

CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES

Introduction

The Nature of Archival Description

The U.S. Working Group on Standards for Archival Description (WGSAD) defined archival description as "the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, organizing, and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate, and explain the holdings of archival institutions and the contexts and records systems from which those holdings were selected."¹ Clearly, archival description is a complex matter, consisting of a number of inter-related activities required to manage archival materials throughout their existence. The International Council on Archives Commission on Descriptive Standards² recognized that descriptive information is required at all stages of the management of archival materials, but narrowed its definition of archival description to cover "the creation of an accurate representation of the fonds and its component parts by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing any information that serves to identify archival material and explain the context and records systems which produced it."³ This aspect of archival description, "the definitive representation of the archival material . . . required to establish intellectual control over it and promote access to the information which it contains,"⁴ is the focus of these rules. Other aspects of description are covered in other standards, professional manuals, and institutional policies and practices.

The Purpose of Archival Description

These definitions imply that archival description serves a number of purposes, i.e., "to identify, manage, locate, and explain" archival holdings, and "to establish intellectual control . . . and promote access. . .", but these purposes need to be more clearly articulated. The Bentley research group identified three main purposes of archival description and the methods by which these purposes are achieved.⁵ These purposes are:

- to provide access to archival materials by means of a description that is retrievable, at a minimum, by provenance;
- to promote the understanding of such materials by documenting their context, structure, and content; and
- to establish grounds for presuming records to be authentic by documenting their chain of custody, their arrangement, and the circumstances of their creation and use.

Standards for Archival Description

The purposes of archival description are clear, but it is not immediately obvious that standards for description are required. As long as exchanging information about an institution's holdings

¹ [U.S.] Working Group on Standards for Archival Description, "Archival Description Standards: Establishing a Process for their Development and Implementation," *American Archivist* 52, no. 4 (Fall 1989), 442 (hereinafter cited as WGSAD Report).

² The ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards was made a permanent committee of the ICA in 1996.

³ International Council on Archives, "Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description", *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992) 12. (hereinafter cited as ICA Statement of Principles).

⁴ *Ibid.*, ICA Statement of Principles P.6, page 10.

⁵ Wendy M. Duff and Kent M. Haworth, "Advancing Archival Description: A Model for Rationalizing North American Descriptive Standards," *Archives and Manuscripts*.25, no. 2 (1997), 204 (hereinafter cited as the Bentley Report).

consisted of sending photocopies of finding aids through the mail, it was often argued that the unique nature of archival holdings made it neither possible nor necessary to develop and apply common standards for the description of archival holdings. Under such circumstances, each institution could make its own rules for description with little regard for what others were doing. However, the widespread use of computers changed that. Since the 1980s, archivists have realized the importance of standards for description to avoid repeatedly reinventing the descriptive wheel in each institution, and to present a consistent product to the users of archival materials, whether they be staff colleagues, the staff of other institutions, or researchers. Furthermore, the ubiquity of computers, combined with the rapid development of communications technology, has made it possible to exchange electronic information cheaply and quickly. Agreement about the elements of archival description and a consistent way of forming them is an essential prerequisite for information exchange at the national and international levels.

The need for descriptive standards is no longer a subject of debate, and the discussion has turned to the role and nature of such standards. The ICA Statement of Principles summarized four purposes of archival descriptive standards:

- a) to ensure the creation of consistent, appropriate, and self-explanatory descriptions;
- b) to facilitate the retrieval and exchange of information about archival material;
- c) to enable the sharing of authority data; and
- d) to make possible the integration of descriptions from different locations into a unified information system.⁶

As the archival community explored and enlarged its understanding of the role and nature of descriptive standards, it became clear that there were different types of standards. The U.S. Working Group on Standards for Archival Description identified two particular types of standards: data structure standards and data content standards.⁷ *Data structure* standards identify the elements of information required for archival description. For example, to describe archival material, the following elements are required: a title element that names the entity, an extent element that states how much there is, and a date element that indicates when the material was created. Data structure standards that accommodate archival description, such as MARC (Machine Readable Cataloguing)⁸ and EAD (Encoded Archival Description),⁹ are well-developed and widely used. However, data structure standards do not stand alone. While they enable the exchange of information, they do not provide any guidance on exactly how to enter information in any particular element. Without corresponding data content standards, information is likely to be presented inconsistently.

