

# Session ten: Archival reference and research

INFO 7401 Archival Appraisal, Arrangement, and Access



# User

An individual who uses the collections and services of a repository; a patron; a reader; a researcher; a searcher.

# Reference

A service to aid patrons in locating materials relevant to their interests; see reference interview.

In archives, like in libraries, the amount of reference work you do depends on your role/the kind of institution you serve.

# Reading room

A physical space for users to access and handle noncirculating materials

Reading room is the most common current use, and it is sometimes referred to as a document room, manuscript room, reference area, reference room, research area, research room, or search room. Larger archival facilities may have multiple rooms to enable use by format (for example, microform room, audiovisual room).

# Access

The ability to locate relevant information through the use of catalogs, indexes, finding aids, or other tools.

# Accessibility

The characteristic of being easily reached or used with a minimum of barriers.

# Archivist and user goals are DIFFERENT

## Archivists:

1. Preservation
2. Access

## Patrons, users, researcher, readers:

1. Research
2. Analyze
3. Interpret
4. Write/create

In what circumstances can (or should) archivists do research (as opposed to reference) for a patron as part of regular duties?

# Archival reference knowledges and competencies

Collection knowledges

# Collection knowledges

Archivists can provide six kinds of information to users:

1. Information about the **repository**
2. Information ***about*** the holdings
3. Information ***from*** the holdings
4. Information about **record creators**
5. **Referrals** to other repositories or resources
6. Information about laws and ethics regarding the **use of information**

Interaction knowledges

# User behavior

Who is using the archives' materials? Why?

How are they contacting you? How are they asking the question?

Who is the asker to you?

- What is the precedent from previous requests?
- What is your range of realistic outcomes?

BR

Brian [REDACTED]

To: © QNS QC-Archives



Thu 9/26/2024 3:57 PM

**\* This email originates from a sender outside of CUNY. Verify the sender before replying or clicking on links and attachments. \***

Dear Archivist,

I'm helping a retired professor prepare his memoirs.

His wife's name before they married was Roberta Louise Gittings and she graduated from Queens College in 1964 (presumably in May or June).

Can you help verify that she was a (the?) valedictorian for undergraduate commencement in 1964? Would that information be included in the Commencement flyer that was given out to attendees?

Thank you,

Brian [REDACTED]

# Assessment methodologies

*How do archivists know what to retrieve for a user?*

What are they asking for?

What do they actually need?

Can we answer the question?

Can someone else answer the question?

How much assistance are you willing to give?

AH

Abbie [REDACTED]

To: ☉ QNS QC-Archives



Tue 11/5/2024 3:03 PM

**\* This email originates from a sender outside of CUNY. Verify the sender before replying or clicking on links and attachments. \***

Good afternoon,

I am a journalist working on a story about the school boycotts of 1964 (focusing on the February 3 boycott). I am requesting access to your archives on the topic and for use of images/information in my story. Let me know the best way to go about this (in-person, online, etc.). Thank you for your help!

Best regards,

Abbie [REDACTED]

# Question negotiation

## Assessment methodologies

Question Negotiation in the Archival Setting: The use of interpersonal communication techniques in the reference interview by Linda J. Long

"Ambiguity on the part of users is frequently rooted in feelings of uncertainty or fear of seeming ignorant"

"Negotiating the question provides the opportunity for users to clearly state the research need themselves; it also discourages archivists from jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

"the first step in question negotiation is to analyze the query into component parts as "givens" (the subject) and "wanteds" (the information needed)."

## Visit Request

PP

To: QNS QC-Archives



Mon 4/13/2026 2:33 PM

You replied on Mon 4/13/2026 3:34 PM

[View conversation](#)

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Priya Perumal, and I am a graduate student with the history department. I am currently drafting my thesis on interracial marriages between Black and Jewish activists in the Civil Rights Movement. I am interested in any documents related to romantic relationships between activists in this specific pairing. So far, I have found sources in the form of letters and journal entries. I was wondering if there were any documents of that sort housed in the archives.

I would like to schedule an appointment to visit the archives. My available days are Monday and Thursday afternoons.

Best,

Priya

 Reply

 Forward

## Re: Visit Request



QNS QC-Archives

To: Priya [REDACTED]



Reply



Reply all



Forward



Mon 4/13/2026 3:34 PM

Hi Priya, thanks for reaching out to the QC Archives.

Before you schedule your appointment, let's see if we have anything that will speak to your research query. While you would be welcome to come in to speak with us or for research help, we do not allow browsing the stacks. This means you must tell us what you would like to see before the appointment you are scheduled to see it. If you want to come speak to us for help formulating a research strategy, that would be absolutely fine, but you would not see any materials that day--we'd pinpoint what you're interested in and then schedule another appointment for you to come see the collections you are interested in on another day. If you would rather get started immediately, you must let me know what boxes to pull for you, information you can get from our [finding aids](#). You can do some keyword searching, or more subject-based browsing ([civil rights collections](#)). From there, when you find something you'd like to view at the archives, you can send me a URL.

