



York University Libraries, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections

University of British Columbia Library, Rare Book and Special Collections



Archival Research Tutorial

Created in May 2006

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Archival Research Tutorial

Introduction



Welcome!

Archival materials give you **direct access** to the time or event you are studying. Using archival materials can help you:

- **better understand your topic;**
- **apply your knowledge and experience in a specific area;**
- **develop your own ideas;**
- **gain a sense of "reality" about your project.**

Finding relevant archival materials is a new process for many researchers. The goal of this guide is to help you conduct research at [Rare Books and Special Collections](#). We will go through the research process from choosing your topic and getting started, to arranging your visit.

If this is your first time searching for archival materials, you may follow the guide as organized. Or, feel free to go directly to the relevant section.

Good luck!



If you have any questions about this guide or need more information about researching please call 604-822-2521 or send an email to spcoll@interchange.ubc.ca.



For a printable version of this guide, please click [here](#).

Choosing your topic

Visiting an archives usually comes later in the research process because archives contain raw materials, much like the ingredients in a recipe. When you don't have a clear idea of what you are looking for, doing research in an archives may become overwhelming.



Choosing and focusing your topic are the first steps to take in any research process

Following, is an example of the focusing process:

Original topic: Commercial development in the city of Vancouver



FOCUS

FOCUS: Commercial development in the 1000 block of Robson Street in the early 20th century



FOCUS

FOCUS: Shift from residential to commercial dwellings at 1001-1010 Robson Street from 1900-1950

Examples of materials you may wish to consult:

[Photographs](#), [Archival materials](#), [Subject guides](#), [Pamphlets, brochures and other published materials](#), [Maps](#)

For more examples of the focusing process, please see Appendix I.

TIPS

To focus, ask questions: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN?

WHEN - focus on a particular range of dates (e.g. 1950-1970)

WHERE - focus on a particular area, block or address of the city

WHO - focus on a business or important family/person

CONSIDER

Length of assignment - 25 pages? Or, 5 pages?

When is your assignment due? Do you have 1 year or 4 days?

To identify archival holdings potentially relevant to your topic, it is helpful to do background research. Go to the next section for more information.

Background research

Primary resources are sources that are usually created at the time of an event. Primary resources are the direct evidence or first hand accounts of historical events without secondary analysis or interpretation. For example, if you were writing a paper on World War I, a soldier's diary or a newspaper article written during World War I would be considered primary resources.

Prior to visiting an archival institution, it is important that you understand your topic. To do this, do some reading and background research on your topic.

Try using secondary resources available in your library, such as dictionaries, bibliographies and encyclopedias, when you begin your research journey. Secondary resources often provide you with a historical context for the **primary resources** that you will find in an archives.

Secondary resources "[are one step removed from the original \[primary\] source, usually describing, summarizing, analyzing, evaluating, derived from, or based on primary source materials.](#)" Secondary resources offer an analysis, description or interpretation of primary resources (first-hand original material such as letters and diaries). For more information on primary and secondary resources, please go to www.library.ubc.ca/hss/primary.html

Primary resource	Secondary resource
diary	article explaining the significance and context of the diary
letters from a soldier to his mother during World War I	book or encyclopedia articles about World War I
original sketches/illustrations for a children's book	biography or articles on the artist
business records (e.g. employee identification cards) from a large forestry company	Newspaper article or book on the company's historical development

Keep in mind that your research question may evolve as you consult these sources. You will focus your topic many times before you step foot into an archives!



Try using materials found in the Reference section of a library, such as an general or subject specific encyclopedia.



Pay special attention to the footnotes and bibliographies of any source you consult! They are often rich sources of information.



Or, try doing a keyword search in the [library catalogue](#) to find some general books written on your area of interest.



You may also want to search a [journal index or database](#) specific to your [subject area](#) to find some review articles that will provide you with a general overview of your topic.



You may also want to speak with a reference librarian, your professor, TA or a scholar about the topic you are interested in researching.

For more information on the research process, you may wish to contact the [UBC Writing Centre](#) or consult the [Student to Scholar researching and writing tutorial](#).

Should you be at an Archives?

