

# **INVITATIONAL MEETING OF EXPERTS ON ARRANGEMENT**

**Ottawa, October 15-16, 2004  
Sponsored by the Canadian Council of  
Archives**

## **FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

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on behalf of the participants of the Invitational  
Meeting of Experts on Arrangement**

**15 April 2005**

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Introduction
2. Background and rationale for the Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement
3. Meeting participants
4. Preparation for the Meeting
5. Structure of the Meeting
6. Conclusions and recommendations arising from the Invitational Meeting

Appendices

- A. Recommendations organized by category
- B. Glossary of terms relating to arrangement and description, compiled by Jennifer Meehan
- C. IMEA bilingual glossary, prepared by Marcel Caya
- D. Bibliography of sources related to archival arrangement from five major archival journals, compiled by Bert Riggs

## **1. Introduction**

On October 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 2004, a group of 14 experts met in Ottawa to explore the desirability and feasibility of developing standards for the arrangement of archival documents. The Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement had a three-fold purpose:

1. to look at the contemporary landscape in which arrangement sits;
2. to identify significant issues and challenges associated with the development of standards for arrangement; and on the basis of 1 and 2
3. to chart the direction in which standards development in this area should proceed.

The Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) provided funding for the Invitational Meeting. The initiative for the meeting came from the CCA's Standards Committee. Part of the mandate of the Standards Committee is to identify and explore areas of archival work that might benefit from standardization. The Committee identified arrangement as a fruitful area of exploration on the grounds that such work would complement the descriptive standards work that has been accomplished.

The Invitational Meeting was organized by an Ad Hoc Organizing Committee, the members of which were Terry Eastwood, Heather MacNeil (Chair) and Mireille Miniggio. The CCA Secretariat provided administrative support for both the planning and execution of the meeting. Gabrielle Prefontaine served as liaison between the Secretariat and the Ad Hoc Committee.

## **2. Background and Rationale for the Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement**

In June 1980 a resolution was passed at the annual general meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists calling for the Association to establish a task force on standards for the arrangement and description of archival materials. By the time the Bureau of Canadian Archivists' Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards was established in 1984, however, its mandate had narrowed to the development of standards for description. Nevertheless, in its final report, the Working Group identified the classical principles and levels of arrangement as the necessary foundation for descriptive standards.

Over the last 10 years, as archival institutions have begun the process of implementing standards for description, they have been forced to grapple with issues of arrangement. Library and Archives Canada, for example, has converted its Record Group System into a Fonds System and in so doing has adapted Duchein's criteria for identifying fonds in order to accommodate the particular reality of the federal government structure. The Archives of Ontario has taken a different approach; it has adapted the Australian Series System for the arrangement of government records in an effort to address more effectively the complexity and frequency of administrative change.

Much of the debate over arrangement over the past decade has focused on the arrangement of organizational records. Archivists working with personal papers maintain that the organizational model fails to take into sufficient account the particular nature of personal papers. Archivists working with non-textual records (e.g., photographs, moving images, sound recordings) are often uncertain how the concept of levels of arrangement such as series and files fits into the reality of the material with which they deal. Archivists working with electronic records, for their part, are trying to sort out how to interpret traditional notions of arrangement in the context of digital environments. The inadequacy of the organizational model has been suggested by a number of archivists but thus far, there has not been any substantial work undertaken in this area to determine how the needs of other sectors of the archival community might be met. An invitational meeting of experts was seen as the necessary first step in (1) placing the topic of arrangement on the archival community's agenda; (2) determining whether and how standards for arrangement that accommodate the diversity of archival documents might be developed; and (3) outlining the process for such development.

