What are Finding Aids? Source Sheet No. 3

Finding aids are the tools that provide access to archival material. They are the means by which sources of information can be found in an Archives. They provide a link between the researcher and the records. Without them it would be almost impossible to identify relevant sources of information within the vast and varied holdings of an Archives. Unlike a Library, there is no comprehensive subject-based catalogue of an Archives’ holdings. To find their way into the records researchers need to rely on the help of finding aids. These may be generally defined as descriptive documentation or media (such as registers, guides, inventories, and indexes) that establish physical and intellectual control over the holdings of an Archives. They make it possible to identify and retrieve specific record items that contain information of relevance to a researcher’s enquiry.

The scope of these finding aids may well range from a general overview of an Archives’ entire collection to descriptions of particular series of records or individual record items. All finding aids have one major objective in common - to facilitate access to archives. To do this they need to provide information about the records and their creators. Finding Aids should be structured in such a way as to show the ***provenance*** of the records - that is, they need to give some insight into the administrative framework and functions which gave rise to the records, the original context in which records were created and used, the interrelationships with other record series and record-keeping systems produced by that individual or organisation, as well as physical details of the records themselves.

Another objective of finding aids in archival institutions is to promote greater user autonomy by providing a system of self-help, thereby reducing reliance on the Archivist for reference and research assistance. The extent to which this is achievable depends on the scope and sophistication of the archives’ system of finding aids. Although archives produce specific finding aids to suite their own collections and clientele, there is nevertheless a certain commonality in the types of finding aids to be found in most archival institutions.

There are essentially two types of archival finding aids – hardcopy and electronic.

**Hardcopy Finding Aids**

Two categories exist – primary and secondary:

1. Primary aids are those which were originally prepared by the creators of records to enable them to find information required for day-to-day administrative purposes; these were in effect contemporary ***control records***, such as original file registers and card indexes, created to assist in the control and retrieval of records.
2. Secondary aids are those which have been produced by Archivists to help researchers identify the records most likely to contain the information they are seeking; these ancillary aids can take the form of summary guides to holdings of an archives, inventories of record creators, series and items, and indexes and special lists of specific series.

In addition to these two distinctive categories of finding aids, there are also what are sometimes known as **supplementary finding aids.** These are usually produced by archivists for subject areas for which there is high user demand, and they are often published. They include subject guides and background information papers compiled from archival source analyses, secondary sources and popular reference enquiries and correspondence. Often these aids are ‘stand-alone’ references that obviate the need to access archival records.

Besides helping users locate information, finding aids also serve another important purpose in that they assist in the preservation of archives by reducing the amount of handling of material needed to retrieve appropriate records.

At the City Archives most Finding Aids are kept in the Reference and Guide Area. They comprise various indexes, manuals and guides to records, some of which were created by the original users of the records, others of which have been prepared by Archives staff to help researchers identify which records are most likely to contain the information they are looking for.

**Electronic Finding Aids**

These are increasingly being developed by archives around the world to widen and improve access to their collections, often remotely, and assist users more easily locate records relevant to their interests. There are two main ways by which these services are delivered:

* Onsite Searching – where public access computers are installed in archives’ reading rooms to enable users to search the archives’ electronic database which provides access to the descriptive accessioning data (system of intellectual control) and also sometimes allows users to see images of some key documents, or even series.
* Online Searching – where users can log in remotely to search the archives databases, and often request records to be retrieved for their next visit to the archives’ reading room, or even download copies of documents or photographs (usually requiring an online payment to be made).

**See also**

More information about archival finding aids may be found in:

***Keeping Archives. Third Edition*** (Australian Society of Archivists Inc, Canberra, 2008)

**City Archives Source Sheet No. 4 *City Archives Finding Aids***

**City Archives Source Sheet No. 46 *Searching for Records Electronically***

**Further Information**

**City Archives:** Topham Mall, off Currie and Waymouth Streets, Adelaide 5000

**Counter / telephone enquiries:** 9**.**00 am to 5.00 pm Mondays to Fridays

**Search Room open for public research:**10.00 am to 4.00 pm Tuesdays to Thursdays

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