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Invisible Hands: Recognizing Archivists' Work to Make Records Accessible

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Introduction

Seasoned researchers know that it's always a good idea to contact an archives before visiting to do research--this ensures that needed collections will be available onsite during the actual visit to the archives, while allowing the researcher to begin a conversation with the archivist about any additional relevant resources available. Starting such a conversation (the "reference interview") with the archivist in advance will make a visit to the archives more efficient and fruitful. This reference role of archivists is generally understood, if not fully exploited, by most archival researchers.

For many researchers, however, the archivist's processing of collections, which includes all work done by the archivist to make a collection available to researchers, remains a mystery. The researcher may understand, for example, that certain preservation steps are taken with collections after they are received by the archives, but other steps taken with the collections are not always evident. We believe that if archival researchers know how to recognize the outcomes of archivists' processing and understand the principles behind processing decisions, they will have a better understanding of the archival materials they study.

Understanding archival theory and principles and knowing the best practices derived from them will help researchers anticipate potential problems and assess the potential usefulness of the archival materials they consult. It is especially important for researchers to know how to work with a repository's archivist if the materials they wish to examine are not yet processed. As an archivist (Sammie) and a researcher (Shirley) who worked together on a recent project, we've come to believe that if archival researchers can be better equipped to recognize the outcomes of archival practice, they will be able to better interpret the materials they study, and to thereby become better researchers. Our purpose in this chapter is to help researchers learn to recognize and understand the work of the archivist's "invisible hands." Using the processing of the James Berlin Papers,[1] a collection of documents created by rhetorician James Berlin during the course of his career, as a case study, we will explain how the two primary principles governing archival work—provenance and original order—inform archival processing practices from selection through description.

We will begin by describing the context for processing the James Berlin Papers, along with the goals of the processing project and its outcomes. Decisions made during the processing of the collection will be explained as they relate to making it physically and intellectually accessible to researchers. We also hope to illustrate the importance to researchers of learning more about the reasoning behind archivists' decision making and about how to recognize the ways a collection changes after passing through the invisible hands of the archivist. Researchers who understand what has guided archival decisions will be better prepared to ask the right questions about a collection and how it has been altered from the time it was acquired by the archives. With answers to these questions, researchers can feel more confident in drawing conclusions from a collection that may be used as evidence in their scholarly endeavors. Our hope is that we can help to spark a dialogue between our readers and the archivists with whom they work that will ultimately lead to better access to and research use of archival collections.

[1] A pdf of the finding aid for the James Berlin Papers is available at this URL: http://www.lib.purdue.edu/spcol/fa/pdf/berlin.pdf

Background of the Project

The Office of the Provost at Purdue University supports a fellowship program, the Faculty Program of Study in a Second Discipline, that offers faculty an opportunity to extend their scholarship through study in a separate field by providing released time for engaging in study on the West Lafayette campus. As an English department faculty member, Shirley won a fellowship for Spring 2006 for one semester's study of archival practice under Sammie's direction as the Purdue University Archivist in order to develop practical experience to complement an understanding of archival theory. As an archival researcher in the humanities, Shirley had published essays based on examination of archival materials related to rhetoric and composition and essays on theoretical issues related to records management and administration of writing programs and had taught two graduate seminars on documentation strategies for writing programs. Though she had been able to develop some knowledge of archival theory through informal study, she had not had an opportunity to study the theory in a systematic way or to develop any hands-on experience in archival processing, applying theoretical principles in specific, concrete contexts.

Shirley had three primary objectives for her program of study: 1) to develop sound practices in archival processing, such as accessioning, preservation, arrangement, and description; 2) to enhance her theoretical understanding of principles and issues in archival practice; and 3) to develop interdisciplinary connections between archival theory and rhetorical theory by working to articulate a theory of the archives as rhetorical practice. Though the Society of American Archivists has recognized the relevance to archivists of theory in areas such as sociology, philosophy, political science, law, accounting, anthropology, and economics, as well as science and the arts, the relevance of rhetorical theory to archival practices has not been explicitly recognized by the professional archivist community. Yet, because rhetorical theory addresses the creation, interpretation, and use of documents in specific contexts, it promises to be especially useful to archival practitioners.

As the Purdue University Archivist, Sammie's role in the fellowship project was to provide advice and guidance to Shirley in processing a specific collection, the James Berlin Papers. This included explanation of archives accessioning practices, including the legal transfer of the collection to the archival repository, along with guidelines for arranging, preserving, and describing the papers according to archival theory and principles. Sammie and Shirley met twice a week over the course of the semester to answer questions that arose relating to the project. Sammie provided guidance on ordering the correct types of preservation supplies and on creating the finding aid[2] (archival inventory) describing the contents of the papers. Although the primary goal of the project was to allow Shirley to gain hands-on experience processing archival materials, Sammie also benefited from the project by gaining a better understanding of the viewpoint of the researcher. Our essay is an outcome of those discussions.

The James Berlin Papers

Shirley chose to process the James Berlin Papers for her fellowship project. The Berlin Papers had been placed in her custody by Berlin's widow, Sandy, several years earlier. We will use Shirley's work on the project, under Sammie's supervision, as an example of the need for researchers to have an understanding of archivists' practices.

