

Catholic Archives Society Publications
Archive Advice Leaflet Number 5

Glossary of basic archival terms

This leaflet offers some interpretations of common archival terminology in current use, and of other technical language which may be encountered by CAS members in carrying out archival work. It is not intended to be exhaustive, and reference should be had to the publications given at the end. Usage changes over time, and there are also some international variations. Where variant meanings may commonly be encountered among the terms listed, these are included in the text. The growing use of national and international standards in archive administration has encouraged the use of a more technical and specialised language, and examples of these standards are included in the list of further reading.

Access: the availability of archival documents for consultation by potential users. Restrictions placed by the archivist or donor on access may be due to the confidentiality of material, the absence of finding aids, or the fragility of the archives.

Access point: An index term or keyword by which an archival catalogue, description or finding aid may be accessed.

Accession register: the formal record of the receipt (accession) of records into the archives, usually compiled in chronological order.

Accrual: generally, additions received to a collection of records already in the archives.

Administrative history: the section of an archive catalogue or finding aid which gives an account of the history of the creator of the records.

Appraisal: the function of reviewing – with a view to assessing their suitability for retention in the archives, for longer term evaluation, or for disposal or destruction.

Bundle: a number of documents, whether in an original or collected order, tied together or wrapped.

Calendar: a list, usually in chronological order, in which a précis or detailed summary of the text and formulae of individual documents are provided.

Catalogue: (1) a list or *finding aid* identifying individual documents or groups of documents, and noting essential context and details, the aim being the intellectual preservation of the *provenance* of the items and the description of the records for the benefit of potential users.
(2) a list or summary of a particular group or selection of archives, perhaps related to an exhibition or display.

Classification: the arrangement of records to correspond with the order in which they were created or maintained, reflecting the origin, structure, government, administration etc., of the institution. Model classifications have been formulated for diocesan and religious archives but most classification schemes are useful only as guides, each archive being unique.

Collection: a term used fairly loosely but generally signifying: (1) an accumulation, often artificial, of archives etc., devoted to a single subject, or having some other common characteristic.

(2) records emanation from a common source.

(3) the total holdings of a repository.

Conservation, also known as restorative conservation: active measures taken to restore or repair damaged or decayed archival records. It is vital that the *evidential value* of the archives be protected and hence any repairs should be fully documented and reversible. Such work should only be carried out by a *professional conservator*. See also preservation.

Copyright: the right vested in law in the author of a document, his heirs or assigns to publish or control publication or reproduction of a document. This right may be exercised separately from the custody or ownership of the document and an archivist needs to have some knowledge of copyright as it pertains directly to archive administration.

File: the basic physical unit of an archival description or catalogue, being a discrete, clearly differentiated document or group of documents relating to a distinct subject or transaction.

Finding aid: any listing, guide, inventory, catalogue, location index etc., published or unpublished, which is intended to establish intellectual and physical control over some or all of the archives in a repository, and assist staff and/or users to access relevant material.

Fonds (*French*): the record group representing the whole of the records of a particular organisation, individual or entity. It may be divided into sub-fonds or sub-groups, representing administrative, geographical or organisational divisions of this entity.

Heritage: a term in current use signifying the total range of records, artefacts, traditions, etc., which contribute to the history of a country or institution e.g. the national heritage, the heritage of the church, and often used with the word 'cultural' and considered to be the responsibility of one generation or owner to hand on to the next.

Informational value: the usefulness for research or reference of archival documents, often separate from the original function or use which the creator of the records envisaged.

Inventory: a basic finding aid, list or schedule, identifying the contents of an archive group, class, series, or whole collection.

Item: the smallest indivisible component of an archive which may be described or, in certain instances, produced to a user, e.g. an individual letter from a folder or page from a volume.

Letters: hand-written or typed papers sent by hand or post, also official documents conferring privileges. Letters received are termed in-letters and copies of those sent are termed out-letters. The term correspondence is used in an archival catalogue only when both in and out letters relating to a particular transaction or communication are retained together, in original or copy format

Location index: a *finding aid* which links references or descriptions of archives to their physical location on the shelves of the *repository*, in order to ensure that they can be accessed by the archives staff.

Manuscripts: properly restricted to hand-written or typed documents but also applied to literary and other non-official records, ancient or modern.

Modern media: records and record materials outside the traditional formats of paper and parchment e.g. photographic, video, audio-visual and electronic records.

Moral defence of archives: the administration of archival records according to professional principles, so as to protect their *archival integrity* (terminology: Sir Hilary Jenkinson).

Physical defence of archives: the administration of archival records according to professional principles, so as to protect their *preservation* (terminology: Sir Hilary Jenkinson).

Preservation: also known as preventive conservation: the process by which archives are protected from damage, misuse or deterioration. This would generally include storage of the whole *fonds* or archive in a strong room or *repository*; the use of *archive quality* material as stationary and packaging for archival documents and measures to monitor and control the storage environment e.g. the use of a *thermohygrograph*. See also *conservation*.

Provenance: the origin and custodial history of an accumulation of records, from which is derived the archival principle that records of separate origin should be preserved and listed separately in order to preserve their archival 'integrity'. Also known as '*respect des fonds*' (French).

Professionally qualified archivists and conservators: in a British context, those having a professional diploma or other training/experience recognised by the Society of Archivists. See *archivist, conservation*.

Record group: see *fonds*.

Records: a generic term comprehending all the various classes and formats of material in which information is retained or transmitted, including paper, parchment, books, film, audio and video tapes, computer disks, etc.

Records Management: the administration and documentation of all of the records created by a particular organisation or individual. The most common functional model is the 'records lifecycle', by which records are managed through current, semi-current and non-current phases,

the final stage being (for most material) destruction or disposal. That material appraised as being of permanent value can then be transferred to the archives. Frequently, the archivist of an organisation also plays a role in records management, reflective of the fact that archive administration is the final phase of a records continuum.

Repository: (1) the building or room in which archives are stored. Archival repositories should properly be designed and configured in a manner so as to ensure the preservation of the documents which it holds. National norms and standards are often available as guidelines e.g. in Britain, the relevant British Standard (BS 5454).

(2) the whole of the offices or agency where archives are stored and administered.

Series: a group of records treated as a unit because they are similar in format and/or arise out of a particular administrative function or discrete filing scheme. Previously often referred to as a class.

Thermohygrograph: An instrument which allows temperature and relative humidity to be monitored and recorded, often used in a repository or strong room to ascertain whether records are stored in the correct environmental conditions.

Further reading

Most manuals of archive administration will include definitions of terms commonly used throughout the archive profession.

The most comprehensive list is provided by the *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, published by the International Council on Archives as ICA Handbook Series, Volume 5 (K.G. Saur, 1984). A very useful shorter list is provided in *Keeping Archives* ed. Judith Ellis (Society of Australian Archivists, 1993)

Some specialist publications and guidelines which contain useful lists of definitions and terminology are: British Standard 5454, *Recommendations for the storage and exhibition of archival documents* (2nd ed, 2000); International Council on Archives *ISAAR (CPF) International standard archival authority record for corporate bodies persons and families* (2nd ed, 2003) and *ISAD(G) General international standard archival description* (2nd ed, 1999) and Proctor, Margaret and Cook, Michael *Manual of Archival Description* (3rd ed, Aldershot, 2000).

The terms 'moral defence' and 'physical defence' of archives are discussed in Sir Hilary Jenkinson's standard archival text *A Manual of Archive Administration* (2nd ed, 1937)

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