Records, not books

Archives contain **records**, not books. Archivists deal with the records left by a person or organization and the relationship between the record and the activity that generated it. As a result, records have meaning and context in how they witness to the creator's activities.



Records are:

- documents made, received and set aside during the course of an activity
- by-products of an activity, not the purpose
- created by an authorized and qualified person
- available in a variety of formats (textual materials, visual materials, sound recordings, etc.)

Researchers often deal with the personal papers of a significant person, such as an author, or an organization. Records generally refer to unpublished materials, such as:

- letters
- photographs
- journals/diaries
- notes and manuscripts
- ledgers and account books
- meeting minutes and agendas
- annual reports and project files
- maps and plans
- sound and video recordings
- drawings

Some of the major differences between libraries and archives are illustrated in the following table:

Archives	Libraries
Closed stacks	Open stacks
Collect original, un-published material (e.g. letters)	Collect published material (e.g. books, journals)
Material is organized according to the way in which the collector organized his/her collection (original order)	Material is organized within a classification system such as Library of Congress call numbers
Unique material (records)	Other copies of the material may be available in other libraries
Group of material is described on a number of different levels within the fonds: fonds level, series level and item level	Material is described on an individual level (e.g catalogue record for a single book)
Items do not circulate ; you cannot take the material home	Items circulate : you may take the material home
You search for materials on your subject using finding aids (listing of everything in the fonds)	You search for materials on your subject using an online catalogue

Importance of background research

As we discussed in the Background Research section, it is important to remember that the materials that are generally found in an archival setting are **primary resources**.

Therefore, it is up to you to research the historical context in which the documents or artifacts were created. Remember, **secondary resources** will provide you with a context and understanding of the circumstances and time period in which the given document (e.g. letter, photograph, or map) was created. Secondary resources will not, however, interpret the document for you. That is up to you!

Basic facts about archives

[Important Facts](#) | [Organization of Archives](#) | [Brief History](#)

Important facts

Archives and libraries are centres of knowledge that support research and learning, and document and preserve cultural heritage. However, archives are rooted in a different tradition of information management, handling and providing access to information in a particular way. It is one that has emphasized the different roles of archives: legal, historical, administrative and cultural.



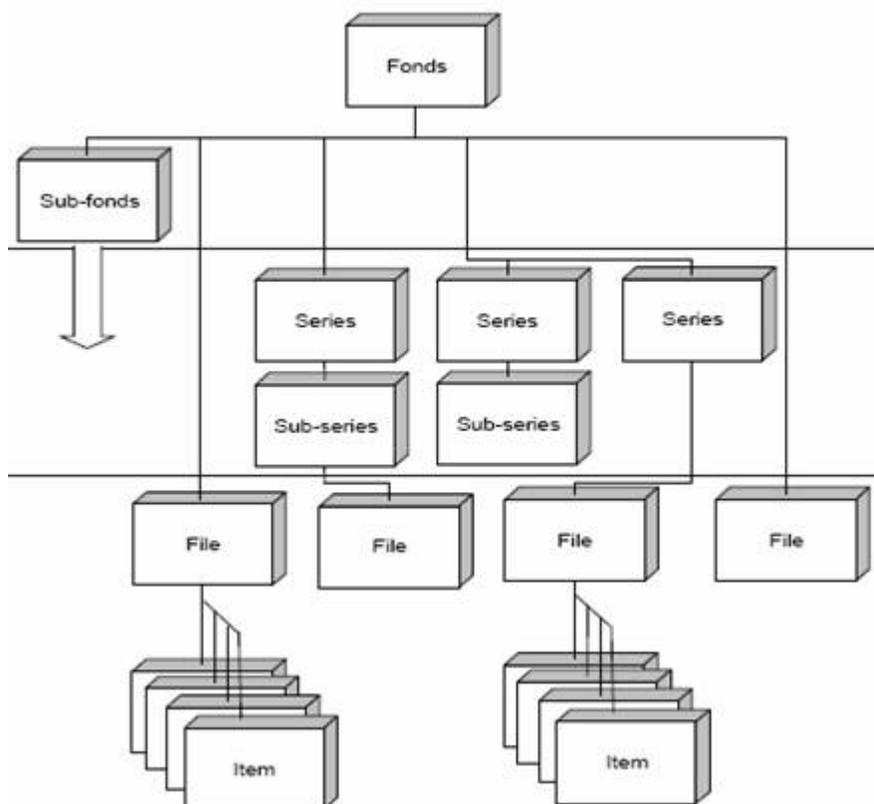
This archival tradition impacts how you access and use archival materials.

