

# Session eight:

# Description principles and standards

# Practicum

INFO 7401 Archival Appraisal, Arrangement, and Access



# DACS: Describing Archives, a Content Standard

“DACS contains rules to ensure the creation of consistent, appropriate, and self-explanatory descriptions of archival material. The rules may be used for describing archival and manuscript materials at all levels of description, regardless of form or medium. They may also be applied to the description of intentionally assembled collections and to discrete items.

While the rules apply to all levels of description and forms of material, some repositories may wish to describe particular media at item level or at a level even more detailed than the item, such as sequence, shot, and so on. These rules do not govern such detailed levels of description because of the varying nature of institutional requirements in this area.”

## **Data elements are mutually exclusive**

“The purpose and scope of each element has been defined so that the prescribed information can go in one place only. In some cases there are separate elements for closely related but distinct information, such as the several elements relating to conditions of access and use.”

## Sources of information

“All the information to be included in archival descriptions must come from an appropriate source, **the most common of which is the materials themselves**. In contrast to library practice, archivists rarely transcribe descriptive information directly from archival materials; rather, they summarize or interpolate information that appears in the materials or devise information from appropriate external sources, which can include transfer documents and other acquisition records, file plans, and reference works.”

## Professional judgment and institutional practice

“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 description, on the use of the material being described, or on the descriptive system being used.”

# Identity elements

2.1 Reference Code (Required)

2.2 Name and Location of Repository  
(Required)

2.3 Title (Required)

2.4 Date (Required)

2.5 Extent (Required)

2.6 Name of Creator(s) (Required, If  
Known)

2.7 Administrative/Biographical History  
(Optimum)

## DACS 2.3 Title

This element provides a word or phrase by which the material being described is known or can be identified. A title may be devised or formal.

A devised title is one provided by the archivist when there is no formal title for the materials being described or when the formal title is misleading or inadequate. The rules for recording a devised title differ from the rules for recording a formal title. Archivists usually devise titles for archival materials.

Devised titles generally have two parts:

- the name of the creator(s) or collector(s)
- the nature of the materials being described

## DACS 2.4 Date

This element identifies and records the date(s) that pertain to the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the materials being described. This element describes types of dates and forms of dates.

Commentary: It may be useful or necessary for archivists to record different types of dates for the materials being described, including:

- Date(s) of creation
- Date(s) of record-keeping activity
- Date(s) of publication or broadcast

## DACS 2.5 Extent

This element indicates the extent and the physical nature of the materials being described. This is handled in two parts, **a number (quantity) and an expression** of the extent or material type. The second part of the Extent Element may be either:

- the physical extent of the materials expressed either as the items, containers or carriers, or storage space occupied; or
- an enumeration of the material type(s), usually physical material type(s), to which the unit being described belongs. Material types may be general or specific.

## DACS 2.6 Name of creator(s), if known

This element identifies the corporate bodies, persons, and families associated with the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the materials being described so that they might be appropriately documented and used to create **access points** by which users can search for and retrieve descriptive records.

(Authority)

## DACS 2.7 Administrative/biographical history

The purpose of this element is to describe the required elements of a biographical or administrative history note about creators embedded in the description of materials. The administrative/biographical history provides relevant information about corporate bodies, persons, or families who are identified using the Name of Creator(s) Element and who therefore function as nominal access points.

## DACS 2.7 Administrative/biographical history

2.7.6 At the highest level of description, give information about the history of the corporate body(ies), person(s), or family(ies) that created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used the material as a whole.

2.7.7 Optionally, at subsequent levels of description, if the creator of the subordinate unit is different from the creator of the material as a whole, give information about the history of the corporate body(ies), person(s), or family(ies) that created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used that subordinate unit.

2.7.8 When primary responsibility for the creation, assembly, accumulation, and/or maintenance and use of the materials is shared between two or more corporate bodies, or two or more persons, or two or more families, create separate administrative/biographical histories for each corporate body, person, or family.