### **3. Meeting Participants**

A group of 14 experts in the area of archival arrangement were invited to participate in this meeting. A list of potential invitees was drafted initially by the CCA Standards Committee and was subsequently refined and finalized by the Ad Hoc Organizing Committee. The experts who participated in the meeting were:

Steve Billinton, Toronto  
Rosemary Bergeron, Ottawa  
Marcel Caya, Montreal  
Terry Eastwood, Vancouver (discussion leader)  
Peter Horsman, Amsterdam  
Mary Ledwell, Toronto  
Heather MacNeil, Vancouver (discussion leader)  
Jennifer Meehan (recorder)  
Mireille Miniggio, Ottawa  
Lucie Paquet, Ottawa  
Lucie Pagé, Ottawa  
Gabrielle Prefontaine (recorder)  
Bert Riggs, St. John's, Nfld.  
Jim Suderman, Toronto

### **4. Preparation for the Meeting**

Prior to the meeting, the Organizing Committee identified seven potential topics for discussion. The topics were:

1. Series and fonds based approaches to arrangement.
2. Limits to general applicability of standard models to various types of archival documents

3. Specific issues associated with the arrangement of private papers
4. Issues associated with the arrangement of electronic records
5. Issues associated with the arrangement of non-textual records (e.g., photographs, moving images, sound recordings)
6. Intellectual vs. physical control over archival documents: points of convergence and divergence
7. Relationship between arrangement and description
8. Any other topic identified by the participants prior to the meeting

To help set the agenda for the meeting, finalize the topical areas, and provide clear foci for discussion, the invited participants were asked to comment on issues, problems, areas of uncertainty in every topical area in which they felt they had some experience, knowledge, or interest. If they thought they were areas that had been overlooked by the organizing committee, they were asked to identify them. On the basis of the participants' comments, the Organizing Committee revised its list of discussion topics.

## **5. Structure and Format of the Meeting**

The Invitational Meeting of Experts was structured around the following topics:

*Topic 1: Laying a foundation on which on which to base discussion of arrangement*

- Definition of arrangement
- Separating intellectual control from administrative/physical/process control
- Clarifying the relationship between arrangement and description
- Determining the nature and purpose of standards for archival arrangement

*Topic 2: Defining and interpreting levels of arrangement*

- Levels of arrangement
- Identification and interpretation of levels of arrangement with non-textual records
- Defining a fonds creating body in relation to personal fonds
- Identifying the complexities of personal fonds and multiple media fonds

*Topic 3: Defining and interpreting principles of arrangement*

- Definition, interpretation, application of principles in relation to a range of different types of records
- The process of analysis implicit in the principles

*Topic 4: Different models of arrangement and description*

- Series and fonds-based approaches to arrangement and description: can they co-exist?

*Topic 5: Arrangement of electronic records*

- Do electronic records present any issues additional and/or different from the issues already identified under the previous 4 topics?

### *Topic 6: The Steps Forward*

- Conclusions and recommendations arising from invitational meeting

The meeting consisted of two days of plenary discussions organized around the six topics. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil served as discussion leaders; Gabrielle Prefontaine and Jennifer Meehan served as recorders. Their notes provided the basis for the conclusions and recommendations outlined in this report.

In the course of the meeting, two participants gave presentations on specific issues relating to arrangement. Bert Riggs outlined criteria for identifying the boundaries of personal fonds, based on an adaptation of Michel Duchéin's criteria for identifying the boundaries of organizational fonds. Steve Billinton summarized the salient features of the series system that has been developed and implemented at the Archives of Ontario.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations Arising from the Invitational Meeting**

The invitational meeting represented a first step in the development of standards for archival arrangement. It was an exploratory exercise, which aimed to identify areas where standards are needed; it was not the aim of this meeting to specify the content of such standards.

There was a clear consensus among the participants that a single, "one size fits all" set of rules for arrangement, analogous to those embodied in the *Rules for Archival Description*, is neither feasible nor desirable. The type of standards envisaged by the participants is more along the lines of guidelines, which the SAA Glossary defines as "recommendations suggesting, but not requiring, practices that produce similar, but not identical, results." Such guidelines would aim at reducing some of the ambiguity associated with arrangement by providing examples of the kinds of problems that archivists face in the course of arranging a body of records and suggesting various ways in which these problems might be resolved.

