

ARCHIVES 101

You have surely heard the word “archive” before. For many people, this word is automatically associated with “old papers,” “dust” or even “useless documents.” Is this really the case? What are archives anyway?

What are archives?

- Archives are any old or new documents that a person or institution (a company, school, restaurant, etc.) produces or receives during the course of their activities. By document, we mean information (i.e. content) conserved on any type of medium (i.e. a support). A document can be paper-based, but it can also take other forms. For example, newspapers, CDs, DVDs, mp3 files, negatives, photographs, film strips, postcards and maps are all archive documents. A blank sheet of paper or an object like a drinking glass is not an archive since neither of these objects contains information.
- Everyone has archives—even you! Your diary, birth certificate and driver’s licence, the emails you send and receive, your report card, your homework assignments, your drawings, etc. are all archives that tell the story of your life, and leave a trail showing the important stages you’ve been through and the things you like to do.

Watch out! Not all the documents in your home are your archives. Your mother’s passport and the grocery store flyer are not related to your activities. The passport is part of your mother’s archives, and the flyer belongs to the grocery store’s archives.

What are archives used for?

- Every day, without even realizing it, you produce, use or consult archives in books, on the Internet and among your personal objects. Archives are used to:

Imagine what would happen if the police lost track of everyone who committed a crime! That’s why the police register is an essential archive!

1. Conserve information so it is not forgotten:

- You keep your friends’ contact information in your address book
- The doctor keeps patients’ appointments in his appointment book
- The police department keeps a register of criminals’ files

2. Communicate information:

- An email invites you to a party
- A movie theatre schedule tells you which films are playing
- A letter tells your parents when to come to a school meeting

3. Prove things:

- Your report card proves you passed your year, so you have to keep it
- The receipt for your parents’ car proves that they paid for it and is used as a guarantee

4. Remind us of the past:

- Old documents reproduced in your history books
- Films and images from museum or virtual exhibits
- Postcards from trips you’ve taken

Jacques Cartier. Archives at UQAM



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What do archivists do?

- No, an archivist isn't an old man in a white lab coat working in the basement filing away yellowed papers. And archivists don't necessarily like dusty rooms either. So what exactly do they do?
- You may have only a few archives, but institutions such as municipalities, banks, stores and other businesses possess a large number of them. All of these institutions produce hundreds of new archives every day. It's archivists' job to manage all these documents.

Archivists use a variety of methods to preserve archival documents. They keep documents in special boxes or sleeves. They wear gloves when handling archives and they store the boxes of archives in humidity- and temperature-controlled rooms.

- **Because not everything can be conserved**, archivists evaluate what should or should not be kept. Not all documents are of equal value. For instance, you need to keep your current health insurance card, but you don't have to keep your old, expired cards.
- **Because information needs to be found easily**, archivists organize archives. So any given document can be found easily when needed, they **file** archives logically and **describe** the information these documents contain. They summarize the archives' contents. For example, they file all correspondence in the same place in chronological order and describe each letter, indicating the date, the names of the senders and recipients, its subject, etc.
- **Because archives degrade over time**, archivists **preserve** archives. If we want to be able to consult them in 10, 50 or even 200 years, they must be protected, as their media are often fragile. This is the case for paper, CDs, DVDs, film reels and other informational media, which are all more or less vulnerable to dust, light, heat, humidity, insects and other elements.
- **Because archives contain useful information**, archivists **circulate** archives. They make the archives available and help people consult them. **Virtual exhibits**—exhibits on the Internet—are a good way to circulate archives. **Have you ever visited a virtual exhibit?** Virtual exhibits make it possible to consult many documents without leaving your home and without having to handle them, which helps preserve them.

You can find exhibits on many themes:
<http://www.archivescanada.ca/fr/virtual/search.asp>

Did you know...

Today's archives are tomorrow's historical heritage. Who knows, maybe the photograph you take in your neighbourhood today could wind up in a history book in the year 2046, just as 17th century cards and etchings or photographs taken in 1880 are found today in virtual exhibits. In other words, ancient contents of archives were once new objects!



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Now that you know what archives are and what archivists do, it's time to try your hand at being an archivist and do an archiving task. You are going analyze and describe an image you choose from a virtual exhibition. Here are your instructions.

Instructions

1. Visit the virtual exhibit "Montreal, 500 Years of History in Archives"

- The virtual exhibit can be found at : <http://www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/montrealistes/500ans>.
- This website summarizes Montreal's history in twelve chapters. You will undoubtedly learn many new things during your visit. You will be able to consult hundreds of digital archival documents, such as cards, drawings, etchings, written documents and many photographs.