Organization of Archives

Fonds (it's French)

Records are viewed as a fonds, the totality of records generated by a person or organization throughout the course of its lifetime. The fonds is a hierarchical structure of groupings based on the ways in which the records were used. The highest level is the fonds, followed by the series, file and item levels. The fonds level gives the broadest view of the records; the groupings become increasingly specific.

Model of the levels of arrangement of a fonds



From: ISAD (G) : general international standard archival description : adopted by the Committee on Descriptive Standards, Stockholm, Sweden, 19-22 September 1999, 2nd ed. 2000: 36, <<http://www.ica.org/biblio.php?pdocid=1>>(accessed September 2, 2005).

Principles: Provenance and Respect for Original Order

There are two principles which govern the arrangement of a fonds:

- Principle of Provenance - all records of one creator are kept together
- Respect for Original Order - all records are maintained in the order the creator had them



Provenance: Fonds are generally listed by the name of the creator (person or organization). You can search for them by name. This is why it is important to note names during your research.



Original Order: Researchers are asked to keep all materials in the order in which they are found.

Brief history of archives



- Archival work aims to preserve the context in which records were created, maintained and used.
- Archives existed in ancient times (including Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome) and housed government or public records. Records were evidence of action taken and decisions made.
- Archives (buildings) were secure and designed to preserve documents as evidence. For example, the Roman Tabularium had hallways and enclosed staircases connecting it to government buildings.
- In France, the *Archives Nationales* allowed the public to access government records in 1794. Prior to this, archives were generally closed to all except a select few.
- In Canada, archival institutions attempt to document Canadian history from all segments of the population and in all record formats. Government archives often hold private papers in addition to government records. This is known as **Total Archives**.

Access: Finding Aids, Indexes

Finding aids (aka archival descriptions) describe each level of a fonds, according to the standard, **Rules of Archival Description (RAD)**. To learn more about finding aids, how to use them and how to find the right archives - read on.

How to read a finding aid

[Introduction](#) | [Title, Dates, Extent](#) | [Bio/Admin](#) | [Scope and Content](#)

Introduction

F044 - Judith Cowen fonds

FondsCollection Number: F044

Title: Judith Cowen fonds

Date: 1964-2004

Extent: 3.25 m of textual records
8 audio cassettes
ca. 80 photographs
3 video cassettes
1 compact disc
1 DVD
4 posters

Biographical Sketch: Judith Cowen, author, translator and professor, was born on 21 September 1942 in Sydney, Nova Scotia. She received a BA in Modern Languages and Literature in 1964 and an MA in French Literature in 1965, both from the University of Toronto. She received an MA in English Literature in 1970 from York University where she also lectured during the 1970-71 school year. She completed her PhD in Canadian Comparative Literature at Université de Sherbrooke in 1985. She has been a professor of Canadian, American and English Literature at Université de Québec at Trois-Rivières since 1979. Cowen has translated numerous poems by Québec writers in French magazines. A frequent film specialist in translations of Canadian literature, she has also translated whole works by authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin and Françoise Sagan. She was awarded a Governor-General's Award in 2004 for "Maison", her translation Pierre Trépanier's "Lignes aériennes". She has authored and published several collections of short stories, including "Santia's Fairy", and has several novels in progress.

Scope and Content: Fonds consists of chronologically-arranged correspondence files that are both printed and processed in nature and include copies of letters received and, in many cases, copies of letters sent by Cowen herself. There is a considerable amount of correspondence with Cowen's own family as well as copies of letters exchanged with Steven Haggitt and David Henry, among others. Fonds also consists of notes and drafts of her work as a translator including "Maison" as well as correspondence with the respective authors, notes and drafts of her about novels, both outlined and completed and personal files consisting of letters and promotion files, course evaluations and other material that documents her lengthy career as a professor at Université de Québec at Trois-Rivières. Fonds also includes copies of essays and/or papers written by Cowen when she was completing her BA and her MA.