⁶ ICA Statement of Principles, 1.3, page 13.

⁷ WGSAD report, 454. The Working Group also identified data value standards that provide lists of terms, names, codes, or other specific information that are acceptable for entry into a particular data element. Abbreviations for states and provinces, or terms in a thesaurus, are examples of data value standards.

⁸ *MARC 21 format for bibliographic data : including guidelines for content designation*. 1999 ed. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Cataloging Distribution Service; Ottawa: National Library of Canada, c1999- ; *MARC 21 format for authority data : including guidelines for content designation* 1999 ed. Washington, D.C. : Library of Congress, Cataloging Distribution Service ; Ottawa : National Library of Canada, 1999- .

⁹ *Encoded Archival Description Tag Library, Version 2002*. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2002).

Data content standards provide the rules that state exactly how to enter information in each element of the data structure. For example, for the extent element, a data content standard will indicate whether to express the extent of the archival material in terms of number of items, linear feet or meters of shelf space, or some other measurement. The development of data content standards has taken place along national lines (e.g., *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts* (APPM) in the U.S., *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD) in Canada, *Manual of Archival Description* (MAD) in Britain, and the *Australian Common Practice Manual*) with very different results. As the means of international information exchange became more readily available, the benefits of agreed-upon international standards became clear. High-level international standards (*ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description* and *ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families*) were developed by the International Council on Archives (ICA), but they still required more detailed rules to make them useful. RAD2 is a data content standard for the description of archival materials based on the framework of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF), and is fully compatible with the existing data structure standards.

The Principles

This statement of principles was developed to serve as the basis for the rules in this standard. Thus, it is more than a statement of archival principles generally and is based not only on fundamental archival theory, but also on a variety of other sources, including earlier statements about description and descriptive standards found in the reports of working groups commissioned to investigate aspects of archival description,¹⁰ national rules for description,¹¹ and statements of the ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards.¹² In recognizing the disparate nature of archival holdings, the statement is also grounded in accepted professional practice in Canada.

Respect des Fonds

Principle 1: The principle of *respect des fonds* is the basis of archival arrangement and description.

This principle states that the records created, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together (in the sense of identified as belonging to the same aggregation) 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. Inherent in the overarching principle of *respect des fonds* are two sub-principles —provenance and original order. The principle of provenance means that the records created, accumulated and/or maintained by an organization or individual must be represented together, distinguishable from the records of any other organization or individual. The principle of original order means that the order of the

¹⁰ *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), 6–9, 55–59, 63–64; WGSAD Report, 440–43; Bentley Report, 198–99, 203–4.

¹¹ *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990), xi-xvi, rules 0.1, 0.2, 0.22, 1.0A1, 1.0A2 (hereinafter cited as RAD); Steven Hensen, comp., *Archives, Personal Papers and Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1989), rules 0.3, 0.9, 0.10, 0.12, 1.0A (hereinafter cited as APPM).

¹² ICA Statement of Principles, 8-16; ICA Committee on Descriptive Standards, *ISAD(G) : General International Standard Archival Description*, 2nd ed. (Ottawa: International Council on Archives, 1999), 7-12 (hereinafter cited as ISAD(G)).

records that was established by the creator should be maintained by physical and/or intellectual means whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between the documents and the evidential value inherent in their order. Together, these principles form the basis of archival arrangement and description.

In the context of this standard, the principle of provenance requires further elaboration. The statement that the records of one creator must be represented together does not mean that it is necessary (or even possible) to keep the records of one creator physically together. It does, however, mean that the provenance of the records must be clearly reflected in the description, that the description must enable retrieval by provenance, and that a descriptive system must be capable of representing together all the records of a single creator held by a single repository. Principles 3.1, 3.3, and 5 provide the foundation for the rules regarding the representation of provenance in archival descriptions.