# Content and structure elements

3.1 Scope and Content (Required)

3.2 System of Arrangement (Added Value)

# DACS 3.1 Scope and content

This element provides information about the nature of the materials and activities reflected in the unit being described to enable users to judge its potential relevance. The Scope and Content Element may include information about any or all of the following, as appropriate:

- The function(s), activity(ies), transaction(s), and process(es) that generated the materials being described
- The documentary form(s) or intellectual characteristics of the records being described (e.g., minutes, diaries, reports, watercolors, documentaries)
- The content dates, that is, the time period(s) covered by the intellectual content or subject of the unit being described
- Geographic area(s) and places to which the records pertain
- Subject matter to which the records pertain, such as topics, events, people, and organizations
- Any other information that assists the user in evaluating the relevance of the materials, such as completeness, changes in location, ownership and custody while still in the possession of the creator, and so on

# Conditions of access and use elements

4.1 Conditions Governing Access  
(Required)

4.2 Physical Access (Added Value)

4.3 Technical Access (Added Value)

4.4 Conditions Governing Reproduction  
and Use (Added Value)

4.5 Languages and Scripts of the Material  
(Required)

4.6 Finding Aids (Added Value)

## DACS 4.1 Conditions governing access

This element provides information about access restrictions due to the nature of the information in the materials being described, such as those imposed by the donor, by the repository, or by statutory/regulatory requirements.

In many cases it will be necessary or desirable to provide a very succinct statement regarding access restrictions rather than a lengthy explanation

## DACS 4.2 Physical access

This element provides information about access restrictions due to any physical characteristics or storage locations that limit, restrict, delay, or otherwise affect access to the materials being described. Such restrictions may include:

- Location (e.g., offsite, cold storage)
- Physical condition of the material that limits use
- Requirement to use copies instead of originals for preservation reasons

## DACS 4.3 Technical access

This element provides information about access restrictions due to any technical requirements that restrict or otherwise affect access to the materials being described, such as equipment or specific hardware/software required for use.

Special equipment may be required to view or access some material, particularly audiovisual materials and records in electronic form. In some cases the equipment required may be obvious from the Extent Element, as in “forty-two slides” or “thirty audio cassettes.” In other cases, however, the type of equipment required should be indicated in the Physical Access Element; for example, the playing speed of audio discs (e.g., 45 or 78 rpm), a video’s recording mode (e.g., Betamax, D2, VHS, Video 8, etc.), or broadcast format (e.g., NTSC, PAL, SECAM, HDTV, etc.), the gauge (width) of the film (e.g., 16 or 35 mm), and so on.

# Acquisition and appraisal elements

5.1 Custodial History (Added Value)

5.2 Immediate Source of Acquisition  
(Added Value)

5.3 Appraisal, Destruction, and  
Scheduling Information (Added  
Value)

5.4 Accruals (Added Value)

## DACS 5.2 Immediate source of acquisition

This element identifies the source from which the repository directly acquired the materials being described, as well as the date of acquisition, the method of acquisition, and other relevant information.

The immediate source of acquisition is the person or organization from which the materials being described were acquired through donation, purchase, or transfer. Because some information relating to acquisitions may be considered confidential, each institution must establish a consistent policy to determine the information to be included in publicly available descriptive records.

## DACS 5.4 Accruals

This element informs the user of anticipated additions to the unit being described. An accrual is an acquisition of archival materials additional to that already in the custody of the repository.

# Related material elements

6.1 Existence and Location of Originals (Added Value)

6.2 Existence and Location of Copies (Added Value)

6.3 Related Archival Materials (Added Value)

6.4 Publication Note (Added Value)

## DACS 6.3 Related archival materials

This element indicates the existence and location of archival materials that are closely related to the materials being described by provenance, sphere of activity, or subject matter, either in the same repository, in other repositories, or elsewhere.

# Notes element

This element provides information that cannot be accommodated in any of the defined elements of description. The use of all notes is optional.

Specialized Notes examples:

- Conservation
- Citation
- Processing Information

# Description control elements

8.1 Description control element

8.2 Rights statements for archival  
description

# DACS 8.1 Description control

The purpose of this element is to document the creation and revision of archival descriptive records. There are four aspects to this: sources used, the rules or conventions on which it is based, the name(s) of the person(s) who prepared or revised it, and the date(s) it was created or revised. Establish a consistent policy regarding the content, form, and placement of citation of sources.

8.1.5 Archivist and date: Record the name(s) of the person(s) who created or revised the description, as well as the creation or revision date.

# Subjects (authorities)

(1) Similar to the University of California Archives, we deemphasize the use of subjects and instead focus on the careful writing of descriptive notes, especially Scope and Contents and Biographical/Historical Note. We see the value of using and having a list of relevant Library of Congress Subject Headings but, in the interest of maximizing the usability of our list of subjects, we aim for a short list instead of a long one.

