

Archives and Special Collections

Working with archives

This resource will explain what archives are and the practicalities of using them, as well as suggesting how you can effectively interpret archive material and use it to inform your own work.

▶ What are archives?

Archives are collections of unique and rare material. They are an original source from a particular time so can provide evidence on a subject and can also add variety to your research through offering an account which others might not have considered. An archive can range from a small box of letters to hundreds of boxes of papers, photographs, digital and audio-visual material and objects created by an organisation or individual.

Archives can be interdisciplinary and informative, explaining how or why something happened, but they are also inherently biased. Every item in an archive was created for a reason – so always remember to ask yourself what the creator's intentions might have been, and what might not have been kept. Archives can never fully replicate a time or experience but do give exciting, original traces for exploration and understanding.

▶ Practicalities of using archives

There are some practicalities you will need to bear in mind when using archives:

- You should contact the Archive you are interested in going to ahead of visiting. They can advise on what you can and can't bring, whether you can take copies of material, and can also suggest material you might be interested in seeing. Archive material will usually have to be ordered in advance, so if you just turn up you might find you can't see what you want to.
- Archives cannot be borrowed, and access to them will only be provided under supervision in a research room, or through the supply of digital copies of material if permissible.
- To protect the archive material, you will not be allowed to bring items such as food, drink, bags, coats or pens into the research room.
- Archives require careful handling and you may be asked to use book supports or weights to protect the item.
- Taking digital photographs of material for personal research use may be permitted but will likely incur a fee and require the completion of documentation to comply with copyright legislation.



Interpreting archive material

Most archives provide descriptions of material in online catalogues which users can browse and search to select the material they wish to see in a research room. However, a catalogue description could be quite limited and will only tell you so much about an item in an archive. When looking at the item yourself you must first identify what it is. Ask yourself:

- What type of object is it?
- Who created it?
- Do you know anything about the author/creator?
- When was it created?
- Why was it created?

Once you have identified what it is, you can then move on to interpreting the item. Ask yourself:

- What points or arguments are made?
- What values or attitudes does it reflect?
- How does it relate to the context it was created in?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How reliable is the source?

You may find you cannot answer all the above questions by just looking at the archive material. You should consult secondary sources such as books, journal articles and websites to aid your understanding. You can then move on to relating the item to your research question and seeing what new perspectives it offers on your subject.

For more information or to book an appointment to view material in the University's Archives and Special Collections, email archives@surrey.ac.uk.