The Relationship between Arrangement and Description

If the archival functions of arrangement and description are based on the principle of *respect des fonds*, what is the relationship between arrangement and description? While the two are intimately intertwined, it is possible to distinguish between them in the following way.

Arrangement is the intellectual and/or physical processes of organizing documents in accordance with accepted archival principles as well as the results of these processes. *Description* is the creation of an accurate representation of the archival material by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing, and organizing information that serves to identify archival material and to explain the context and records systems that produced it. A number of aspects of the relationship between arrangement and description are set out in Principle 2 and its sub-principles.

Principle 2: Description reflects arrangement.

Inherent in the statement that description reflects arrangement are three underlying principles: that archival material is arranged according to a hierarchical system of levels; that the levels of arrangement determine the levels of description; and that description takes place after arrangement is completed. Each of these principles is elaborated below.

Principle 2.1: Archival arrangement is based on a system of hierarchical levels.

Traditionally, archival material has been arranged in a hierarchy of levels that reflect the intellectual and/or physical ordering of the records. The exact number of levels of arrangement has been the subject of debate in the profession, and will depend on both the provenance and nature of the material itself, as well as the management needs of the institution preserving it. This standard recognizes four levels of arrangement: the fonds,¹³ the series, the file, and the item. These four levels are related in the sense that the lower levels constitute parts of the whole. However, it is also recognized that not all levels are required. When arranging a given aggregation of archival material, a number of combinations are possible, depending on the provenance and nature of the material itself. Conversely, it is also recognized that in some situations additional levels may be required, and that the fonds and series levels may require further subdivisions, depending on the provenance and nature of the material being described.

¹³ For the purposes of arrangement, collections of intentionally accumulated materials are treated in the same manner as the fonds.

For example, a fonds can be divided into sub-fonds, and a series can be divided into sub-series or even sub-sub-series as required.¹⁴ Figure 1 illustrates just some of the possible combinations.

The four levels are defined as follows:

Fonds: The whole of the documents regardless of form or medium, organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities and functions.

Series: Documents arranged in accordance with a filing system or maintained as a unit because they result from the same accumulation or filing process, the same function, or the same activity; because they have a particular form or subject; or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use.

File: An organized unit of documents grouped together either for current use by the creator or in the process of archival arrangement because they relate to the same subject, activity, or transaction.

Item: The smallest intellectual archival unit.¹⁵

Principle 2.2: Levels of description are determined by levels of arrangement.

Levels of description are determined by levels of arrangement, and each of the four levels of arrangement recognized by this standard has a corresponding level of description. However, because arrangement determines description, and because not all levels of arrangement are required or possible in all cases, it follows that not all levels of description are required. Where additional levels are required, the rules for description at the fonds level may be used to describe sub-fonds; similarly the rules for description at the series level may be used to describe sub-series.

Principle 2.3: Description takes place after arrangement is completed.

Description follows arrangement in the chronological sense that description cannot take place until the material has been arranged. Increasingly, however, it is understood that description is an iterative and dynamic process, that is, descriptive information is recorded, reused, and enhanced at many stages in the management of archival holdings. For example, basic descriptive information is recorded when incoming material is accessioned, well before the material is arranged. Furthermore, arrangement can change, particularly when an archives receives regular accruals of records from an ongoing organization. In that situation, the arrangement will not be complete until the organization ceases to exist. Thus, it is more appropriate to say that description reflects the current state of arrangement (whatever that may be) and can (and does) change as a result of further arrangement activities.¹⁶ These rules are intended for the description of archival material after it has been selected for ongoing retention because of its enduring value; nonetheless they can be applied at earlier stages in the life of archival materials.¹⁷

¹⁴ An institution can also set an institutional policy regarding description, e.g., that it will describe only to the series or file level, except in particular circumstances.

¹⁵ For example, an item can be a single document such as a letter, report, or photograph, or it can be a volume such as a letter-book, photo album, or scrapbook.