For example, in our [Hratch Zadoian Papers](#), there is a series of materials about a project he started, called the [Black-Jewish People-to-People project](#), that may suit your question.

Take a look, and see if you can make a start. Then, you can reply to this email either with a request for more research assistance or a materials appointment request (include the links to the material you would like to see).

Thanks!  
Caitlin

[Queens College Special Collections and Archives](#)

qc.archives@qc.cuny.edu | 718-997-3650

[Digital collections](#) | [@QueensCollegeArchives](#)

Re: Visit Request



Priya [REDACTED]

To: QNS QC-Archives



Mon 4/13/2026 4:02 PM



You replied on Wed 4/15/2026 3:39 PM

[View conversation](#)

Hi Caitlin,

I'm in the early stages of research, so I'm just looking for general information on these types of marriages. I would like to know how they met, how they were perceived by their fellow activists and by common everyday people. I'm looking at the years 1950 to 1970. I think it is best if I come to the archives first to figure out a research strategy. I should have a more comprehensive list of questions that would aid in deciding what materials are best for my project.

Best,  
Priya

“The negotiation process is necessary, because it allows the patron to define the information need more precisely; this permits the reference specialist to match the actual need against finding aids and sources available.”

# Information retrieval

*How do archivists efficiently retrieve that material?*

What's in your archive?

How do you find materials?

How do you access materials?

How will the user access materials?

Search **all record types** where

keyword(s): **student publication**

Showing Results: 1 - 10 of 66

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Relevance

Sort

### Revisions (Publication)

**Collection** – Box: 1 **Identifier:** SCA-0095

#### Scope and Contents

Set of *REVISIONS: A ZINE ON WRITING AT QUEENS COLLEGE*. The publication variously features writing by Queens College faculty, staff, and students, as well as CUNY Writing Fellows, on particular themes.

**Dates:** 2004 - 2019

**Found in:** [Queens College \(New York, N.Y.\) Special Collections and Archives / Revisions \(Publication\)](#)

### Fern Kruger Oral History

**Collection** **Identifier:** QMP-0027

#### Scope and Contents

Fern Kruger reflects on her time as a student at Queens College in the 1960s, as well as the extent of her participation in the Queens College Jamaica Student Help Project. Kruger was a volunteer in the Jamaica Student Help Project, where she was a tutor to young Black elementary school students in Jamaica, Queens. At its height, the Jamaica initiative of the Student Help Project engaged 500 Queens College students who volunteered to tutor more than one thousand educationally challenged,...

**Dates:** 2020-11-6

**Found in:** [Queens College \(New York, N.Y.\) Special Collections and Archives / Fern Kruger](#)

### Filter Results

Search within results

From year

To year

Search

### Additional filters:

#### Type

Collection 33

Archival Object 26

Collecting Area 7

#### Subject

interviews 28

oral histories (literary works)

28

Civil rights movements 15

Queens (New York, N.Y.) 8

Prince Edward County (Va.)

7

▼ more

# Appointments and hosting

Information retrieval

## Scheduling:

- Is the college open?
- Is the archives open and available to host?
- Can the researcher get here?
- Can you accommodate walk-ins?

## Preparing materials:

- Confirm needed materials, retrieve boxes, set up research station

## How to get here:

- Directions to campus, to library, to archives
- Parking pass?

## When the researcher is here:

- let Access services know researcher is coming
- explain handling instructions to researcher
- be mindful of researcher and materials



QNS QC-Archives

To: Hayley Blair <hb@fordham.edu>



Thu 10/17/2024 10:47 AM



3 attachments (776 KB) ☁ Save all to OneDrive - CUNY ↓ Download all

Wonderful! We'll be happy to have you on 11/5. You're confirmed.

Attached are maps to the archives office where you will be during your research appointment with us. We are in the Benjamin Rosenthal Library (the building with the clock tower in the photo attached), on the third/main floor, in room 317. I will let public safety know to expect you; you will need to check in with them at the entrance of the library with your ID to access the building. Sometimes they can be a little clueless, so if they give you a hard time you can call me at 718-997-3652 I will come retrieve you from the entrance.

Driving and public transport directions can be found on the [Directions to Queens College](#) page. If you are driving, I can procure a parking pass for you--I will just need your car make/model, color, license plate number and license plate state.

Please let me know if I can assist you further in the meantime!

All best,  
Caitlin

# Relevant legalities

How does the archivist *communicate* to the user how to use the materials *beyond* the reference visit?

What are our policies?

- Digital access
- Publication

Research knowledges

# Domain knowledge

Subject knowledge; an understanding of the subject being researched by a user.