The participants also agreed that, in addition to practical guidelines, theoretical elucidation of key concepts and principles associated with arrangement is needed. That elucidation could take the form of a series of discussion documents on specific concepts and principles (e.g., series, original order) that would examine the historical meaning of those concepts and principles, their contemporary interpretation, and their application in concrete situations. Finally, it was agreed that empirical research in two specific areas is needed: the first area is the arrangement practices in archival institutions; the second area is the nature of aggregations within electronic systems. Empirical research in the first area is necessary to establish the nature and extent of the guidance already provided to archivists working in various archival institutions and dealing with various media and could take the form of surveys of institutional practice. Empirical research in the second area is needed to establish some baseline understanding of levels of arrangement as they manifest themselves in electronic record-keeping environments and could take the form of case studies of different kinds of electronic systems.

With the completion of this final report, the mandate of the Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangements is effectively fulfilled. It is for the Canadian Council of Archives to decide whether and in what manner to act on the recommendations outlined below. It seems clear, however, that the most effective means of implementing the recommendations would be through the creation of an oversight body that would assume responsibility for prioritizing the recommendations and establishing mechanisms for translating them into a set of deliverables. Of course there are significant cost implications associated with this option. For that reason, the CCA may wish to seek funding from agencies such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council either on its own or in collaboration with the Bureau of Canadian Archivists. There is precedent for the archival community receiving such funding; the work of the Canadian Working Group on Descriptive Standards, for example, was funded by SSHRCC.

The conclusions and recommendations arising from the meeting fall into three broad categories: (i) situating arrangement in the broader context of archival management processes; (ii) the process of analysis involved in arrangement as an exercise in intellectual control; and (iii) the relationship between alternative models of arrangement.

It is important to underscore the fact that, while the conclusions and recommendations tend to address the arrangement issues associated with personal, non-textual, and electronic records separately, it is understood that there is considerable overlap. For example, the issues associated with arranging non-textual records (e.g., photographs, moving images, sound recordings) cannot really be separated from the discussion of issues associated with arranging personal records since individuals and families are significant creators of non-textual records. Moreover, given that non-textual records are increasingly being created in electronic form, issues related to their arrangement must be addressed as part of the wider discussion about arranging electronic records. Any effort to implement the recommendations outlined below will need to take into account these various areas of overlap.

## **I. SITUATING ARRANGEMENT IN THE BROADER CONTEXT OF ARCHIVAL MANAGEMENT PROCESSES**

### *1.1 Clarifying the concept of arrangement*

The first task of the meeting was to establish the scope of meaning of the term “arrangement”. It was generally agreed that the term “arrangement” does not adequately capture the full range of meanings traditionally associated with it. For example, in many definitions arrangement is characterized as both a physical process of ordering documents and an intellectual process of identifying relationships between and among records of a given creator(s).

For that reason, the participants agreed that the term “arrangement” is best viewed as an umbrella concept reflecting a range of ongoing archival management processes aimed at the achievement of different kinds of control. That broad concept can then be decomposed

into constituent elements that correspond to different kinds of control, e.g., physical and administrative control, intellectual control. Such decomposition would serve a number of useful purposes: it would introduce greater precision into the terminology associated with arrangement, clarify the nature and purpose of processes aimed at achieving different kinds of control and promote the standardization of the descriptive tools associated with these processes.

**Recommendation 1: Develop a matrix that (1) defines and characterizes the various processes associated with arrangement, e.g., physical control, administrative control, intellectual control; (2) explains the objectives and results of each of these processes; and (3) identifies the descriptive tools associated with each of them.**

### *1.2 Clarifying the relationship between arrangement and description*

The inclusion of descriptive tools as a component of the matrix proposed in the first recommendation underlines the close connection between arrangement and description. Like arrangement, description is a broad concept that refers to a range of tools that support the administrative, physical, and intellectual control of archival holdings. For that reason, it is not sufficient to simply name the tools associated with different kinds of control, it is necessary to identify and define the descriptive elements that are (or should be) included in those tools to ensure they serve the purpose for which they are intended.