¹⁶ ISAD(G), Statement I-3, page 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Principle 3: Archival description is based on the principles of multilevel description.

The principle that there are levels of description corresponding to levels of arrangement implies that it is possible to describe not only a fonds, but also its parts. The four levels of description are related in that the lower levels constitute parts of the whole, and an understanding of the lower levels is often possible only in relation to their place within the higher level. The technique of multilevel description, that is, "the preparation of descriptions that are related to one another in a part-to-whole relationship and that need complete identification of both parts and the comprehensive whole in multiple descriptive records,"¹⁸ requires some precepts regarding the order in which descriptions are presented and the relationships between description(s) of the parts and the description of the whole.¹⁹

Principle 3.1: Descriptions are presented from the general to the specific.

While the actual work of arrangement and description can proceed in any order that makes sense to the archivist, the presentation of the descriptive record(s) must be available in the descriptive system at the highest level before proceeding to the next level. In other words, a description at the file or item level cannot be presented without the description of the larger aggregation(s) of which each forms a part.²⁰ For the purposes of this standard, description can start at the fonds or series level provided that the provenance is represented in accordance with Principles 1, 3.1, 3.3, and 5.

Principle 3.2: The information provided at each level of description must be appropriate to that level of description.

The second principle of multilevel description requires that information provided at each level of description must be relevant to that level of description. This means that it is inappropriate to provide detailed information about the contents of files in a description of the fonds or the series. Similarly, when describing a series of records created by a branch or division of a department, an administrative history of only that branch or division should be provided at the series level; the administrative history of the entire department belongs at the fonds level. The principle that the information provided must be relevant to its level of description also implies that it is undesirable to repeat information given at higher levels of description. To avoid needless repetition, provide information that is common to the component parts at the highest appropriate level.

Principle 3.3: Relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated.

The third principle of multilevel description requires that the relationships between levels of description must be clearly indicated. The description of the whole and its parts must be represented in a hierarchical structure that indicates the relationship between them. For each unit being described, the level of description must be identified and linked in some way with the next higher unit being described. A descriptive system must be able to identify and maintain the relationships between levels of description.

¹⁸ RAD, page D-5.

¹⁹ The rules for multilevel description are found in RAD, rule 1.0A2 and in ISAD(G), 12.

²⁰ This principle does not stipulate the design or outputs of any particular system. For example, a descriptive system can be designed so that a user can "enter" a descriptive record at a lower level and navigate the system to the higher level(s).

The Nature of Archival Holdings

Archival holdings are varied in their nature and provenance. If they are to be described consistently within an institutional, regional, or national descriptive system, the rules must apply to a variety of forms and media created by, and acquired from, a variety of sources.

Principle 4: Description applies to all archival materials regardless of form or medium.

Inherent in the principle of provenance—that the records created, accumulated, and/or maintained and used by an organization or individual must be kept together—is the assumption that no records are excluded from the description because of their particular form or medium. Different media will of course require different rules to describe their particular characteristics, sound recordings, for instance, may require some indication of playing speed, and photographs may require some indication of polarity and color. It is acknowledged that archival material comes in a variety of forms and media, and rules for archival description must accommodate all forms and media (and the relationships between them) within the body of records of one creator.

Principle 5: The principles of archival description apply equally to records created by corporate bodies and by individuals or families.

The documents that are the product of the functions and activities of organizations may differ in extent, arrangement, subject matter, and so on from those that result from the activities of individuals or families. While there may be valid reasons to distinguish between them in the organization of the work of a repository, the principles of archival arrangement and description can be applied equally to materials created by individuals or organizations.

Principle 6: This standard can also be used to describe collections and discrete items.

Archival material has traditionally been understood to consist of the documents automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a person or organization in the course of the conduct of affairs, and preserved because of their continuing value. However, many institutions also hold materials that fall outside the scope of this definition, in that they are not the unselfconscious products of a function or activity, but instead are groupings of documents that have been intentionally assembled or collected because they reflect some common characteristic such as a particular subject, theme, or form. Such collections are part of the holdings in many institutions and must be described in a way that is consistent with the rest of the holdings. Archival institutions also hold individual items that are without context, i.e., that are not part of a fonds. Such items must also be treated consistently within the institution's descriptive system.