# Artifactual literacy

The ability to understand, contextualize, and interpret primary sources, in part by taking into consideration their physical characteristics.

# Archival intelligence

A person's knowledge of archival principles, practices, and institutions, and an understanding of the relationship between primary sources and their surrogates.

# Researcher understanding of archives

selecting information that is useful precede the presentation or publication of the results. As scholars have pointed out, archival work can be tedious and time-consuming, and archival researchers usually have no formal training for the work they do but they have to learn on their own “how to search for documents, how to talk to archivists,” how to treat the documents and findings, and how to subtract relevant information from them; they often have to learn through trial and error how to take notes and interpret their findings (Ramsey *et al.* 1, 3). Fortunately, the situation is gradually changing as conferences, workshops, and symposiums are being organized to discuss student involvement in archival work and the use of archives in research and teaching in general.<sup>1</sup> Another welcome sign is that universities are starting to offer rhetoric composition and literature courses in which archival recovery work is an

## Introduction

Library archives are strangely exciting places. They sit there, quiet stacks of books and old paper, silently humming with thousands of stories. Closed to random rum-magers, guarded by librarians, the past seems to wait for someone to reach out to it. To open a box or a book on a page of old handwriting, with its browning ink on yellowing paper, requires a steady nerve. Having been discovered, the ancestors demand attention. We cannot simply close the box and leave them alone again.<sup>1</sup>

In the archival institutions that I gained access to, I felt pressured with only a few hours to get through the documents, knowing that the next day new boxes of data would arrive. I felt frustrated that I could not change my requests based on discoveries in the boxes I searched on one day, and that I would have to wait an additional two to three working days for the boxes that I chose. I often felt lost, as there were hundreds and hundreds of boxes to choose from with no real description, and my selections were circumstantial or just pure guesswork. In one archival institution,

## *Managing Expectations*

Archival research is some of the most unpredictable work a historian can do. Some boxes open to reveal marvelous treasures. Others contain useless materials or copies of documents you have already seen. Still others offer tiny portions of the story that the historian can, with patient determination, build into something larger. One trip to the New-York Historical Society produced nothing of value for my research except for a 1921 pamphlet with an arresting six-word phrase: “The bus is young and honest,” which I used for an article title. That was an afternoon well spent.<sup>57</sup>

Some days you find nothing. Some days you find sources that change your understanding of your project. You cannot control or predict what kind of day you will have. You can only open the next box.

In some ways, **my research process was random**, as I sifted through folders that might or might not yield information useful to my study. In other ways, **this research process was ordered**; I developed a list of materials to look through, adding to that list as I learned of new resources and searching through these documents sequentially, folder by folder, box by box.

The **method itself was organic**, shaped by the research process itself and shaped by other key theoretical and pragmatic factors that I discuss in this chapter. In developing this method, I read what I could about archival methodology, but after finding few pragmatic suggestions for conducting archival research, **I ultimately found it was my entry into the archives itself that shaped my approach most significantly.**

rediscovered by researchers. Therefore, any expectation for the completeness of historical sources (as defined by today's needs) is imprudent, which renders the accompanying criticism of the archives unfair. Perhaps the most troubling part of scientists' dismissals of the archives is that they are rarely corroborated with citations elaborating on the repositories accessed or the efforts undertaken to substantiate the claims of insufficiency.

Locating the disconnect

## Archival Research (Re)Defined

Sometimes, archival research involves following a Nancy Drew–like trail of clues that culminates in the rare, intriguing, “holy grail” find at the conclusion of the search—but not often. I’ve only had that experience once or twice in my professional life. In 1990, as I was researching educator George Jardine in Glasgow, Scotland, I came upon a decrepit and flimsy box housing 136 letters tied together with a faded red ribbon—letters written by Jardine over the course of his life. These letters held the genus of Jardine’s teaching theories and pedagogy. I had found the mother lode—at least in this phase of my search for Jardine artifacts. I’ve had other “ah-hah!” moments involving archival finds that changed the trajectory of my research, but for the most part, archival research is somewhat tedious, involves following trails that fork, branch, or dissipate and rarely involves holy grail discoveries.

Ramsey, A. E., Sharer, W. B., L'Eplattenier, B., & Mastrangelo, D. N. U. L. (Eds.). (2009). *Working in the archives : Practical research methods for rhetoric and composition*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Archival research as “a spiral or a series of concentric circles, getting both deeper (gathering more detail) and wider (learning new aspects related to your topic) as you explore the territory.

You will find yourself constantly returning to older sources armed with new perspectives that can take you closer to your goal.”

