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Notes +  
Queries



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## *How to Work with Primary Source Documents*

Archival research is an important source for coursework and teaching, as professors and instructors are increasingly incorporating work with primary documents into undergraduate courses. Because access to primary resources is often restricted by research room hours, and can be further limited because of preservation concerns if materials are extremely fragile or if collections are not fully inventoried, this kind of research takes time. Despite this, many student researchers leave archives with a great deal more information than they will be able to explore in their written scholarship. Students' research goals also inform their actual practice, although, due to the many pleasures and challenges of working with primary documents, even the best intentions often change dramatically when working through a collection of materials. Whatever the situation, undergraduates working with primary documents need to be aware of a number of general recommendations, in addition to any particular archive's specific rules.

Though the individual archive or library is the best first source of information for working with specific collections, the following resources provide general information about working effectively with archival materials that may be of use to students and/or their teachers.

# *Resources for Working with Primary Source Documents*

## Comprehensive

Schmidt, Laura. "Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research." *Society of American Archivists*. 2011. <http://www2.archivists.org/usingarchives>. An excellent primer for using archives, with considerations such as: "What Are Archives and How do They Differ from Libraries?"; "Requesting Materials Remotely"; "Planning to Visit an Archive"; and "Notes on Copyright, Restrictions, and Unprocessed Collections."

## Handling Documents

National Archives (UK). "Handling Documents." *The National Archives*. 2011. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/visit/document-handling.htm>. A basic overview for handling documents, including best practices and an explanation of common types of documents and handling needs.

National Park Service. "Handling Archival Documents and Manuscripts." *Conserve O Gram* 19, no. 17 (Sept. 1996). <http://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/consveogram/19-17.pdf>. A brief guide focused on handling archival documents and manuscripts organized into a series of do's and don'ts, including setting up the research area, moving materials, and dealing with problems (brittle, damaged, attached, and contaminated materials).

## Working in Archives

Archives of American Art. "Frequently Asked Questions." *Archives of American Art: Ask Us*. 2011. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus/faq>: A general FAQ addressing basic questions and providing policy information, such as the need for researchers to schedule appointments, a useful reminder no matter which archive you plan to use.

New York University Libraries. "Using Archives and Manuscripts." *New York University Libraries: Research Guides*. 2011. <http://nyu.libguides.com/content.php?pid=38517>. Intended for researchers using NYU collections, this guide also provides general relevant information, including definitions, recommendations on handling materials, and best practices for archival research.

## Teaching

The National Archives Experience (US). "Tool Box." *The National Archives Experience: Educators and Students*. 2011. <http://www.archives.gov/nae/education/tool-box.html>. The "Tool Box" includes many basic documents explaining the benefits of teaching with primary sources, basics for teaching with primary documents, and links to teaching workshops and collaborative opportunities (<http://www.archives.gov/nae/education/collaboration.html>)

National Archives of Australia. *Vrroom: Virtual Reading Room*. 2011. <http://vrroom.naa.gov.au/>. With a tagline of "easy access to archival records for teachers and students," *Vrroom* is designed as a full virtual

reading room, allowing users to search and browse archival collections, as well as providing support for teaching and research.

## Working with Technology in Archives

Bateman, Kirklin, Sheila Brennan, Douglas Mudd, and Paula Petrik. "Taking a Byte Out of the Archives: Making Technology Work for You." *Perspectives Online* 43, no. 1: (Jan. 2005) <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2005/0501/0501arc1.cfm>. A useful overview of working with technology in archives, as well as maintaining electronic documents and notes from archival research. Published in 2005, the guide is somewhat dated (it does not include Zotero, for example, which rolled out in 2006).

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