

HOW DO YOU DESCRIBE GOVERNMENT RECORDS?

Documentation and description are two very important activities you need to understand and practice when managing your government records. Both apply to cataloging individual records and records series, as well as communicating your mission, policies, and procedures. Good documentation and description practice is important throughout all aspects of records management—from initial contact with the donor to the eventual disposition of your records—and when applied, can be a tremendous help in improving the quality of your collections and your services.

In this chapter you will learn what documentation and records description are and how they can help you manage your collections. This chapter also discusses the importance of description standards and presents some of the more commonly used standards that you should be familiar with. You will also learn about a well-known commercial software package used by historical societies and museums for managing their collections.

What is meant by documentation and why is it important?

Documentation has several meanings in the archival setting. First, it can refer to a process that results in greater accessibility to records, substantiates the authenticity of records, and provides the means of managing and controlling records more effectively. Second, documentation can refer to the products of this process—finding aids, such as catalog records, inventories, registers, and indexes. Lastly, documentation can refer to the records themselves. Good documentation adds substantial value to your collections:

Good documentation makes locating and retrieving your records easier.

When you document your collections, you are using description standards and creating finding aids that help you locate and retrieve records more easily. Standards and finding aids are discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Good documentation substantiates the trustworthiness of your collections.

As an archivist, you need to be collecting information on the origin, ownership, and completeness of your collections. When you do so, you are substantiating the reliability and authenticity—the trustworthiness—of your collections. Deeds of gift and certificates of authenticity are examples of documentation that you need to collect and retain, as they prove legal ownership and authenticity.

Good documentation provides the means to manage and control your records more effectively.

In the course of managing your collections, you are constantly involved in many archives-related activities: acquiring, processing, conserving, storing, exhibiting, and loaning to name a few. Your collections are important assets, and good documentation is essential for tracking and controlling these valuable collections. Good documentation practice is also essential for minimizing the legal risks associated with managing your collections. To assess your legal risk, use the State Archives' *Legal Risk Analysis Tool* found at <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/tis/Legalrisk.html>.

What is records description and why is it important?

Records description is the means of providing useful information on the content and organizational structure of archival holdings. It identifies the type of information needed by staff and researchers, and is compiled from the record itself or from an external source. Records description results in the creation of finding aids such as catalog records, inventories, registers, and indexes. These finding aids provide a convenient means of scanning large quantities of records to locate desired information.

Catalog Records

A catalog record is a descriptive summary of a set of records and commonly contains information such as records storage location, author, title, history, and contents summary. In addition to being used as a finding aid itself, catalog records can be used to generate other helpful finding aids such as an author index or collection title inventory. Catalog records are easily incorporated into electronic systems for online access and remote searching.

Inventories and Registers

Inventories and registers are similar to catalog records in that they contain summary information about a set of records. But unlike catalog records, they add detailed information about the location, structure, and contents of the records series (detailed information such as box number, folder number, volume number, and detailed descriptions of contents). Presenting such detailed information makes it easier and quicker to locate and retrieve specific information. Compared to catalog records, inventories and registers can be narrative in nature, allowing you to easily create and manage them using commercial word processing software and a personal computer.

Indexes

An index is a listing of all information held in a collection and guides you to the finding aid that is most suitable for your search. Indexes function much the same as card catalogs found in public libraries.

Why are standards so important in record description?

Just as the standard conventions provided by a common language enhance everyday communication, description standards enhance the sharing of collection-related information. The use of broad standards encourages the sharing of information among people, departments, and organizations, and makes your collections and the collections of others more accessible and, therefore, more valuable.

Many different description standards are available covering data value, data structure, data content, and data interchange. Standards also exist for inventories and registers. The following are well-known standards that you might want to make use of:

- *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD-G)* is available online at <[http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargrp/isad\(g\)e.html](http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargrp/isad(g)e.html)>.
- *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* is available online at <<http://www.ala.org/editions>>.
- *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging: A Revised and Expanded Version of Robert G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Man-Made Objects* is available online at <<http://www.altamirapress.com>>.

At the end of this chapter (*Where can you get more information on government record description?*) you will find complete bibliographic information on these standards. For a more complete listing of standards used for description, visit <http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/standards/introarchives>.

What are some of the standards used in record description?