# Subjects (authorities)

(2) As much as possible, use an existing subject in our database. If an appropriate subject does not exist in our database, you can create an appropriate and authorized subject following a few internal guidelines:

- The subject heading refers to at least 20 percent of the resource--we don't want to "oversell" resources by linking them to subjects that are only marginally applicable.
- In the interest of clarity and consistency, we use subjects without subdivisions.
- Most records will require only one or two subjects. We can enumerate and contextualize all the topics we think are in the resource, even marginal ones, in the Scope and Content Note.

# Subjects (authorities)

(3) We use the geographical subjects Flushing (N.Y.), Queens (N.Y.), and New York (N.Y.) only for resources that depict local/regional history and activities.

To avoid overusing and rendering them useless, we do NOT use them for resources like academic and departmental records, and alumni and faculty papers, even if those resources, due to our location, originated or relate to events in those locations.

# Subjects (authorities)

(4) For now, due to their limitations and our ongoing discussions about them, we will make case-by-case decisions in using Library of Congress Subject Headings that refer to racial, ethnic, and gender identities. We don't want diverse identities to be hidden in the records, but we also don't want to reinforce any default identity, use outdated terms, or make faulty assumptions about what we think we see in the records.

The most efficient way to ensure this is by writing full, nuanced, and contextualized descriptions of racial, ethnic, gender, and various other identities in the appropriate descriptive notes. (See more discussion of this in the section on Inclusive Description in the Processing Guide.)

# Levels of description

A finding aid may consist of only one level of description (single-level descriptions), or it may include many different levels of description (multilevel descriptions).

A finding aid that consists of multiple levels of description may provide information at successively narrower levels of arrangement (such as subseries, files, and even items) for some series while confining information to a single level of hierarchy for others.

# Requirements for single-level archival description

## Single-level Required

A single-level description with the minimum number of DACS elements includes:

- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6) (*if known*)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1)
- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)

## Single-level Optimum

A single-level description with the optimum number of DACS elements has all of the elements included in Single-level Minimum above, plus the following:

- Administrative/Biographical History Element (2.7)
- Access points (See Overview of Archival Description.)

## Single-level Added Value

A single-level description using DACS elements to provide added value for researchers includes all of the elements in Single-level Optimum above, plus any other relevant elements the repository wishes to include.

# Requirements for multi-level archival description

## Multilevel Required

The *top* level of a multilevel description with the minimum number of DACS elements includes:

- Reference Code Element (2.1)
- Name and Location of Repository Element (2.2)
- Title Element (2.3)
- Date Element (2.4)
- Extent Element (2.5)
- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6) (*if known*)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1)

*Note: In a minimum description, this element may simply provide a short abstract of the scope and content of the materials being described.*

- Conditions Governing Access Element (4.1)
- Languages and Scripts of the Material Element (4.5)
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of the *top* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system; if so, the output must be able to explicitly identify this relationship.

Each *subsequent* level of a multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements used at higher levels, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.

*Notes:*

- Name of Creator(s) Element (2.6): *At subsequent levels of a multilevel description, this element is required only if the person(s) or organization(s) responsible for the creation or accumulation of the material at the subsequent level differs from the higher level(s). This can also be accomplished by using the Name Segment of the Title Element (2.3).*
- Scope and Content Element (3.1): *Scope and contents are typically necessary for large units of aggregation and are not required at the file or item level if the Title Element (2.3) is sufficient to describe the material.*
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

## Multilevel Optimum

The *top* level of a multilevel description with the optimum number of DACS elements includes all of the elements in Multilevel Minimum above, plus the following:

- Administrative/Biographical History Element (2.7)
- Scope and Content Element (3.1)

*Note: In an optimum description, this element should include a full description of the scope and content of the materials being described.*

- Access points (See Overview of Archival Description.)

Each *subsequent* level of that multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements included at the higher levels of the multilevel description, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.

## Multilevel Added Value

A multilevel description using DACS elements to provide added value for researchers should include all of the elements in Multilevel Optimum above, plus any other elements the repository wishes to include.

Each *subsequent* level of that multilevel description should include:

- All of the elements included at the higher levels of the multilevel description, unless the information is the same as that of a higher level or if it is desirable to provide more specific information.
- Identification of the whole-part relationship of *each* level to at least the *next subsequent* level in the multilevel description. This may be done through internal tracking within a particular descriptive system or through an explicit statement of the relationship.