**Recommendation 2: Elaborate on the elements that are or should be included in the descriptive tools identified in the matrix proposed in Recommendation 1.**

The participants also agreed that the specific relationship between arrangement and description as the process and product of achieving intellectual control over records is more subtle and complex than is implied in the principle, “description follows arrangement.” In fact, it was argued that arrangement and archival description are not sequential but, rather, concurrent activities and should be characterized as such. Moreover, the corollary principle, i.e., that “description is based on arrangement” implies that there is a one to one relationship between arrangement and description in which a single arrangement is reflected in a single description. The participants pointed out that description can allow for many “virtual arrangements,” corresponding, for example, to the structure of an organization and its records at different times and that allowance should be made for this possibility.

**Recommendation 3: Prepare a discussion document that clarifies and elaborates on the principles that “description follows arrangement,” and “description is based on arrangement.”**

## II. THE PROCESS OF ANALYSIS INVOLVED IN ARRANGEMENT AS AN EXERCISE IN INTELLECTUAL CONTROL

### *II.1 Interpreting the principles of arrangement generally and applying them in the context of personal records specifically*

The participants agreed that the interpretation of the principles of respect des fonds and respect for original order in general and their application to personal records specifically require considerably more theoretical elucidation and practical guidance. The two most vexatious issues identified by participants were: (a) determining the boundaries of a personal fonds and (b) interpreting and applying the concept of “original order.”

There was general consensus that sufficient guidance already exists for determining the boundaries of organizational fonds.<sup>1</sup> However, there is a paucity of guidelines addressing the problems that present themselves specifically in the context of personal fonds. The sorts of problems encountered include: the intermingling of personal and organizational records in personal fonds, the status of family fonds that are “created” as a consequence of an individual’s estate keeping the records of different generations of family members together (as opposed to family fonds that are such because the family members interacted with one another), and the difficulty of determining how records of various provenances have found their way into personal fonds (in other words, distinguishing between provenance and accidents of custody).

The interpretation of “original order” also presents problems for archivists attempting to arrange personal fonds. It was generally conceded that people’s individual record-keeping practices are often haphazard and/or idiosyncratic, making it difficult to determine whether there is a discernible original order. Moreover, at what point in the life of the records creator(s) is the original order of the records established?

The need for guidelines for interpreting and applying the principle in specific situations is not limited to personal fonds. Examples were given of organizational records that had been removed from their original files and incorporated into the files of an inquiry. The question that was raised in that example was whether the principle of original order mandated the return of the records to the files in which they were originally found once the inquiry was concluded or the preservation of those records in the files in which they ended up.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Terry Eastwood, “Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives,” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 93-116, which provides guidelines that are compatible with both series and fonds-based approaches to arrangement.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth pointing out that this was not a hypothetical case but rather a real case and that the creators of the original records were seeking the advice of the archival institution concerning whether to return the records to their original files or leave them in the files in which they ended up.

Moreover, the concept of original order has both intellectual and physical aspects and these aspects need to be explored in more depth. For example, an aspect of original order that is frequently overlooked is the original physical order of records, which may be compromised when those records are re-housed by archival institutions for preservation reasons. To what extent should the original physical order of the records be protected and/or documented?

Before any practical guidelines can be developed to address such questions it is necessary to establish a sound theoretical foundation on which to base those guidelines. This can be accomplished by undertaking an in-depth analysis of the principles of arrangement and their implications for archival practice in general and for the arrangement of personal fonds in particular.

**Recommendation 4: Prepare a discussion document(s) on the principles of respect des fonds and respect for original order that explains their original meaning, the intentions underlying them, their evolution over time, and their contemporary interpretation and application in light of the challenges posed by personal fonds.**

In conjunction with the theoretical work outlined above, it will be useful to survey the archival landscape to determine whether and to what extent archival institutions have developed guidelines for arranging personal, family, and organizational fonds. Such a survey would provide a sound empirical foundation for the development of any practical guidelines.

**Recommendation 5: Survey archival institutions to determine whether guidelines (directed to archivists) for arranging personal, family, and organizational fonds have been developed and the nature of such guidelines.**

Once a theoretical and empirical foundation for interpreting and applying the principles of arrangement has been established, it will be possible to develop some practical guidelines that outline various kinds of scenarios focusing on specific arrangement problems and suggesting solutions to those problems.