2. Choose an image to describe

- You can choose any image from the exhibit for this exercise. Try, however, to choose one with a lot of detail, such as a landscape. If you choose a photo or a drawing showing people, try to find one with many individuals or a historical character you are familiar with.
- To print the image from your computer, right-click on the image of your choice, then, choose "Print" from the dropdown menu. You can also save your image by choosing "Save as..." from the dropdown menu and print it later.
- Keep your image in a plastic sleeve.

3. Analyze and describe your image

- Using the descriptive fact sheet on the following pages, start your analysis by answering as specifically as possible the questions provided to help you analyze your image. Then, fill in the descriptive fact sheet.
- Be sure to fill in all sections of the descriptive fact sheet.
- Try to be as specific as possible, while still keeping it brief.

4. Compare your descriptions in small groups

- In teams of four, compare your images and your descriptions. Complete yours as needed.

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Identification of the image

Title | What is the image's title in the exhibit (i.e., its caption)? Is the caption specific enough? If you don't think so, find the image a new title based on its contents.
Answer :

Who? | Who created the image? Was it a famous artist or photographer? If you don't know because there is no written indication, mention this fact. Also, write down the name of the archive department that provided the image.
Answer :

When? | When was the photograph taken? If you don't know the exact date, at least indicate the approximate year. You can find clues in the fashion styles, transportation, buildings, etc., that you see in the picture.
Answer :

How? | Your image has been digitalized. However, was it originally a drawing, a colour photograph or maybe a black-and-white photograph? What are its dimensions in centimetres (height by width)?
Answer :

Analysis of the image's contents

When? | When was the image created? Was it taken at night? In the daytime? Were the people in the image posing or was it taken without their knowledge?
Answer :

Where? | Where was the image created? Outdoors or indoors? In a park or on a street? In a house or in a public building? Be as specific as possible. Observe the background elements—they may help you.
Answer :

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Who? Who do you see in the image? How many people are there? Name the ones you recognize and write down their functions (ex. Jean Drapeau, former mayor of Montréal). Indicate where they are in the image (On the left? In the middle? On the right? In the foreground? In the background?). If there are no people, don't write anything.

Answer :

What? What do you see in the image? A landscape? Can you see Mount Royal? What buildings do you see (church, well-known building, workers' houses, etc.)? What objects are there? Are there any animals? Describe the physical elements you see in the image as specifically as possible and, when you can, their position in the image.

Answer :

Why? Why was this photograph taken? On what occasion? Does it show a specific event or an element of daily life in the Montreal of another era? The chapter in which you find the image may help you find answers to these questions. What are the people in the image doing? What activities are shown?

Answer :

Comparison Depending on your image and its era, you can surely see differences between then and now. What strikes you the most? Name at least one element that contrasts with modern times.

Answer :

Commentaire :

A variant of this exercise could be to choose a photograph of a Montréal neighbourhood from the exhibit -Place d'Armes, for example- and to ask the student to return to the same place and take a photograph in order to analyze past/present changes.

Archival Descriptive Fact Sheet

(to be handed in with the printed image)

Title:	View of place Jacques-Cartier
Creator:	Unknown
Date:	ca1918
Original support:	Black-and-white photograph
Dimension (height by width):	12.5 x 17.5 cm
Name of archive department:	City of Montréal

Commentaire :

Example of a fact sheet. See the corresponding photograph on the following page.

Commentaire :

Fill in the exact date if known, if not, then the approximate date with the indication « ca » before the date

Summary of contents :

Photograph of Place Jacques-Cartier on market day. Several automobiles and a few horse-drawn carriages are parked on each side and at the center of the public square.

A truck loaded with boxes of merchandise can be seen in the foreground. Here and there, vendors and passers-by go about their business. Nelson's monument and the courthouse roof can be seen far off in the background.

Several advertisements promoting various products, including a brand of oil and a life-insurance company, have been painted on the walls of the buildings surrounding the square.

Commentaire :

If students choose a well-known character, they can include a short biography of the character in their description.

Commentaire :

The idea here is not to be able to identify all buildings or monuments, but to be as accurate as possible.

Description by:

Magalie Belleau

Date of description:

Septembre 23, 2007

Corresponding image



Source : Division de la gestion de documents et des archives at the City of Montréal