Have to help readjust research strategy from “*what is sought*” to “*what emerges*”

It is vital that scholars fundamentally reframe thinking about what the SKA actually is and represents. Lisa Stead (2019) argues that greater archival reflexivity is required by film historians to consider not only the archive as source but also as subject. It is necessary to ask whether the SKA is by, for, and about Stanley Kubrick (as it has largely been branded and as much of the archival catalogue often frames it) or is something much more complex. When reams of paperwork across many of the SKA's boxes do not even mention Kubrick and were not even created by him but by a myriad of administrators, secretaries, and other labourers, then what is meant by it being "the Stanley Kubrick Archive"? The very existence of the SKA and its continued administration and preservation is the result of the work not of Stanley Kubrick, but of often hidden, marginalised, or overlooked labourers, both historic (secretaries such as Margaret Adams) and continuing (by archivists like Georgina Orgill at the UAL). The SKA is primarily used by Kubrick scholars

James Fenwick (2023) The exploitation of Sue Lyon: *Lolita* (1962), archival research, and questions for film history, *Feminist Media Studies*, 23:4, 1786-1801, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2021.1996422

For many researchers, however, the archivist's processing of collections, which includes all work done by the archivist to make a collection available to researchers, remains a mystery... **We believe that if archival researchers know how to recognize the outcomes of archivists' processing and understand the principles behind processing decisions, they will have a better understanding of the archival materials they study.**

Understanding archival theory and principles and knowing the best practices derived from them will help researchers anticipate potential problems and assess the potential usefulness of the archival materials they consult.

Those four boxes, dating from the 1920s to the end of the century, largely contained arbitration Opinions and Awards, i.e., outcomes. In coming to better understand the arrangement of the massive collection of a century-old behemoth organization, I discovered that the incidents, choices, and negotiations leading to arbitrations and the aftermaths of arbitrations are dispersed throughout the collection in the files such as “Correspondence: Legal,” or the files of Equity Council. These union officials’ and counsel’s pre- and post-dispute strategizing and interpersonal efforts to informally resolve conflicts are filed alphabetically by subject and boxed year.

*AFW. (shaking her fists at the gods) WHY BY YEAR, NOT SUBJECT??*

I groaned with the realization that a return visit would need to be quite lengthy as I would need to request a different box for each file that I wanted to review (see fig. 1). The NYU collections staff pages a maximum of six boxes per day.

*Standing at her assigned table, AFW thumbs through the box and pulls out a file labelled, "Aliens: Correspondence." She repeats the action, this time the file is "Committee: Duplication of Names." Again and again, the same action. Sometimes, she snaps a picture, scribbles a note, stretches.*

Against my training in methodical adherence to the logic of subject relevance, I selected files arbitrarily (pun intended). The contents of some had zero to do with my topic and, frankly, bored me. Others offered future lines of inquiry? Still others glimpsed the quotidian institutional context, organizational concerns, and competing priorities contemporaneous with disputes. Thus, the significance of the discrete disputes for the collective, the union, and the theatre industry took shape.

Like Palacios, I took all the photos of all the things, made notes, filled out permissions, eagerly awaited the arrival of each box. And yet, unlike Palacios, and to my surprise, the pressure of time's waning and grief for what I might miss was largely absent my experience. I had waited years, and at the most fundamental level, I understood that a next time is an always uncertainty. So, I reveled in the being there and the performance of archival research instead of anticipating the curtain call, to continue Palacios's metaphor. I let curiosity share priority with gathering information. Consequently, time behaved differently for me. Paradoxically, I seemed to have all the time in the world each day because I was limited to six boxes per day. Each box placed on my table contained only one file that I "needed" to see

Obstacles of limited time, resources, and access beyond an individual researcher's control can all but foreclose hope. I am certainly not optimistic that such obstacles will be mitigated at local or global levels, given U.S. universities' ongoing defunding of the humanities and societal devaluation of history. Yet my experience makes me hopeful for the transformative potential of curiosity and arbitrariness as archival practices. At the time, I did not conceive of my meandering through files as resistance to the underlying values that place obstacles in our path. Those values prime us to fixate on the product of our archival endeavors instead of embracing the nature of the work, time bound as it is. Much like theatrical performance each moment in the archive matters, so why not choose to linger?

Unfortunately, mutual dependence does not always produce mutual respect and harmony. Historians can get frustrated with archivists who are the human representatives of institutions that may deny access to materials, either from scarcity of resources or a desire to restrict knowledge. Archivists can get frustrated with historians who fail to recognize their hard work and professional training. “Archival studies scholars and practicing archivists are more than willing to meet humanities scholars halfway,” writes M. L. Caswell, “but there has to be a willingness to engage and a baseline of respect in interdisciplinary exchange that is currently lacking.”<sup>48</sup>

How do archivists bridge gaps in archival intelligence to the benefit of all users?

How do we convince users that archival intelligence is important?

How do we get users and researchers to see us and use us as archivists and not just as box jockeys?

