

## 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 your mission, policies, and procedures. Following good documentation and description practices 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.

### 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*<sup>1</sup>.

## 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 way to scan through large quantities of records to locate desired information, some of which are described below.

### 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Historical Society. *Trustworthy Information Systems Handbook: Appendix G, Legal Risk Analysis*. State Archives Department. July 2002. <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/tis/Legalrisk.html>

Many different description standards are available covering data value, data structure, data content, and data interchange. Standards also exist for inventories and registers. For an introduction to archival organization and description, review the resource with the same title, *Introduction to Archival Organization and Description*<sup>2</sup>, by Michael J. Fox and Peter L. Wilkerson.

## What are some of the standards used in record description?

As previously mentioned, there are many description standards available to help you manage your collections. The Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, controlled vocabularies and thesauri, Encoded Archival Description, the General International Standard Archival Description, and Machine Readable Cataloging are some standards that you should be aware of.

### Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR2)

AACR2 is a set of cataloging rules used in the library profession and is jointly published by the American Library Association, Canadian Library Association, and the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (UK). The rules assist with description and access of cataloged materials. Information about the standards can be found online<sup>3</sup>. A new version, AACR3 or RDA is currently being developed and tested.<sup>4</sup>

### 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.

### 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. The standard is available online.<sup>5</sup>

### ISAD (G): General International Standard Archival Description

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<sup>2</sup> Fox, Michael J. and Peter L. Wilkerson. *Introduction to Archival Organization and Description*. J. Paul Getty Trust. 1998. [http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting\\_research/standards/introarchives/](http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/standards/introarchives/)

<sup>3</sup> American Library Associations. *ALA Editions*.  
<http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/publishing/editions/editions.cfm>

<sup>4</sup> RDA: Resource Description Access. *Home Page*. <http://www.rdaonline.org/>; Library of Congress. *Testing Resource Description and Access (RDA)*. <http://www.loc.gov/bibliographic-future/rda/>

<sup>5</sup> Library of Congress. <EAD> Encoded Archival Description: Version 2002 Official Site. July 10, 2009.  
<http://www.loc.gov/ead/>

A set broad and general rules to be used when describing archival materials that developed twenty-six elements for description. These elements provide a structure to the description of the records as well as serving as access points into the records. The standard is available online<sup>6</sup>.

### **Machine Readable Cataloging<sup>7</sup>**

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.

## **Where can you get more information on government record description?**

### ***Introduction to Archival Organization and Description<sup>8</sup>***

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<sup>nd</sup> ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990.

The following resources are standards used in description:

International Council on Archives. *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD-G)*. Stockholm: International Council on Archives, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1999. Available online<sup>9</sup>.

Joint Steering Committee for Revision of AACR. Edited by Michael Gorman and Paul W. Winkler. *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*. 2<sup>d</sup> ed., 1998 revision. Chicago: American Library Association, 1998. Available online<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup>International Council on Archives. *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*. 1994. [http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargp/isad\(g\)e.html](http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargp/isad(g)e.html)

<sup>7</sup> Library of Congress. *MARC Standards*. June 23, 2009. <http://www.loc.gov/marc/>

<sup>8</sup> Fox, Michael J. and Peter L. Wilkerson. *Introduction to Archival Organization and Description*. J. Paul Getty Trust. 1998. [http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting\\_research/standards/introarchives/](http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/standards/introarchives/)

<sup>9</sup> International Council on Archives. *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*. 1994. [http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargp/isad\(g\)e.html](http://www.mclink.it/personal/MD1431/sito/isaargp/isad(g)e.html)

<sup>10</sup> American Library Associations. *ALA Editions*. <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/publishing/editions/editions.cfm>