**Recommendation 6: Develop guidelines that will assist archivists in identifying when and if records have a discernible order and in the absence of any discernible order, provide examples of different kinds of arrangement that may be appropriate in a number of given situations.**

A final question considered by participants concerned the desirability of developing guidelines for creators of personal fonds as a means of addressing some of the problems associated with determining the boundaries of a personal fonds and the original order of the records within that fonds. There was much discussion on this matter and no clear consensus emerged as to the appropriateness of such guidelines. This is not surprising since such guidelines would represent a shift in orientation away from *describing* how creators have organized their records, toward *prescribing* how creators should organize

their records. Nevertheless, there was considerable interest, particularly among archivists dealing with personal fonds, in exploring this question further, particularly in light of the problems now emerging in relation to identifying the arrangement of electronic records of personal creators.

**Recommendation 7: Survey existing institutional practices to ascertain the extent to which archivists are already providing guidance to personal record creators concerning the arrangement of their records and the nature of that guidance.**

**Recommendation 8: Prepare a literature review of the empirical research done to date in the area of personal information management (PIM).** Such research, which aims to investigate the filing practices of individuals working in electronic environments, could provide a useful foundation on which to build a more sophisticated understanding of current trends and possible future directions in the arrangement practices of electronic record creators and in the development of software designed to support those practices.

**Recommendation 9: On the basis of recommendation 7 and 8, prepare a discussion document that investigates the feasibility and desirability of developing arrangement guidelines for creators of personal fonds and the various forms such guidelines might take in relation to both electronic and non-electronic records.**

## *II.2 Defining and interpreting levels of arrangement*

There was a considerable amount of discussion about levels of arrangement, which focused on two main questions: (1) What is the relationship between the identification of levels of arrangement and the analysis of a body of records? 2) What constitute meaningful aggregations in the context of non-textual records (e.g., photographs, moving images, sound recordings) and electronic records?

With respect to the first question, the participants agreed that arrangement, as an exercise in intellectual control, is a process of identifying the external and internal structure of a body of records. For corporate bodies, external structure refers to the authority and functional relations and administrative procedures of the records creator, e.g., predecessor and successor bodies, mandate and sphere of functional responsibility, administrative relationships (controlling/controlled relationships), administrative structure, agencies, officers, or persons that have exercised custody or control over records. For persons or families, external structure refers to the interests, activities, familial and professional relations of the records creator, e.g., birth and death dates, place(s) of residence, education, occupation, life and activities. The internal structure refers to the activities and procedures generating the records, the relationship among and between the records, their organization, and their documentary forms, e.g., the specific activity or activities generating the records the administrative and documentary procedures that explain how the records came into being, the structure of the aggregates, e.g., classification scheme, filing system, indexing system, the documentary forms of the records, the relationships between groups of records within this fonds and groups in other fonds, the time period of the records and the geographic area to which the records pertain.

Levels of arrangement emerge in the course of the analysis of external and internal structure. Generally speaking, external structure corresponds to the fonds level while internal structure corresponds to the series, file, and item levels. There was general consensus that situating the levels of arrangement within the analytical framework outlined above may reduce the ambiguity associated with identifying those levels in various situations. Although the archival literature discusses the relationship between analysis and the identification of levels of arrangement, it has done so primarily in the context of organizational records and substantial elaboration of the external and internal structure of personal fonds is needed to assist archivists dealing with such fonds. Moreover, further work needs to be done to explicate in more specific terms the inferential process that underpins the analysis of a body of records and the sources on which that process is built.<sup>3</sup>

**Recommendation 10: Prepare a discussion document that (1) explains the terms of analysis for identifying the external and internal structure of a body of records in the context of both organizational and personal records; and (2) elaborates on the inferential process underpinning that analysis.**

**Recommendation 11: Review the *Rules for Archival Description* to determine whether the descriptive elements currently included in the standard need to be revised in light of the analysis outlined in the discussion document proposed in recommendation 10.**

With respect to the second question (i.e., what constitute meaningful aggregations in the context of non-textual records (e.g., photographs, moving images, sound recordings) and electronic records?), it was agreed that the analysis outlined above does not obviate the need to provide archivists with more specific guidance concerning the interpretation and application of levels of arrangement. It was observed that the identification of levels of arrangement and, specifically, the series, file, and item levels, is particularly problematic in the contexts of personal, non-textual, and electronic records and guidance is needed to clarify and elaborate on the application of levels of arrangement in these contexts. Depending on the findings of the survey proposed in recommendation 5, it may be possible to incorporate current conventions for identifying levels of arrangement into those guidelines.

