



The [NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES](#) Presents: Tips for Finding and Using Archival Sources

1. How To Locate The Archival Resources You Need

- **Frame** your research questions well. To identify where primary-source materials might be, first think about how your topic would be documented. What kinds of sources would be likely to contain pieces of the puzzle: letters, diaries, founding documents, newspapers, reports?
- **Think** about who or what would have produced or generated information about your topic: Which individuals? What groups—committees, clubs, corporations, the government?
- Think about connections: Was there a specific person involved? If so, was that person affiliated with a group or organization or academic institution that has an archives? (Many corporations do—but those can be hard to get into because they're not really set up for public use).
- Some archives specialize in certain types of collection –labor-related, social welfare, Chicago literary figures, etc. State or local historical societies usually collect papers and official records that reflect the geographic location. University archives tend to focus on people and activities that are directly connected to the institution. The National Archives (NARA) has regional outlets.
- Don't forget the old fashioned way to find primary sources: start with bibliographies in books on the subject—look at “archival sources” or “unpublished sources.” Let earlier scholars help you get started!
- You may need to adjust your topic to fit the materials available
- You will most likely use more than one resource in the archives, including secondary sources that provide context and background.
- Never assume!
 - It's not all online, so if you think something might possibly be in a repository, ask!
 - All the answers may not be in a single collection. Ask if there are related collections that you may not know about, and also ask about photos, clippings, serial publications, etc., that relate to your topic
 - Ask about other repositories or resources the archivist may know about that hold related material

2. Accessing Archival Resources from a Distance

- Consult with the archivist by email or phone: be very clear about what you want
- Request further information and arrange for photocopies or scans to be sent to you
- Check the repository's fee and permissions schedule
- Allow yourself enough advance time. Sometimes it can take weeks to get a response or copies.

3. The Research Trip: Using Archives or Special Collections Repositories Onsite

PLAN AHEAD! Before you go, check the website or (better yet) contact the archives by phone or email to determine:

- Exactly what is in a collection—if the folders you've requested contains one piece of paper or 200, if correspondence files contain both incoming and outgoing letters. This will help you plan how much time you'll need to spend—or if the collection even has what you need
- If you need to make an appointment
- If you can request materials to be ready for you on your arrival. Many archives have holdings stored offsite. It can take hours or days to retrieve these.
- The registration procedure:
 - You may need a letter of reference from your advisor, or a letter describing your project
 - If you do need to register, there might be an online form you can fill out to save time
- Open days and hours AND whether they close for lunch (to make sure you schedule enough time for your visit)
- What the procedure is for obtaining photocopies or scans—and if you can bring in a digital camera
- Whether you can bring your laptop
- Other rules and regulations that apply to the use of the specific archives' materials

Making Best Use of Your Time during Your Visit

- Consult with the archivist once you get there
- Know what collections you want to use—it helps to bring a copy of the online finding aid
- Expect to spend a lot of time looking through things.
 - You might be reading handwritten documents that are difficult to decipher
 - You might have to look through many folders and boxes before you find what you need
 - You might find more than you thought—or less
- Allow time for getting items paged
- Allow time for following up leads

4. Final Reminders:

- a. **Remember that most of your archival research is note-taking and “upfront gathering” -- you will do your synthesis and analysis later!**
- b. **Get full citation information for each item you use! This saves MUCH time later!**
You'll need this information to cite your materials AND if you need to go back to them yourself! See your style guide (Chicago Manual of Style, MLA, or other) for the approved format for “Unpublished materials,” but if you get the following information you'll be set for all purposes:
Description and date of item; box/folder location; collection title; series or call number; repository name; repository city/state/country

For a list of selected local, national, and world-wide archival repositories, plus links to databases where you can search multiple repositories with a click, see [Finding Archival Sources](http://library.northwestern.edu/archives/archival_resources.html) at http://library.northwestern.edu/archives/archival_resources.html

For further information about using archives, at NU or around the world, contact us at (847) 491-3136 or archives@northwestern.edu

