
Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts

By Dennis Meissner. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019. 212 pp.
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Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts, by Dennis Meissner, is the second volume in the Society of American Archivists's (SAA) Archival Fundamentals Series III edited by Peter J. Wosh. Meissner is the retired deputy director of Programs at the Minnesota Historical Society, a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists (as well as its former president), and, along with coauthor Mark Greene, the creator of the "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP) innovation in archival processing methods.

The intention of the Archival Fundamentals Series is self-explanatory—the series seeks to provide practical, baseline introductions to key concepts and functions of the archival profession. In addition to instructing readers in key concepts, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* purports to provide practical methods (i.e., workflows and tools) for arrangement and description that can be applied equally to physical and digital formats. This volume in particular is written for new archives professionals to use as a blueprint for the most fundamental activities of the profession—arrangement and description of archival materials. Because this set of activities is also the one most likely to be performed by professionals who have not received classical archives training through an educational program, this volume's utility as a ready reference tool is incredibly important. Based on the broad audience alone, this volume within the Archival Fundamentals Series must have the greatest clarity and accessibility to nonarchives professionals.

Structurally, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* is broken down into a brief introduction to theory and practice that provides critical context to the reader ("The Context and Significance of Arrangement and Description"), then principles of both arrangement and description ("Principles of Arrangement" and "Principles of Description"), and two chapters on mechanics of arrangement and description ("Physical Processing and Arrangement" and "Describing Materials"). Two final chapters are given over to nontextual formats, "Arranging and Describing Nontextual Formats" and "Emerging Trends and Theoretical Shifts" in arrangement and description, respectively. In addition to these basics, the book offers seven appendixes that include a glossary and examples of best practices in finding aid authoring, EAD encoding, a crosswalk

between descriptive standards, and an exhaustive set of recommended readings for deeper understanding of theory and practice.

There are a few exceptional aspects to this volume. Meissner does an excellent job clarifying some archaic practices that are grounded in theory (e.g., why accession numbers are not used as collection numbers) and clearly elucidating the different types of standards used in description. The latter, especially, is very well done as it provides a clear picture of how different standards utilized by archivists fit together—in other words, when to follow certain models over others. This can be a confusing space for even experienced archivists, and I appreciated the refresher. The author also selects a very thoughtful and extremely comprehensive set of supplementary information in the appendixes, several of which will be earmarked for reference in teaching future volunteers in my collecting area. Generally speaking, the volume represents a very clear, well-organized, and structured breakdown of critical areas of archival practice that will be immediately useful and accessible to members of the profession, volunteers, interns, and/or students—regardless of degree of formal training.

Despite the clarity of the writing and the general practicality of this work, as one would expect given its inclusion in the Archival Fundamentals Series, larger issues represent a growing tension within the archival profession regarding the usefulness of traditional finding aids for our users. The functionality of a hierarchical finding aid in the current web-based “search” paradigm versus the “browse” paradigm for which finding aids were originally designed (as physical or digital manifestations of a narrative document) is surprisingly not addressed. As Meissner points out, the arrangement of archival materials is key because it introduces critical context that shows the intricate links between records that define a collection or series; and the finding aid is the access point for sharing this context and arrangement with users. Meissner still expects users to browse the entirety of a finding aid or, at the very least, have easy and obvious access to its hierarchies as a reference point to absorb context.

The advent of new tools like ArchivesSpace and other content management systems make perusal of an entire finding aid relatively obsolete with their unique and targeted search capabilities that produce results that could be collection-, series-, folder-, or item-level listings. While we would like to think that users are gleaning important contextual information and a clear understanding of the relationships between the records and hierarchies of a collection, limited user experience data suggest the contrary.¹ Meissner does touch on this briefly within this volume (pp. 9–11, 64–65), and he has done so in greater detail in previous publications.² However, it seems to be a larger predicament worthy of a profession-wide conversation around the utility of finding aids as research tools for our users and how we can improve content management systems to better display contextual information—a conversation that can be started in

this series, but is worth revisiting in other forums. Should we continue to train archivists and processing staff in traditional finding aid design if the finding aid itself (in its totality) is no longer useful to our users?

New, efficient processing methodologies focusing on immediate access to materials heighten the challenges to context in online finding aid databases. At their finest, as Meissner describes, these methodologies result in well-articulated intellectual arrangement of materials as expressed through descriptive finding aids brimming with contextual information, typically leaving the physical reality of the records or papers in original order and housing (p. 23). Under older processing methodologies, materials would be physically rearranged to reflect their intellectual ordering and to introduce context, meaning researchers would be able to infer a certain level of context from the materials colocated with files within a box. Today's efficient methods do not introduce that mirrored aspect of physical and intellectual arrangement, which represents another lost opportunity for researchers to infer or directly learn critical contextuality for collections. Meissner details these efficient processing methods clearly and well in the volume, but he does not caution readers about their potential impact on the research process of our users. I would have liked him to address this tension in this book as it is fundamental to our profession today.

A second, somewhat glaring, absence in this volume is the lack of attention to socially conscious and inclusive description practices—which are given a nod in the “Emerging Trends and Theoretical Shifts” chapter, but not incorporated as a foundational principle for how archivists seek to describe archival materials. The movement toward more inclusive and equitable description practices is certainly not new, nor is it emerging. It is the culmination of more than a decade of work, and the wealth of community-generated controlled vocabularies that have developed over the last few years, as well as the theoretical grounding, should have been presented as fundamental to the practice of archival description, in my opinion.