Language of material note: Some correspondence, translation and professional files are in French.

Restrictions on access: Some restrictions on access apply. File 2003-027019104 is closed until after Access and Use. Cowen's death. No restrictions on accession 2004-044.

Finding Aid: File list is available.

URL of Finding Aid: <http://davidson.library.yorku.ca/fonds/F044/F044040.htm>

Accession: The fonds comprises the following accessions: 2003-027, 2004-044, 2005-014. Further accessions may be expected.

Immediate source of ownership: Judith Cowen in 2003, 2004 and 2005, acquisition.

Provenance Access Point: Cowen, Judith Elaine

See records: 2003-028
2004-044

PMF² Finding aids or archival descriptions help you find materials

Archival descriptions:

- can exist for all levels in a fonds
- provide the context in which records were made and used
- begin by describing the fonds as a whole and then moves to the smaller groupings (series, file, item).

You will use the fonds level description to begin your research. It is the broadest level of description (as pictured here) and gives you an overview of what you will find.

Certain fields can help you figure out whether a fonds is related to your research. The following will tell you how.

Most institutions make fonds level descriptions available online. If you want to more about a fonds after having read the description, contact that institution.

Once you are able to read a fonds level archival description, read on to learn how to find the correct archival institution.

Click on above to see larger view.

Title, Dates, Extent

Title: Usually the creator – individual or group responsible for the origin or existence of records by creating or collecting them.

If you know the name of an individual or group prominent in your field of study, you can use the name to search archival indexes and databases

Dates: indicate the time period covered by materials in the fonds.

Knowing the time period can help you determine if the fonds is useful for your research.

FOUNDS DESCRIPTION

Twigg, Alan, 1952-
Alan Twigg fonds. – 1977-2000 predominant 1991-1997.
4.88 m textual records and other material.

Biographical sketch:

Alan Twigg was born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1952. He married in 1973 and has two sons in Vancouver. He is the publisher and editor of *Spilsbury's Coast*. In addition to freelance writing, Twigg has been a Canadian books columnist for *The Province* and *Vancouver* magazine. Twigg has also served as a Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing, on *Spilsbury's Coast* in 1993.

Extent: Indicates the amount and format of records in a fonds.

This can help you decide if you should visit or roughly plan how much time you need. If there are a number of materials to go through, you may need more time.

includes moving images, sound recordings and photographs created during the production of the film *Spilsbury's Coast* and accompanying textual materials, as well as moving images and textual materials created during his production

Biographical Sketch / Administrative History

FONDS DESCRIPTION

Twigg, Alan, 1952-

Alan Twigg fonds. – 1977-2000 predominant 1991-1993
4.88 m textual records and other material.

Biographical sketch:

Alan Twigg was born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1952. He married in 1973 and currently lives with his wife and two sons in Vancouver. He is the publisher and editor of the quarterly newspaper *BC Book World*. In addition to freelance writing, Twigg has been editor of *Quill & Quire*, an editorial and Canadian books columnist for *The Province* newspaper, and a books columnist for *Vancouver* magazine. Twigg has also served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing, on behalf of the Writers Union of Canada. He has written several books and produced several documentary films, including *Spilsbury's Coast* in 1993.

Scope and content:

The fonds consists of moving images, sound recordings and photographs created during Alan Twigg's production of the film *Spilsbury's Coast* and accompanying textual materials, as well as moving images and textual materials created during his production of the *BC Book World* television series. The fonds also consists of textual, photographic, sound recordings, and moving images related to Twigg's interests and associations with

Biographical sketch/ Administrative History: Overview of the life or history of the creator, providing basic facts and highlights.

This section provides context about the creation and use of the records. This can help you decide

Scope and Content, Notes

Scope and Content

FONDS DESCRIPTION

Twigg, Alan, 1952-
Alan Twigg fonds. – 1977-2000 predominant 1991-1997.
4.88 m textual records and other materials

Scope and content: This section provides more detailed information about material in the fonds such as the document types, functions and activities in which records were used.