For the purposes of description, while most of the rules for archival description in this standard can be applied to the description of intentionally assembled collections or discrete items, collections require special rules when providing title, dates, administrative/biographical history, and access point(s). Where appropriate, this standard includes rules for the description of collections within these particular elements.

The Creators of Archival Material

Previous principles relate to the description of the structure and content of the archival materials. Equally important to their understanding is the description of the context in which they were created.

Principle 7: The creators of archival materials, as well as the materials themselves, must be described.

If the principle of provenance is fundamental to the arrangement and description of archival materials, it follows that the provenance, or the creator(s), of archival materials must be described too. Translated into practice, this principle means that the creator (or the provenance) of the materials must be identified and included in (or linked to) the description of the materials. Moreover, the functions and activities of the creator(s) that produced the archival materials must be described as well. Finally, standardized access points must be provided that indicate not just the primary creator but also the relationships between successive creators, for example, parts of a corporate body that has undergone reorganization(s). This standard includes rules for providing all this information in a consistent way.

Conclusion

If they are to be widely adopted and used, standards must be grounded in generally accepted principles. The foregoing statement sets out the principles on which archival arrangement and description are based. Widely understood and accepted by archivists, these principles provide a framework and a strong foundation for the rules that follow.

CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION

Developing descriptive standards for archives has always been a derivative process. All standards have been based on earlier standards or current practice, and RAD2 is no different. The immediate antecedents of this standard are the two North American data content standards, RAD and APPM. The goal of this project was to produce a new standard by harmonizing RAD and APPM within the frameworks of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF). Combining these disparate standards was not a straightforward matter. For example, while the main focus of APPM was the description of textual materials at the highest aggregate level, RAD explicitly provided detailed rules for description of archival materials in all media at all levels of description. In contrast, ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) are more general standards that function more like data structure standards in that they provide only one or two general rules for each element.

The resulting standard is therefore different in many ways from any of its immediate antecedents. For example, while the two North American standards followed the structure and organization of *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules* (AACR), the international standards, which were subsequently developed, moved away from the bibliographic model. RAD2 contains some rules from AACR, but, unlike RAD, it no longer follows AACR's overall organization in media chapters. While Parts I and II of RAD2 fall within the framework of ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CPF) respectively, they do not follow either of them slavishly in terms of organization or elements, and they necessarily provide far more detailed rules.²¹ While traces of its origins are evident, RAD2 is innovative in several ways. The result is a robust data content standard that is firmly grounded in the principles in the foregoing chapter.

While a standard such as RAD2 is essential to standardize the content of archival descriptive records and archival authority information, successful automated exchange of archival information also requires a data structure standard, such as Encoded Archival Description (EAD)²² or MARC21.²³ A data structure standard provides the containers for discrete pieces of descriptive information such as title or date; a data content standard provides rules for filling the containers in a consistent fashion. Both are necessary to support the exchange of archival information over computer networks.

Purpose

²¹ The relationships between RAD2 and related standards are found in the crosswalks in Appendix G.

²² *Encoded Archival Description Tag Library, Version 2002*. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2002). EAD supports the exchange of ISAD(G)-compliant descriptive records. A related standard, Encoded Archival Context (EAC), which supports the exchange of ISAAR(CPF)-compliant archival authority data, is currently being developed.

²³ *MARC 21 format for bibliographic data : including guidelines for content designation*. 1999 ed. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Cataloging Distribution Service; Ottawa: National Library of Canada, c1999- ; *MARC 21 format for authority data : including guidelines for content designation* 1999 ed. Washington, D.C. : Library of Congress, Cataloging Distribution Service ; Ottawa : National Library of Canada, 1999- .

2.1 The purpose of this standard is to provide rules to ensure the consistent description of archival materials and the entities that created them, and to facilitate the retrieval and exchange of information about archival material and their creators.

