
STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

PURPOSES OF ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

Archival description serves “to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote its accessibility.”²⁰ The Bentley research group identified three specific purposes of archival description, and the methods by which these are achieved.²¹ The purposes are:

1. To provide access to archival material through retrievable descriptions;
2. To promote understanding of archival material by documenting its content, context and structure; and
3. To establish grounds for presuming the authenticity of archival material by documenting its chain of custody, arrangement, and circumstances of creation and use.

The following principles form a foundation for this standard, and assist institutions to achieve the purposes of archival description.

PRINCIPLES OF ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION

These principles guide the development of a descriptive practice that employs the system of rules contained in this standard. Principles are grounded in fundamental archival theory as well as the tradition of Canadian archival practice. They are informed by earlier statements on description, and various national and international descriptive standards.²²

The “Preface to the 1990 Edition” of *RAD* states:

The principles governing descriptive practice may be defined as the theoretical and practical underpinnings of any descriptive process, while descriptive standards can be characterized as general, officially agreed upon, and widely accepted

²⁰ International Council of Archives (ICA), *International Standard for Archival Description (General)*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council of Archives, 2000), p. 7.

²¹ Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, “Advancing Archival Description: A Model for Rationalizing North American Descriptive Standards,” *Archives and Manuscripts*.25, 2 (1997), p. 204.

²² See *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), pp. 6–9, pp. 55–59, pp. 63–64; U.S. Working Group on Standards for Archival Description (WGSAD), “Archival Description Standards: Establishing a Process for their Development and Implementation,” *American Archivist* 52, 4 (Fall 1989), pp. 440-43; Duff and Haworth, pp. 198-99, pp. 203-4; *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990); ICA, “Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description,” *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 8-16; ICA, *ISAD(G)*, pp. 7-12; and *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004).

frameworks... The practical context in which the rules are applied depends on an understanding of the relationship between principles and standards.²³

If it is to be widely adopted and used, a descriptive standard must rest on a solid intellectual foundation. These principles, widely understood and accepted by archivists, provide a theoretical and practical framework for the rules that follow.

P1.0. Archival description should be undertaken with attention to requirements for use. Descriptive practice must recognize specific use requirements. To ensure effective access to archival material, decisions related to description and the choice of access points should reflect the archivist's obligation to all users. The rules in this standard should be applied in a way that results in descriptions and access points suited to both institutional and research needs.

P2.0. The description of all archival material (e.g., fonds, series, collections and discrete items) should be integrated and proceed from a common set of rules. Archival material has traditionally been understood to consist of documents automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a person or organization in the course of that creator's activities or functions. Understanding the contextual relationships that exist between a whole and its parts is an important factor in attributing value to aggregations of material. However, archival material varies with respect to provenance, and many institutional holdings fall outside the scope of the traditional conception.

In fulfilling a particular mandate or collections development policy, a repository often acquires collections of documents assembled on the basis of a common characteristic, as well as discrete items that do not form part of a larger body of materials. The value of these records may be related to characteristics independent of knowledge of their creator, or their context of creation, accumulation and use (e.g., subject or form).

If this range of material is to be described consistently within an institutional, regional, or national descriptive system, the rules must apply to material created by, and acquired from, a variety of sources. It follows that the rules in this standard should be used to describe all archival material, including fonds, series, collections and discrete items.

P3.0. *Respect des fonds* is the basis of archival arrangement and description. The archival principle of *respect des fonds* states that the records created, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an individual or corporate body must be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained, and not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body.

This principle is composed of two parts – provenance and original order. The principle of provenance means that the records created, accumulated and/or maintained by an individual or organization must be represented together, distinguishable from the records of any other creator. The principle of original order means that the order of the records established by the creator should be maintained by physical and/or intellectual means

²³ Kent M. Haworth, "Preface to the 1990 Edition," in *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990), p. xvii-xviii.

whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between records and the evidential value inherent in this order.

P3.1. Description applies to all material, regardless of form or medium. The principle of provenance demands that no records are excluded from description because of their particular form or medium. However, different media will require specific rules to accurately describe their unique characteristics. Rules for archival description must accommodate all media (and the relationships between them) within the body of records of one creator.

P4.0. Creators of archival material must be described. A description of the functions and activities of the creator(s) that produce archival material is important to understanding the context in which they were created. Standardized access points to descriptions should indicate the primary creator and relationships between successive creators (e.g., parts of a corporate body having undergone reorganization). This standard contains rules for presenting this information consistently.

In the context of this standard it is understood that the archivist does not always possess knowledge of the creator(s), nor is a given creator always responsible for more than one unit of material. However, when information relating to creators is known, it must be clearly reflected in (or linked to) the description, enabling retrieval by provenance.

P4.1. Description applies equally to records created by individuals or families, and by corporate bodies. Documents that are the product of the functions and activities of organizations may differ in extent, arrangement, subject matter, etc., from those that result from the activities of individuals or families. However, principles of arrangement and description should be applied equally to materials created by individuals or families, and organizations.

P5.0. Description reflects arrangement (i.e., levels of description are determined by levels of arrangement). Arrangement is the intellectual and/or physical processes of identifying accumulations of documents in accordance with accepted archival principles. Description involves the creation of accurate representations of archival material. Archivists capture, collate, analyze, and organize information about material that serves to identify it and to explain its context and the systems that produced it.

The description of any unit of material will reflect its unique pattern of arrangement. For instance, records arranged as a fonds or collection might be described using multiple levels to represent both the whole and its parts. In the case of a discrete item, the description would reflect only a single level of arrangement.

P5.1. Levels of arrangement and description constitute a hierarchical system. The arrangement of archival material constitutes a hierarchical system of levels that reflect the intellectual and/or physical ordering of the records. This standard recognizes the following levels of arrangement: fonds, series, collection, file and item. Each level of arrangement has a corresponding level of description.

Levels of arrangement may be related to one another in a part-to-whole relationship. For example, a fonds may be composed of series, which in turn may be composed of files, etc. The significance of each part of the whole is tied to its

place in the hierarchy. Multilevel description then, involves the preparation of multiple, interrelated descriptive records, of both the whole and its parts.

This standard, however, also recognizes that not all levels of arrangement are required or possible in all cases, and thus not all levels of description are required. Conversely, in some situations additional levels may be required (i.e., a fonds or series may require further subdivision). Ultimately, levels of arrangement and description depend on the provenance and nature of the material, as well as the management needs of the institution preserving it.

P5.2. Descriptions should proceed from general to specific. The representation of multilevel descriptive records must progress from the general to the specific. Description at the highest level should be presented before that of lower levels. It follows that descriptions at lower levels should not be presented without the description of the larger aggregation(s) of which each forms a part.

P5.3. Information provided at each level of description must be appropriate to that level. Information provided at a given level of description must be relevant to that level. For example, it is inappropriate to provide detailed information about the contents of files in a description of the fonds or the series. Likewise, it is undesirable to repeat information given at higher levels of a multilevel description. To avoid repetition, provide common information at the highest appropriate level.

P5.4. Relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated. Any relationship existing between levels of description must be clearly indicated. In multilevel description, the whole and its parts must be represented in a way that indicates the nature of the relationships between them. Each level of description must be identified and linked in some way with the next higher unit being described.