This information can provide you with a better idea of the major subjects in the fonds and main record types--information that will help you decide if the fonds is useful to your research.

several do

Scope and content:

The fonds consists of moving images, sound recordings and photographs created during Alan Twigg's production of the film *Spilsbury's Coast* and accompanying textual materials, as well as moving images and textual materials created during his production of the *BC Book World* television series. The fonds also consists of textual, photographic, sound recordings, and moving images related to Twigg's interest in and association with writer George Woodcock, particularly in the early 1990s. The fonds has been arranged into 4 series according to subject matter: Records pertaining to George Woodcock, *Spilsbury's Coast*, *BC Book World* (TV Series), and miscellaneous.

Source of supplied title: Title based on contents of fonds.

Physical description note: Includes: 113 film reels, 32 audio reels, 44 videocassettes, 14

Notes

Alan Twigg was born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1952. He married in 1975 and currently lives with his wife in the publisher and editor of the quarterly magazine, *Twigg*. Twigg has been editor of *Province* newspaper as a

Notes: A series of notes follow the Scope and Content. One of the most important notes outlines the availability of records to consult. At RBSC, this notes field is called **Restrictions.**

Notes are very important. They can tell you how and if you can use some or all of the materials in a fonds, if a finding aid is available and if material will be added to the fonds in the future.

in the collection of the sound recording of the writer George Woodcock into 4 series according to *Spilsbury's Coast, BC Book World* and miscellaneous.

Source of supplied title: Title based on contents of fonds.

Physical description note: Includes: 113 film reels, 32 audio reels, 44 videocassettes, 14 audio cassettes, 125 photographs, 114 slides, negatives and contact sheets.

Immediate source of acquisition: Alan Twigg donated the George Woodcock material to the University of British Columbia in 1998 and the *Spilsbury's Coast, BC Book World* (TV Series), and miscellaneous material in 1999.

Arrangement: When discernible, original order and titles have been maintained by the archivist.

Restrictions: No restrictions on access.

Finding aids: File list is available.

Accruals: Further accruals are expected.

Finding an archives

Now that you have completed the background reading on your focused research question and determined that the information on your topic may be held in an archives, you are ready to proceed to the next step: finding an archives.



Archival records may be found in a variety of places:

1. government institutions (local, municipal, provincial and federal)
2. businesses (both public and private)
3. religious organizations (churches and denominations)
4. institutions (universities and colleges), especially those with research collections.

With over 800 public archival institutions in Canada, finding the information you need may seem like a daunting task. How do you narrow your search?

Some tips include:

1. Remember Canada's *Total Archives* tradition.

Because of **Total Archives**, you will find records:



- in all formats in Canadian archives, including slides, photographs, sound and video recordings.
- are kept as close to their place of origin as a possible.

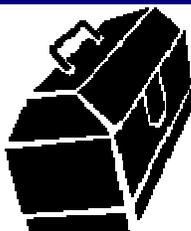
Note: If a person or organization was significant in a particular place or region, the records will likely be found in an archival institution there.

2. Note major research collections during your secondary research.



- Institutional research collections focus on specific areas and will collect materials in those areas.

Archival Toolbox



To make this step easier, Canadian archival institutions offer researchers some excellent searching tools.

Please go to the [Finding Archival Materials guide](#) for more information on searching for archival resources at [Rare Books and Special Collections](#).

For municipal, provincial, national and international archival resources, please refer to the "Web and Internet sites" section of the [guide](#).

Visiting Rare Books and Special Collections

[Closed Stacks](#) | [Registration](#) | [Handling of materials](#) | [Timing](#) | [Contact Us](#)

We welcome researchers and visitors! A visit to [Rare Books and Special Collections](#) is a different experience from visiting another department or section of the library. Much of what you will experience stems from one of the traditional roles of archives, discussed in [Basic Facts](#). This also affects how you do your research and the amount of time you need for your visit. Here are some things you should know prior to visiting RBSC:



Materials in Rare Books and Special Collections can be viewed only in our Reading Room. Please note our [business hours](#).

Closed Stacks

In most libraries, researchers can walk through the stacks (bookshelves) and can browse for items.

RBSC's stacks are closed to the public. To browse and search for holdings, researchers use the [UBC Library Catalogue](#) and [archival descriptions in finding aids and indexes](#). Once you've located your item(s) of interest, you request materials.