Scope

2.2 The rules in Part I of this standard may be used to describe archival materials at all levels of description, regardless of form or medium. They can also be applied to the description of intentionally assembled collections, and to discrete items. The rules in Part II may be used to describe the corporate bodies, persons, and families associated in some way with the creation of the records being described.

Structure

2.3 The standard is divided into two parts: Describing Archival Materials (Part I) and Describing Creators (Part II). Part I includes the rules for providing those elements of description that describe the characteristics, content, and structure of archival materials themselves. Part II includes the rules for providing those elements of description that describe the persons, families, and corporate bodies associated in some way with the creation of the archival material in question. At the end of the rules are a number of appendices that relate to either or both parts, and an index to facilitate access to specific rules.

2.4 Each part is divided into chapters, which include the set of rules for each element of description. Depending on its purpose, and what part it is in, an element may stand alone as a chapter, or be part of a chapter that provides rules for a group of related elements. The introduction to each part provides more detail about how that part and the chapters within it are structured.

Numbering

2.5 In order to refer to specific rules or other parts of the standard for purposes of discussion or citation, a numbering system is required. Following an introductory statement, the paragraphs in this general introduction and the introductions to Parts I and II are numbered sequentially using a system consisting of the chapter number followed by a period and the number of the paragraph.

The numbering of the rules in Parts I and II is explained in the introductions to each part.

Each appendix is designated by a capital letter. Where rules are contained in the appendices, they are numbered sequentially using a system consisting of the alphabetical designation for that appendix followed by a period and the number of the rule.

What the Rules Include

2.6 The rules themselves are found in Chapters 4–11 and 13–19. The general introduction to the rules (Chapter 2), the introductions to Parts I and II (Chapters 3 and 12), the glossary (Appendix A), the rules for abbreviations (Appendix B), and the prescribed sources of information for title, date(s), edition, and publisher's series (Appendix C) also form part of the rules. Where a repository decides as a matter of

institutional policy to use prescribed punctuation to identify elements, Appendix D also forms part of the rules.

Examples

2.7 The examples in Parts I and II are illustrative and not prescriptive. They illustrate only the application of the rule to which they are appended. Do not take the examples or the form in which they are presented as instructions; where there appears to be a discrepancy between a rule and an example, follow the rule. Furthermore, the presentation of the examples is intended only to assist in understanding how to use the rules, and does not imply a prescribed layout, typography, or output.

2.8 Examples often have explanatory notes added to them. Such additions are in italics, enclosed in parentheses, and introduced with the word “Note.” To avoid confusion between explanatory notes and notes that are part of the description, the latter are introduced with the phrase “Example of note” in italics.

Commentaries

2.9 In addition to the examples that serve to illustrate the application of the rules, commentaries are provided throughout the standard where necessary to amplify, explain, or provide greater context for the ensuing rule(s).

Mutually Exclusive Elements

2.10 The scope of each element has been defined so that the prescribed information can go in one place only, and the exclusions indicate clearly the element(s) containing rules for describing related information. In the few cases where two elements overlap, clear direction is given about how they should be treated.

2.11 Where certain elements are provided for in both ISAD(G) (which largely corresponds to Part I) and ISAAR(CPF) (which largely corresponds to Part II), for example, name of creator or administrative/biographical history, this standard has determined that, as much as possible, the rules for any particular element will be found in one place only (i.e., either Part I or Part II) with appropriate references as required.

Relationship between Descriptive Records and Authority Records

2.12 The relationships between the records that describe archival materials and the authority records that describe the entities associated in some way with the creation of the records are illustrated in Appendix F.