Reparative description, a critical extension of inclusive and equitable description practices, could have been put forward as more of an “emerging trend.” There is a vigorous, ongoing discussion about this very topic in the profession, and the lack of mention in this publication is startling. Perhaps Meissner chose to not include it because it is not universally accepted practice, but I feel that his authoritative perspective on arrangement and description would be uniquely valuable as we consider opportunities for expanding traditional description practices. As theory evolves, the *Archival Fundamentals Series* has an obligation to make definitive statements and codify practice. This volume could have presented a major opportunity for codifying certain initiatives in socially conscious description, and I am saddened to see the work of so many reduced to an “emerging trend.”

Along with the absence of socially conscious description practices, Meissner glosses over arrangement and description peculiarities of digital and nontextual formats. The appendixes do not direct interested parties to workflows for these types of materials, nor do they contain lists of relevant software packages, tools, or equipment necessary for proper arrangement and description of nontextual formats. While the author purports that the volume covers both digital and physical materials, the utility of the volume is clearly weighted toward physical records. This is not a serious detriment given the myriad of special considerations for the wide variety of nontextual formats that exist today. It would be a herculean task to cover entirely the amorphous world of nontextual formats and, upon publication, the information would be completely obsolete.

A more minor quibble that is certainly not the fault of the author is that the publication timeline for this volume runs counter to the 2016–2019 change process for the most recent DACS principles updates.³ Because they were not finalized prior to publication, Meissner was left to discuss out-of-date principles, which is unfortunate in this “back to basics” guide. The most glaring example of this disconnect is the new deemphasis, or deprioritization, of the concept of original order in the 2019 updates to DACS. In contrast, Meissner maintains original order as foundational to arrangement (pp. 22–23).⁴ This is most clearly demonstrated on page 22, “Sitting firmly atop the foundation provided by respect des fonds and provenance is original order, which has a relevance and importance for arrangement and description that is difficult to overstate.” The new DACS principles, which were originally posted for comment in June 2017, then revised for formal public comment in August 2018, and passed in August 2019, detail the decision to not elevate original order as a descriptive principle.⁵

Overall, Meissner addresses two of the most important aspects of the archival profession in this engaging, clearly written volume. His breakdown of theory and practice, as well as the provision of his own, unique perspective on arrangement and description is very valuable given his prominence within the field on these two topics. I found *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* to be useful as a reference point and will direct volunteers and interns to specific sections, especially those touching on granularity questions about arrangement (p. 32), archival descriptive standards (pp. 40–56), and the “how to” for creation of useful descriptive metadata (pp. 111–12); however, I find that I personally have more questions for Meissner after reading it. Indeed, I had high hopes that the author would use this volume as a means to open critical conversations within the profession about arrangement and description, especially with regard to the future of the finding aid and the fundamental importance of socially inclusive description, but instead found a well-written guide to practice that feels a bit outdated.

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- ¹ Rachel Walton, "Looking for Answers: A Usability Study of Online Finding Aid Navigation," *American Archivist* 80, no. 1 (2017): 30–52, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.80.1.30>.
- ² See Dennis Meissner, "First Things First: Reengineering Finding Aids for Implementation of EAD," *American Archivist* 60, no. 4 (1997): 372–87, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.60.4.6405275227647220>.
- ³ TS-DACS has moved toward a continuous improvement model, leveraging GitHub for ongoing requests for change to principles and standards, alike. This new approach diverges from previous practice of codifying DACS in a publication that would be reviewed periodically.
- ⁴ Meissner does mention "challenges to original order" in his "Emerging Trends" chapter (p. 144), but this change to the DACS principles is not referenced in his writing on the topic.
- ⁵ Society of American Archivists' Technical Subcommittee on *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (TS-DACS), *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)* (2019). Most up-to-date documentation is available on GitHub at <https://github.com/saa-ts-dacs/dacs>.

The Digital Archives Handbook: A Guide to Creation, Management, and Preservation

Edited by Aaron D. Purcell. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019.
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The Digital Archives Handbook seeks to provide practitioners with the “who, what, and how of digital archives” (p. xx). Bringing together archivists and experts, Aaron D. Purcell has created a guide on how to handle digital archives. The volume is divided into two sections, the first addressing practices and processes and the second detailing specific types of materials and archival environments. Functional aspects of digital archives, such as infrastructure, access, donors and deeds of gift, institutional commitment, and researchers’ needs, are illustrated with real-world examples. Each of the ten chapters in the book is written by a practitioner or expert who has hands-on experience with digital archives. Much like Purcell’s book about donor relations, *Donors and Archives: A Guidebook for Successful Programs* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), this volume is intended to be a practical guide to help archivists begin managing digital archives and not stay mired in theory or presumptions of ideal situations.

The first five chapters in part 1, “Processes and Practices,” address the fundamentals of digital archives. In “Acquisitions, Appraisal, and Arrangement,” Lisa Calahan writes about the acquisition, appraisal, and arrangement of digital materials at University of Minnesota Libraries. Dorothy Waugh tackles description and access in “Description and Delivery,” with examples of the Salman Rushdie computers at Emory University. These two chapters demonstrate how