

STANDARDS OF ARCHIVAL DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION WITHIN THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFESSIONAL CONTEX

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A unified structure for describing archival materials is an important priority today. When rules are inconsistent, searching for sources across borders becomes nearly impossible. However, the issue of regulating such descriptive standards has remained relevant for a long time. General principles for the creation of finding aids were established at the international level decades ago.

The United States adopted these principles through the lens of its own records management system. The Canadian approach takes into account multilingualism and the country's federal structure. The United Kingdom has modified standards based on the traditions of classical archival science. Today, digital platforms act as a bridge between these different implementations.

Archival description is the process of selecting representative informational characteristics of the object of description in order to adequately reproduce it in a descriptive record, with the aim of identifying archival materials and revealing the content of documents and the systems that produced them. Archival description is based on several key principles, including provenance and original order.

The principle of provenance stipulates that records should be grouped and described according to the institution, organization, or individual that created them. This helps preserve the relationship between documents and their creator or records creator. The principle of original order means that records should be preserved and described in the order in which they were created or used in the activities of an institution or individual.

In order to ensure the consistent implementation of these and other archival principles, unified rules for document description are required. For this reason, international archival practice relies on standards developed by the International Council on Archives, which created the core international descriptive standard ISAD(G). This standard serves as a general guide for the preparation of archival descriptions and is intended to be used in conjunction with existing national standards or as a foundation for their development.

In addition, other international standards exist, such as ISAAR (CPF), the international standard for archival authority records relating to corporate bodies, persons, and families. Its technological framework is supported by the EAC (Encoded Archival Context) standard.

Despite the existence of international standards, many countries have developed their own national rules for archival description. In the United States, DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard) is used. It defines the required elements for identifying fonds and records, ensures a logical structure of archival catalogs, and applies to all types of materials.

In Canada, the RAD (Rules for Archival Description) standard is used. Its essence lies in prescribing how archivists should describe documents so that researchers can easily locate them across different institutions. RAD is based on the principle of hierarchy: first the entire fonds is described, followed by individual series and files.

In the United Kingdom, the central institution is The National Archives (TNA). It preserves and manages records, datasets, and information resources that provide extensive insights into the lives of individuals, groups, organizations, and places, thereby contributing to public knowledge and understanding of British society. This information is collected through measurement, mapping, surveys, and censuses, as well as by transforming raw data obtained through these processes into

structured digital formats such as relational datasets or geographic information systems. Government bodies also create datasets as part of their administrative processes, most often in the form of digital case files.

Despite the existence of a well-developed system of international and national standards, their practical implementation is accompanied by a number of significant challenges. One of the main issues remains the differences in approaches among English-speaking countries, which complicates the full unification of archival description. The United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom have historically developed their own archival traditions: American DACS, Canadian RAD, and the British ISAD(G)-oriented approach differ in the structure of descriptive elements, requirements for mandatory fields, and terminology. For example, the concept of “fonds” in the Canadian tradition has a precise definition based on the principle of provenance, whereas in American practice the term “collection” is more commonly used and may have a broader meaning. These differences complicate data exchange between archives in different countries, even when using a common technical standard such as EAD, since the same XML structure may contain descriptions created according to different logics.

In addition, varying levels of digitization among archival institutions play a significant role. Large national archives, such as the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in the United States or The National Archives (TNA) in the United Kingdom, have the resources to fully implement modern standards. In contrast, smaller regional, university, or municipal archives often operate with limited funding and outdated software. This creates an uneven digital landscape, where some archival descriptions are available online in fully structured formats, while others remain only in paper form or in legacy databases incompatible with modern standards.

The complexity of implementing new standards is also directly related to staffing issues. Training archivists who are equally proficient in both archival description principles and technical skills—such as working with XML, metadata, and digital repositories—requires substantial investment in education and professional development. Many practicing archivists were trained at a time when digital standards either did not exist or were in their early stages, making the transition to new tools dependent on large-scale retraining programs. Another challenge is the rapid pace of technological change: standards developed for one generation of technology must be updated as new file formats, data models, and interoperability requirements emerge.

For example, the growing popularity of Linked Open Data and the Semantic Web raises the question of how to adapt existing standards to the RDF (Resource Description Framework) model, enabling archival descriptions to be fully integrated into the global linked data environment. At the same time, migrating existing descriptions from outdated formats to newer versions of standards is a labor-intensive process that requires careful data validation and may lead to the loss or distortion of information. An additional challenge concerns the description of born-digital materials—documents originally created in digital environments, such as emails, databases, or websites—for which traditional hierarchical models of description are not always adequate, prompting the archival community to seek new approaches and reconsider established principles.

In contemporary archival practice in English-speaking countries, digital description systems are based on a combination of content standards and technical encoding standards. For the technical implementation of descriptions in digital environments, the EAD (Encoded Archival Description) standard—based on XML markup language—is most widely used. It transforms traditional finding aids into hierarchical digital structures that can be indexed by search engines and shared between institutions. In addition to describing the materials themselves, attention is also given to the context of their creation, for which the EAC-CPF (Encoded Archival Context – Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families) standard is applied, focusing on biographical and historical information about record creators.

To manage digital objects, metadata standards designed for preservation are used, among which PREMIS (Preservation Metadata: Implementation Strategies) is particularly important. This standard records technical characteristics of files, their history of use, and access rights. To integrate

descriptive, administrative, and structural metadata into a single package, the METS (Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard) is often employed—an XML-based schema developed by the Digital Library Federation (DLF) for creating standardized, machine-readable documents.

In conclusion, English-speaking countries have formed a comprehensive and resilient system for the description of archival documents, effectively balancing universal international rules with nuanced national traditions. This framework encompasses both content-based standards and sophisticated technical schemas, ensuring that researchers can navigate diverse archives through unified principles. The expansion of these approaches into the digital environment significantly increases the accessibility of archival heritage for a global audience, breaking down geographical and institutional barriers. Moving forward, the continued evolution toward Linked Open Data and more flexible models for born-digital records will be essential to maintaining the relevance of these standards. Ultimately, the successful integration of technological innovation with classical archival principles remains the key to preserving the integrity of the historical record in an increasingly interconnected world.

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