As mentioned earlier, there are many description standards available to help you manage your collections. Machine Readable Cataloging, Encoded Archival Description, controlled vocabularies and thesauri, and records retention schedules are some standards that you should be aware of.

Machine Readable Cataloging

Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC) is a well-known data interchange standard that defines catalog information fields and field data type for all types of records, whether the records are books, films, or artifacts. For example, this standard specifies that the field designated as 655 contains only information on the physical form or genre of a record or group of records, and that this information be in accordance with a particular protocol.

Encoded Archival Description

Encoded Archival Description (EAD) is a data structure and data interchange standard that applies to inventories and registers. Since this standard is compliant with Extensible Markup Language (XML), EAD-formatted inventories can be opened and viewed by web page browsers.

Controlled Vocabularies and Thesauri

Controlled vocabularies and thesauri are data value standards that control the terminology used for describing information. Controlled terminology is beneficial because it allows related or similar information to be included in the results of information searches. For instance, if you search for information on Paul Joseph Smith, controlled terminology will also return information on Paul J. Smith, Paul Joe Smith, and Paul Joseph Smith Jr.

Records Retention Schedules

Standardized records retention schedules provide you with a plan for managing government records and are available for the four major local government jurisdictions: city, county, township, and school district.

City, county, and township schedules are available from the League of Minnesota Cities (<<http://www.mcfoa.org/>>), the Association of Minnesota Counties (<<http://www.mncounties.org/>>), and the Minnesota Association of Townships (<<http://www.mntownships.org/>>). School district records retention schedules are available at <<http://www.region1.k12.mn.us/main/Portals/0/SMARTFIN/docs/DistrictGeneralRecordsRetention.pdf>>.

Government Agency	Retention Schedule Status
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City	This schedule was updated in April 2003. It is available online at < http://www.mcfoa.org/ >.
County	This schedule was compiled in 1985 and is still valid.
Township	This schedule was compiled in 1985 and is still valid.
School district	This schedule was updated and distributed in January 2000.

The Minnesota State Court System has a records retention schedule that is available at <http://www.mncourts.gov/documents/0/Public/Justice_Agency/Retention_Schedule_Revised_3-05rev.pdf>.

For records of county human services departments, the state Human Services Department hosts an on-line records retention schedule at <http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/agencywide/documents/pub/dhs16_140359.pdf>.

What standard commercial software is useful for documentation and record description?

PastPerfect is a leading Windows-based software application that can help you manage your collections. It is endorsed by the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), accredited by the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), and is used extensively throughout the United States. Many societies and museums throughout Minnesota have purchased this software with the help of matching grants available from the Minnesota Historical Society. For more information on matching grants, visit <<http://www.mnhs.org/shpo/lhs/grants/>>.

PastPerfect comes with these standard features:

- Collection management tools that make accessions, loans, and descriptive cataloging easy and efficient.
- Membership management tools, including membership renewals and dues, donation receipts, and mailings.

- A variety of finding aids, including search capability that allows you to search by keyword, lexicon term, category, or field information.
- Over 200 predefined forms and reports, and the ability to create your own custom reports and queries.
- Robert G. Chenhall's book *Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging* to ensure correct and consistent data.
- Many timesaving features to speed catalog data entry and help standardize data input.

For more information on PastPerfect, visit Pastime Software Company's web site at <http://www.museumsoftware.com/>.

Where can you get more information on government record description?

Introduction to Archival Organization and Description

http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/standards/introarchives

This web site contains introductory information about organizing and describing collections of personal papers and organizational records that make up the fabric of archival collections.

Hensen, Steven. *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts: A Cataloging Manual for Archival Repositories, Historical Societies, and Manuscript Libraries*. 2^d ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990.

The following three resources are standards used in description:

Blackaby, James A., Greeno, Patricia, and the Nomenclature Committee. *The Revised Nomenclature for Museum Cataloging: A Revised and Expanded Version of Robert G. Chenhall's System for Classifying Man-Made Objects*. Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1988. Available online at <http://www.altamirapress.com>.

International Council on Archives. *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD-G)*. Stockholm: International Council on Archives, 2nd ed. 1999. Available online at [http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargrp/isad\(g\)e.html](http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargrp/isad(g)e.html).

Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR. Edited by Michael Gorman and Paul W. Winkler. *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*. 2^d ed., 1998 revision. Chicago: American Library Association, 1998. Available online at <http://www.ala.org/editions>.