *American Archivist* 64 (2001): 363-84.

³ <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/cwgs/womens-rights/Archival-Research-Tutorial/Archival-Research-Tutorial.php>

⁴ See Barbara Rockenbach, pg. 279. “Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library.” *American Archivist* 74 (2011): 275-289.

available to support your research efforts, individual faculty and/or graduate student mentorship can also very effectively help you build confidence in the archives.

Keep good records. Consult with an archivist about proper citation practices, which will vary depending on the materials you work with. Take a lot of notes as you pore through archival materials, since you may recognize the significance of a detail or document only after you have proceeded in other directions with your research plan. Seek reflection opportunities. Consider keeping a research journal to reflect on the challenges and rewards of your archival research process. (If you have a faculty or graduate student archival research mentor, your journal entries can help start the conversation when you meet.)

Seek models of effectively integrated archival research. Browse the following links for examples of how scholars have analyzed archival items and integrated textual, visual, and material artifacts in their research.

The National Security Archive blog, "Unredacted": <http://nsarchive.wordpress.com/>

Slate.com's "The Vault" blog: http://www.slate.com/content/slate/blogs/the_vault.html

The Harry Ransom Center "Cultural Compass" blog:
<http://www.utexas.edu/opa/blogs/culturalcompass/>

The National Archives Blogs: <http://www.archives.gov/social-media/blogs.html>