This means that researchers:



- must fill out call slips so that staff can retrieve materials.

Registration

All researchers must fill out a registration form. Please note that all jackets, coats and bags must be stored in designated areas

Researchers:



- **affiliated** with UBC should use their UBC Library Card
- **unaffiliated** with UBC must [register for a RBSC Community Card](#)
- present staff with two piece of identification (e.g, Driver's Licence) while consulting materials.

Handling of materials

Materials are often fragile, rare and unique.

- Use care when handling items, such as when turning pages or lifting them from the holders.
- Gloves and book supports are provided as needed.
- Use pencils while consulting material

Timing

It is very important to set aside enough time to conduct your research at RBSC. As you have read so far, there are a lot of other things to take into account, such as the availability and accessibility of materials. We recommend that you [contact RBSC staff](#) prior to your arrival to discuss your research topic.

RBSC staff can:



- Make sure that you have identified and located all materials related to research;
- Answer questions you have about accessing materials and material availability;
- Help you read and understand finding aids and guides.

Contact Us

For more information about planning your visit to RBSC, please [contact us](#). You can also explore our [website](#) where you can find links to our [acquisitions policy](#), descriptions of our holdings (including Virtual Exhibitions), and [subject guides](#).

Policies

Prior to your visit to Rare Books and Special Collections, please familiarize yourself with our services and policies:

- [Handling Rare Books](#)
- [Handling Archival Materials](#)

If you have any questions or require further information, please feel free to contact staff at spcoll@interchange.ubc.ca.

Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed the **Archival research tutorial**. We've discussed quite a lot of material in this short tutorial.

□ **How to chose and focus your topic**

- choose your topic
- focus and define your topic - ask questions: Who, What, Where, When
- create a work plan and confirm your assignment due date
- take into consideration the length of your assignment

□ **How to do background research**

- use reference materials
- study the footnotes and bibliographies of the reference sources
- to find books on your topic, do a keyword search in your library catalogue
- search for articles in a journal index or database
- speak with a reference librarian, professor, TA or scholar

□ **The differences between libraries and archives**

- Key idea: Archives contain records, not books

□ **Some basic facts about archives**

- Overview of the brief history of archives
- Definition of fonds
- Discussion of archival principles: provenance and original order

□ **How to read a finding aid**

Discussion of the 4 section of a finding aid:

1. Introduction
2. Title, dates, extent
3. Biographical sketch/ administrative history
4. Scope and content notes

☐ **How to find an archives**

- Canada's Total Archives tradition
- Links to searching tools created by Canadian archival institutions

☐ **What to expect when you visit the archives**

- Closed stacks
- Registration
- Care and handling of materials
- Timing

☐ **Overview of policies such as photocopying and copyright**

We hope that you now have the tools and information you need to feel comfortable finding, using and understanding archival records and collections. Here's a [checklist](#) to use to help keep you on track.

If you have any questions left unanswered, please feel free to contact staff at Rare Books and Special Collections at 604-822-2521.

Appendix 1 : Choosing Your Topic Examples

More examples of the focusing process

[Literary](#) | [Historical](#)

Literary

Original research topic: Canadian authors and artists and the influence of the Canadian landscape in their work



FOCUS: British Columbian authors and artists and the influence of the British Columbian landscape in their work



FOCUS: Influence of the Vancouver landscape on two female members of the 1930's Vancouver arts scene:
Ethel Wilson, author and Nan Cheney, artist

Examples of materials in RBSC you may wish to consult:
[Photographs](#), [Archival materials and thematic guides](#) (see: [Ethel Wilson fonds](#) and [Nan Cheney fonds](#)), search the [catalogue](#) for other Rare Books and Special Collections items, including pamphlets, books and other published materials

Historical

Original research topic: World War I



FOCUS: Experience of young soldiers during World War I



FOCUS: Experience of young Canadian soldiers during World War I

Examples of materials in RBSC you may wish to consult:

[Photographs](#), [Archival materials and thematic guides](#) (see [Jack Stickney fonds](#), [World War I British press photograph collection](#)), [World War I Poster collection](#), and search the [catalogue](#) for Pamphlets, brochures and other published materials. The Canadian government provides an excellent database:

[Soldiers of the First World War](#)