INFS 332
Introduction to Archives Administration

Session 7 – Arrangement and Description of Archives

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When you receive materials from the records centre or through some methods, it is necessary to sort them into their component parts. This session discusses the need to organize and arrange archives after acquiring them. It also touches on the various levels of arrangement and traces the development of the theories that guide archivists in arranging and describing newly acquired accessions.
Session Objectives

After completing this Session, the student should

• Be able to explain the basic principles of archival arrangement.
• Be able to identify levels of archival arrangement
• Be able to comment on some description practices in archives administration
• Be able to examine some principles of archival description.
The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

• Topic one: Basic Principles of Archival arrangement
• Topic Two: Levels of Archival Arrangement
• Topic Three: Archival Description Practices and Principles
Reading List


BASIC PRINCIPLES OF ARCHIVAL ARRANGEMENT
The archival principle of respect des fonds or provenance requires that archivists judiciously preserve both the integrity of a particular source and the identity of the source. Implementing the principle of provenance, archivists try to link a distinct group of archival records to a creating institution and avoid at all cost mixing records from various institutions.

Provenance in other words refers to the office of origin or the person or body that created or received the records in the course of business or personal activities.
Respect des Fonds (Provenance) cont..

- Respect des fonds also means respect the source or creator of archives. Each new accession, acquisition or consignment of records represents a distinct unit, and the relationship of various items in the unit must be maintained. One should not interfile or file together.
- For example Dr. Kwame Nkrumah’s papers or records with that of Dr. Hilla Limman, regardless of any relationship between the two families (in terms of they being former presidents and from the same party).
Archivists should not combine the archives of two institutions. The archival materials of separate institutions must be managed separately even if the institutions whose records are to be arranged were involved in similar activities.

Similarly, the private archives of different individuals must not be integrated or put together, even if the individuals were related or experienced the same events.
• Archival records most often originate from an institution. For the records to be accessible or available during their active life to more than one member of staff of the institution means that the records had been organized according to an easily recognized plan.

• Thus, the principle of maintaining the sanctity of original order merely advocates the presentation of the form of arrangement given it by its creator even after the records become inactive and are placed in an archival environment.
• Archival materials that show a clear original order must not be rearranged. The original order in which the archival materials were received must not be disturbed or rearranged, if that order clearly reflects the activities and functions of the creating institution.

• The archivists should identify the levels of archives according to the hierarchical levels of arrangement used in archival work.
However, where there is no way to identify any order in the materials, or if the records were accumulated haphazardly, the archivist may need to impose an order in them to present the material in a way that reflects the spirit and intent of the creator and to facilitate the use of the records for research.
LEVELS OF ARCHIVAL ARRANGEMENT

- Repository
- Record group (and subgroup)
- Series
- File unit
- Item
Levels of Archival Arrangement

- Archival materials are arranged in levels to help achieve control over the holdings of the archival institution. That is, administrative (physical) and intellectual control.

- Administrative or physical control ensures that all records series and items are accounted for in the repository and can be found and used, while intellectual control identifies for users what archival materials are held, what subjects they deal with and where they are located.
• Since it will be practically difficult to arrange records of an institution as a whole, the arrangement is made in divisions or levels.

• Archives are organized into levels according to the principles of provenance and original order. The levels of arrangement may include the institution, the group, the subgroup, the series and the item.

• Sometimes ‘item’ is also used to refer to the single documents that make up such an assembly.
A group consists of all the archival materials arising from a distinct organization or individual.

Archival institutions have the responsibility of having a clear and agreed policy on defining what is to be included in a group and this should be set out in internal instructions or procedure manual to guide the staff. The best way to carry out this assignment is to compile a list of groups of creating institutions.
Arrangement by Subgroups

- In most cases, an institution for which a record or archives group has been established is also subdivided into a number of smaller organizational units, the records of which may be considered as subgroups.
- These subgroups may be arranged in accordance with either the administrative or intellectual control.
The basic unit of control for all archives is the series. The term **series** is used to refer to specific organized sets of records kept and used together as a system in the creating institution, and from which the archival materials have been selected.

Normally, a series documents a particular function or process in public institutions or in the activities of an individual. Series of records should be kept together and in their original order or system.

For instance, a series of financial records might be kept together because they all relate to an **imprest**.
Arrangement by File Units

- The final and most detailed step in arranging records is concerned with single documents, folders, volumes or other file units. File units usually consist of records kept together because they relate to the same subject or transaction, or because they have the same form.

- These units which may vary in size and character are usually placed in a sequential arrangement that is determined by the type of filing system used.

- The serial order given the records whether alphabetical, numerical or chronological should be preserved.
Topic Three

ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION PRACTICES AND PRINCIPLES
The International Council on Archives (ICA) defines description as “the creation of an accurate representation of each fonds and its component parts by the process of capturing, collating, analyzing and organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate and explain archives taking into consideration the content in which the record was produced and the records system that produced the records”
Description enables the archivist have intellectual control over his holdings; thus making it feasible to retrieve for use by searchers.
Purpose of Archival Description

• to provide access to archival material through description of retrieval tools

• to promote the understanding of archival materials by documenting their content, context and structure

• to establish grounds for presuming the authenticity of archival materials by documenting the chain of custody, arrangement and the circumstances of creation and use of the archival materials (Wendy and Duff, 1997).
The standard requires that archival materials be arranged according to recognised levels referred to as **multi-level rule**. When the multi-level arrangement rule is applied, it makes description of archives systematic and clearer. In using the multi-level approach, archival descriptions will generally include descriptions that show links between the various levels.

The multi-level rule states that archival descriptions should be completed for each of the levels of arrangement and then linked together. (describing from general to the specific)
Therefore, in describing archives, archivists should start from the institution as the higher, general level.

Then move down the hierarchy to the group level, which could be equated to a division or department of the institution.

The next levels could be a subgroup, which can be a subdivision or unit under a department.

The series level follows after the subgroup and the final level is the item.
Principles of Archival Description

• Description in archives administration refers to the process of capturing, organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate and explain archival materials.

• It also helps to explain the context or environment and records systems that produced the records. Thus, description makes it possible for both archivists and users to have access to archival materials.
Summary

In this session you learned that

- The two principles of archives administration are Provenance and original Order.
- Archival materials are arranged in levels to help achieve physical and intellectual control over the holdings of the archival institution.
- The levels of archival arrangement include the institution, the group, the subgroup, the series and the item.
- Description in archives administration refers to the process of capturing, organizing and recording information that serves to identify, manage, locate and explain archival materials.