Required/Discretionary

2.13 Not all elements are required at each level of description. The preliminary rules for each element indicate (in a statement or in a table) whether the element is mandatory, mandatory if applicable, optional, or not applicable at each level of description. The definitions for these terms are as follows:

Term	Definition
Mandatory	Must always be provided

Mandatory, if applicable	Must be provided if applicable, e.g., access restrictions, finding aids
Optional	Used at the discretion of the archivist or in accordance with institutional policy
Not Applicable	May not be used at a particular level of description

Minimum Required Elements

2.14 Descriptive Records: When describing archival materials, the minimum elements required for each level of description are as follows:

Element of Description	Fonds	Series	File	Item
Reference code	Mandatory	Mandatory	Optional	Optional
Level of description	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory
Title	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory
Date °	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory	Mandatory
Extent*	Mandatory	Mandatory	Optional*	Optional*
Scope and content	Mandatory	Mandatory	Optional	Optional
Provenance access point**2	Mandatory	Mandatory	N/A	N/A

* Provide extent at the file and item level if it is not immediately obvious from the title or other parts of the description.

° At least one date (and date type) is required; additional dates and date types are optional.

** If different from level immediately above

² At least one provenance access point is required; additional access points are optional.

2.15 Authority Records: The minimum elements required in an authority record are:

Authorized form of name

Documentation about the creation of the authority record.

Sources of Information

2.16 The information to be included in archival descriptions must come from an appropriate source. The most common source for information about the records is the records themselves. Information about creators is most often found in reference sources. In contrast to library practice, archivists rarely transcribe descriptive information directly from archival materials; more often they supply much of the information from appropriate sources. Each element has a prescribed source of information which is given in the preliminary rules to each element. For the majority of elements, the source of information is any reliable source. The archivist must exercise professional judgment in determining the reliability of sources. However for some elements, the source of information can vary depending on the level of description, and at the item level, the source of information will differ depending on the general class of material. Appendix C sets out the prescribed sources of information for each level of description and for each general class of material for the title, date(s), edition, and publisher's series elements.

Alternatives and Options

2.17 Optional/Alternative Rules: Some rules are designated as optional; others are designated as alternative rules.

- Where a rule represents an instruction that may or may not be used, it is introduced by the word “optionally.” A repository may use it or not as a matter of institutional policy or on a case-by-case basis.
- Where a rule represents an alternative equal in status and value to another rule, it is introduced by the word “alternatively.” A repository must use one or other as a matter of institutional policy or on a case-by-case basis.

These provisions arise from the recognition that different solutions to a problem and differing levels of detail and specificity are appropriate in different contexts. The use of some alternatives and options may be decided as a matter of description policy at the institutional level to be exercised either always or never. Other alternatives and options can be exercised on a case-by-case basis. Institutions are encouraged to distinguish between these two situations, and to keep a record of their policy decisions and of the circumstances in which a particular option may be applied.

2.18 Professional Judgment: The rules recognize the necessity for judgment and interpretation on the part of both the person who prepares the description and the institution responsible for it. Such judgment and interpretation may be based on the requirements of a particular finding aid or upon the use of the material being described. The need for judgment is indicated in these rules by words and phrases such as “if appropriate,” “if important,” and “if necessary.” While in no way contradicting the value of standardization, such words and phrases recognize that uniform rules for all types of finding aids are neither possible nor desirable, and they encourage institutions to develop and document a description policy based on specific local knowledge and consistent application of professional judgment.

Outputs Not Prescribed

2.19 The rules are intended to create inputs to a repository's descriptive system, without specifying any particular outputs. It is up to the repository to determine what descriptive products will be produced and how they will be presented to the end-user. Elements can be combined in a variety of ways, such as through use of punctuation, layout and typography, labels, and the like. The examples in Appendices H and I provide samples of possible outputs but none is prescribed. Where archival descriptions are contained in automated systems, the design of the system may influence how these rules are used. For example, such systems may automatically display hierarchies and create links between different levels of description, or create links between a unit of description and other information such as appraisal or scheduling information, in such a way that a textual explanation of the relationship(s) is not necessary.

Language of the Description

2.20 An institution should establish an institutional policy regarding the language and script in which descriptions will be prepared.

Language Preferences

2.21 The rules contain some instances where a decision is made on the basis of language and in which English is preferred. Users of the rules who do not use English as their working language should replace the specified preference for English by a preference for their working language.