Doing Archival Research: What to Expect and Some Tips for Success

THE PROCESS

A different experience in both the types of sources used and the process of using those sources.

-- **Do not circulate**, so you can’t just take them with you.

-- Are **organized by provenance** (see definition). What does this mean for subject based research? Have to think like a detective: Who or what organization/group would have created or collected materials about [my subject]? 

*Principle of provenance*: Provenance is a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection. Most archival collections are organized by provenance, rather than by subject.

-- Are **described by** documents called **finding aids** (what is it and what does it do?)

-- Not everything is already digitized (can’t necessarily find it online)

-- More **time-consuming**
  - need to take notes; cannot have everything copied
  - everything is staff-mediated (not self-service)
  - sources may not offer information sought in an obvious way (e.g. photographs)

-- Sources have to be **handled with care**; might have to wear cotton gloves; some materials may be too fragile for use or for copying/scanning; no food or drink; no pens

-- Some collections or items within them **may be restricted** (by donors, by law)

-- There may be **gaps in the historical record**. Why? Fire, damage, loss, natural disasters, warfare, never kept by people/groups in first place, sources not previously deemed “worthy” of being preserved (racist, sexist, classist views by historians, librarians, archivists, governments, etc.)

-- As “raw” sources, they are **subject to interpretation**. You will have to infer from the evidence they provide. Not already digested or synthesized for you as they would be in secondary sources.
TIPS for SUCCESS

-- Give yourself **more than enough time** to do the research. Don’t wait until the last minute. If you haven’t allowed enough time, nobody will be able to solve that problem for you.

-- Have a **plan** and try to be **systematic** in your approach. Devise a research strategy. Set **research goals** for each time you visit the archive (if doing in-person research)

-- **Ask for help early on** in the process. It is the job of archivists and librarian to help people do research and gain access.

-- Be prepared to have to **examine lots of material** even to “answer” seemingly simple questions.

-- Do as much **prep work** as possible before coming to do the actual research (e.g., examining finding aids and knowing which collections, boxes, and folders you want to consult). This will help you to maximize your research time on site.

-- When using a source, make sure to **consistently note information for your citation** such as a title (if present), author, date, collection, box, and folder from which the source came. Another person should be able to retrace your research process by using the information included in your citations.