

How to Read a Finding Aid

A finding aid is a document that describes a particular collection of related records within the archive in detail. It serves as a guide to the collection and its contents, facilitating the researcher in locating what they are looking for. These are some important sections of a finding aid for a researcher.

Repository: This tells you what building to go to, which is especially important if you are at a large institution, such as a university with several different libraries and archives in different locations around campus.

Creator: The person, family, or organization that is responsible for creating or compiling the documents.

Title: The name of the collection. By-and-large, this will be the creator or compiler's name and the kind of collection it is. Examples: Jane Doe letters, XYZ University records, Barth family papers. This will be pertinent information for requesting the collection from the archivist and for citations.

ID: The identifying number for the collection. You will also need to provide this number to the archivist in order for them to locate your collection within the building and use it in citations.

Dates: The date range of the items within the collection.

Physical description: How large the collection is. This will give you an indication of how long it would take you to research the materials or how much you need to narrow down what you want to look at. Physical description can be anything from one volume or one folder to over 100 cubic foot boxes.

Preferred citation: How to refer to the materials.

Biographical note: A brief biography of the person the collection is about or the collector. This could also be a history of a time period or event, or background information about a company or organization. Use this information to direct your research. Does it verify that this is the collection you are looking for? Does it produce other information that could assist in your research?

Scope and contents: This section will tell you the content of the collection. For example, it may contain scrapbooks, photographs, and receipts. Perhaps you are looking for John Doe's papers from his publishing business, but his collection only contains family albums and genealogies. This section may also relate to the arrangement and hierarchy of the collection.

Arrangement: How the collection is organized. This could be a simple description, such as by subject or chronologically, or it could involve a listing of series and subseries, especially for a larger collection.

Example:

Series I: Correspondence, 1910-1992

Series II: Legal documents, 1950-1959

Subject headings: Controlled headings that describe the contents of the collection. Knowing these is particularly helpful for finding related collections or books on the same topic.