**Recommendation 12: Prepare general guidelines for identifying series, files and items that define each level, explain their interpretation and application in various contexts and that include examples and scenarios that provide criteria for recognizing series, files, and items and that indicate when it is appropriate to ignore one or more of the designated levels of arrangement.**

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<sup>3</sup> An excellent starting point for examining the inferential process underpinning arrangement is Jennifer Meehan, "The Role of Inference in Arrangement and Description," unpublished paper presented to Association of Canadian Archivists annual conference, Montreal, Que., 29 May 2004.

**Recommendation 13: On the basis of those general guidelines, prepare individual sets of guidelines for personal and non-textual records.**

It was agreed that, given the prevalence of collections and discrete items in archival institutions, it is necessary to acknowledge these levels in any guidelines aimed at the interpretation and application of levels of arrangement.

**Recommendation 14: Include discussion of collections and discrete items in the guidelines proposed in recommendation 12 and 13.**

Given our limited experience dealing with electronic records, it is probably premature to propose guidelines for identifying levels of arrangement for electronic records. What is needed is empirical research that investigates how aggregations of records manifest themselves within various kinds of electronic systems, the nature of those aggregations, and the extent to which they are functionally analogous to traditional levels of arrangement.

**Recommendation 15: Undertake a series of case studies aimed at examining arrangement in the specific context of electronic records. Such discussion should take into account issues of consortia and distributed networks, the difference between traditional files and computer files, and the boundaries of a file and an item in an electronic environment.**

### **III. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALTERNATIVE MODELS OF ARRANGEMENT**

There was agreement among the participants that it is possible to map traditional concepts of arrangement onto the Australian series system of arrangement. The entire environment in which the series approach is expressed is pragmatic and flexible and it does not represent a significant departure from archival principles. Moreover, in terms of analysis, there is no fundamental disparity between fonds-based and series-based approaches: the key terms of analysis are the various kinds of context entities and records entities and the relationships within, among and between them.

Despite the compatibility of fonds and series based approaches, however, they are not accommodated in the same way in contributory networks, which are built on the fonds based approach. For that reason, it is worthwhile to explain to the archival community in straightforward terms the salient characteristics of the two approaches and to explore the means by which the two approaches may be taken into account in the design of contributory networks.

**Recommendation 16: Prepare a discussion document that outlines the salient features of fonds- and series-based approaches to arrangement that lays out their points of convergence and divergence.**

**Recommendation 17: Prepare a discussion document that examines the question of implementation in contributory networks and that identifies the means necessary to permit alternative approaches (i.e., both series and funds based approaches) within those networks.**

## **Appendices**

The appendices consist of four documents prepared by various participants before or after the invitational meeting.

Appendix A consists of the recommendations of the Invitational Meeting of Experts categorized according to the aim of the recommendations, i.e., information gathering, advisory and exploratory. These categories were not defined at the invitational meeting but were suggested by Jim Suderman after reviewing the draft report.

To facilitate the participants' discussion of the relevant concepts, a glossary of terms relating to arrangement and description was prepared by Jennifer Meehan prior to the meeting and distributed to the participants; the glossary is included as Appendix B of this Report.

Following the meeting, Marcel Caya prepared a bilingual glossary of those terms, which is included as Appendix C of this Report.

Prior to the meeting, Bert Riggs identified the history of arrangement as a topic worth exploring in the context of developing standards for arrangement. Although this topic was not explored in any depth at the meeting, the participants agreed that it was relevant. In order to facilitate future work in this area, Bert Riggs contributed a bibliography of sources related to archival arrangement from five major archival journals that he has compiled; the bibliography is included as Appendix D.