HOW TO 5: How to Arrange and Describe records

An ***archival description*** is an overview of a record or group of records describing its main features such as author, title, description of the information content, date of creation, number of pages/ volumes/items. This information allows us to locate and manage the records.

Arrangement and Description practices allow archivists to turn an accumulation of records into a useable collection. This involves intellectually and physically organizing records so that users can see how and when the records were created or used, who created them and what information was recorded.

The archivist will research the context that led to the creation of the records, including the life and activities of the person/ group who produced them then summarizes their findings in an archival description. The description is the first point of contact for researchers: it is their introduction and guide to the collection.

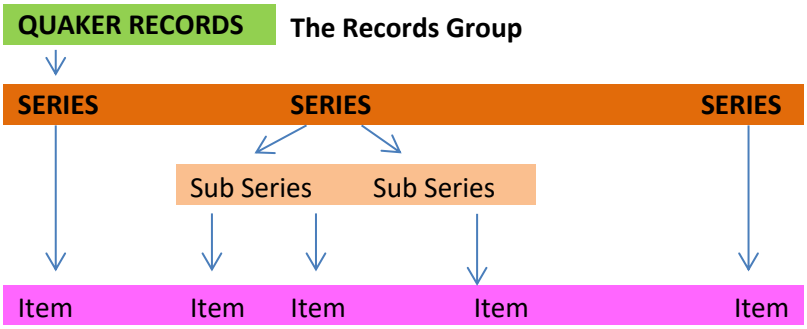
It is VERY important to keep archival records together based on their ***provenance***, or where they came from; who created them. This is followed by the archival principle of ***original order.*** Preserving the relationship/s between records because they tell us more about the records than individual items taken alone. This is done by keeping records in the order which they were originally created.

The archivists may then subdivide a records group into ***series*** *and* ***subseries***, which are groupings based on factors like the function/activity of the record, other themes or categories.

For examples a series of *Minutes* may be broken down into subseries:

1. Meeting Agendas & Meetings
2. Meetings Attendance Books

See Suggested ***Series Headings /subheadings for Oxley Library*** for a full listing.



An Item may be a book (register or volume), a file or a single letter or photograph, a plan etc.

What to record:

- **Creator of records** – name of the agency e.g. Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) - Qld Regional Meeting
- **Series Title –** e.g. Yearly Meeting (Annual Event)
- **Sub Series Title (where relevant) –** Yearly Meeting in Brisbane 2000
- **Item list** – individual items/files in the sub series e.g. correspondence; reports; surveys etc.,
- **Dates of creation** – start date and end date e.g. 01/02/1999 to 31/11/2000
- **Physical Description (or Extent) -** the amount of material involved; how much of the archival material is found on certain media (such as photographs, textual documents, or maps) with certain attributes e.g. 1.25m paper records; 200 B&W photographs 36X31cm or smaller; 4 plans 50 X 45cm or smaller; 3 x Type 1 boxes; etc.
- **Biographical Sketch or Administrative History (where relevant):** a brief summary of whose records were these and what did they do?
- **Scope and content (where relevant):** What can the records tell us, and how? - note the range of formats covered by the records, such as letters, minute books, newspaper clippings, expense accounts, photographs, etc. Indicate the variety of topics, events, and dealings documented by the records and relate them to the activities of the records' creators.
- **Access Restrictions:** Who can view this material? Is there a closure period or are the records on open access (i.e. anyone can view them, there are no privacy considerations OR these records contain private& confidential information and should be closed for 30, 65 or 100 years)
- **Box lists –** keep a list of all items in the box housing the records and keep a master copy on file (paper or digital).

How to start…

- ***ARRANGE*** your records by rounding up all records deposited for archiving

- Separate into like groups (these groups become your SERIES) e.g. Minutes & Agendas; General Correspondence; Regional Meeting; Yearly Meeting etc.

- Separate the records into Sub-series for a single group (SERIES) where relevant e.g. the Series *Concerns* is broken down into:
    - Alternatives to Violence Project
    - Drug Arm
    - Gender and Sexuality
    - Joint churches social justice committee
    - Indigenous issues
    - Other

- Separate individual items within each sub-series e.g. Concerns – Alternatives to Violence Project : Correspondence; Training programs; Presentations

- Make sure all records are in their original order; where there is no clear order (alphabetically, chronologically or numerically) arrange the records in in an appropriate order e.g. chronological order by date

- ***DESCRIBE*** the records by documenting what you've done/found – this becomes your description of the records :
    - Creator; Series title; Sub series title; Items; Date range; Physical description; Access

- Re-house the records – de-metal all records; remove all inappropriate old housings e.g. old folders, plastic wallets, packets etc., and place the records in suitable archival quality envelopes, folders and boxes etc., See ***HOW TO 2 Preserving Paper documents*** and ***HOW TO 3 Preservation and storage of records – General.***

- RECORD which records are in what box – this is your Box list. Keep a copy of the box list with the records and keep a master copy on file with your Description sheet of the series. Write Record Type, destruction date and Access provision on the box. See ***HOW TO 6 Disposing of old records***

- Ensure all permanent records are transferred to the John Oxley Heritage Collection – State Library of Queensland with accompanying Series Descriptions and box lists. Keep a copy of the transfer documentation for filing.

- Ensure all temporary records are kept and destroyed in accordance with QRM Retention and Disposal Schedule.