

Searching for sources in archives

What is an archive?

Archives collect old materials that are judged worthy of being saved. Most of these are written source materials from government agencies, courts and other official offices, but some are posters, maps and photos. One can also find materials in archives from non-governmental sources (associations, firms) or residues from private people's estates (diaries, letters, speeches, photos ...), if these are considered valuable. In addition, old issues of local newspapers are collected.

Just as there are different kinds of libraries, there are different **types of archives**, depending on what is kept there:

- **Public-record archive:** stores especially written source material from public offices
- **Municipal archive:** stores historical materials from cities, townships, districts
- **Church archive:** stores, e.g., church books with notations about christenings, burials, weddings
- **Private archive:** stores documents belonging to private people or families that didn't make their way into municipal or public-record archives
- **Press / media archive:** stores particular types of media-related materials (films, radio contributions, newspapers, periodicals)
- **School archive:** belongs to a school and especially stores written source material
- **Specialized archive:** stores documents from particular companies, interest groups and parties; there are also archives pertaining to a limited subject (e.g., Berlin's Archiv der Jugendkulturen e.V. and Zurich's Sozialarchiv)

Types of archives



Check list for an archive visit

In order not to be disappointed on your first archive visit and come home empty-handed, you should keep the following advice in mind:

To prepare yourselves for your visit to an archive, you must:

- scan the available literature, limit your topic
- note many search terms on a keyword list
- establish the archive's business hours and research times
- clarify the archive's admittance conditions and terms of use
- make an appointment for an archive visit (Is there an archive pedagogue?)
- contact the archive through a letter or telephone call (see Work Sheet "Sample letter to an archive"). Adults can help you with this!

In the archive you must then:

- discuss the theme with an archive employee
- look through search resources and request archive materials using an order paper, on which the call number (location number) must be written
- always write down a document's call number and date on your own note paper
- order copies of the most important documents

Finally, there is the follow-up:

- rate the source documents critically
- check what information is missing and consider how to find it: through other archives, eyewitnesses, literature?

Sample letter to an archive

For establishing a first contact, you can write a letter according to the following sample:

Jane Searcher
Weststr. 12
12345 Neustadt

May 13, 2007

To:
The Stadtarchiv Neustadt
Ostweg 15
12345 Neustadt

Re: possibility of visiting the archive

Dear Sir or Madam,

In the context of the history competition "Young historians conduct on-site research," I am interested in the diaries of young women from the 1940s. I have already acquired information from my own family and circle of acquaintances, but I would like to expand my research further.

I wished to ask whether it would be possible for me to make an appointment to visit the archive in order to speak with one of your employees about my work and about the possibility of searching in your archive for other source materials.

On the Internet, I have already found out what your business hours are. It would be convenient for me to visit on an afternoon when your archive is open, but I could also make arrangements to come for a morning appointment.

I will phone you within the next few days, and thank you very much in advance for your help and interest.

Yours sincerely,

Jane Searcher