[2] A finding aid is "a tool that facilitates discovery of information within a collection of records." The finding aid is "a description of records that gives the repository physical and intellectual control over the materials and assists users to gain access to and understand the materials." From *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* by Richard Pearce-Moses. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005, page 168.

As most of our readers will know, James Berlin was an important scholar of the history of rhetoric and composition and a leading theorist of cultural studies composition pedagogies. He was also a member of the English Department at Purdue University when he died suddenly of a heart attack in February 1994. The James Berlin Papers that were the focus of Shirley's processing project comprise 7 cubic feet of materials from Berlin's academic career, including teaching materials, research materials, and collegial correspondence dated from 1978 through 1994, with the bulk of the materials dating from Berlin's work at Purdue from 1986 to 1994.

Understanding Provenance

To understand the materials in any archival collection, researchers must know as much as possible about their *provenance*, the chain of custody of the materials, including what happened to them (and when) from the time they were originally created up to the point of being accessioned or added to the archival repository. This will allow the researcher to evaluate the authenticity and integrity of the materials as evidence.

For example, knowing that the materials in the James Berlin Papers were placed in Shirley's custody in 1999 by Sandy Berlin, the widow of James Berlin, helps an archival researcher to establish their authenticity as reliable documents created by Berlin. Knowing they are the contents of the file cabinets in Berlin's faculty office on campus at the time of his unexpected death will help a researcher understand why most of the materials date from 1986 or later. More specifically, knowing that some of the teaching materials were removed from Berlin's office files and later returned by faculty colleagues who took over his classes within a few days of his death will help a researcher understand why a few folders are organized differently from the others.

General information about the provenance of a collection is usually included in the public finding aid for a collection; but often, the archivist or other staff will have access to additional, more specific information, and will be able to give a more detailed account of the collection's history. Many archival repositories maintain a "collection file" for each collection, in which, along with other relevant information, they include a more detailed account of the collection's provenance, in particular who among the staff has worked on the collection. There is even a good chance that the archives staff member whom a researcher consults will have been involved in acquiring the materials or will have contributed to some or all of the processing for the collection, and will be able to give a first hand account of some of its history. As Frank Burke has noted, in some cases, "the curator becomes the ultimate finding aid."[3]

In some cases, a researcher can also contribute to identifying the provenance of a collection by clarifying the relationships of previous owners of the collection. For example, sometimes a repository has records of a collection being donated by a particular person but does not know that person's relationship to the original creator[4] of the collection. In these instances, a researcher who is familiar with the background and family relationships of the creator of the collection can help clarify who the donor was and his or her relationship to the creator.

Researchers rely on the ability to draw conclusions about a person's life by examining the papers of that person. Items found in the person's papers are assumed to have been owned by the person and kept for some reason. These items can be used as evidence in learning about what types of subjects were important to the person, and can sometimes reveal information about a person's interests that may not appear in secondary sources such as biographies or encyclopedia entries. For these reasons, it is crucial that the papers of one individual or organization never be

[3] Burke, Frank G. *Research and the Manuscript Tradition.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1997. p. 55.
[4] "Creator" is the term archivists use for "author" or "artist."

intermingled with those created by another person or organization, even if the subjects within the papers are similar. This principle of provenance is one of the two most significant theories guiding archives work and has its roots in the beginnings of the archives profession.

During the French Revolution (1789-1799) there was a large increase in the creation and use of records. The French, recognizing that records such as land deeds were critical to protecting the rights of the public, sought to preserve the evidence contained in their records. They felt that the public had the right to examine the records produced and kept by their government. As a result, formal archival practice was established. The principle of provenance, or "respect des fonds" in French, was an outgrowth of the French Revolution and literally means "respect for the group." This principle is fundamental to contemporary archives work, and exists to protect the integrity and authenticity of archival records as evidence by retaining the nature of the relationship that exists among records by the same creator. Although the principle of provenance was a result of the French Revolution, archivists generally did not begin applying the principle to their work until the second half of the nineteenth century.[5] The impact of the French Revolution on the archives profession cannot be overstated, because out of it came the principle that the public had the right to access the records of its government. This increased governmental accountability to the people.

Understanding Original Order

The second foundational principle informing an archivist's work is the principle of respect for "original order," which refers to the original creator's arrangement of the materials. Like provenance, it is a principle that guides all professional archives work, and it exists for a similar reason: to document the relationships among the records themselves. Original order is

[5] Posner, Ernst. *Archives in the Ancient World*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003, page 6.

also important because the arrangement of a collection can sometimes reveal things about the person or organization that created and used the records.

Archivists take care to determine and maintain the original order to the extent possible given their responsibilities both to preserve the materials from deterioration and to make them accessible to researchers. Archivists do not impose their own organizational principles upon materials that are already organized, but rather devote their efforts to identifying and clarifying the organizational principles followed by the creator, recognizing that the arrangement itself may be of interest and significance to researchers. For archival researchers interested in rhetorical issues, original order may be of even greater interest than for other researchers because it can reflect the original context or rhetorical situation of the materials. It is critically important, then, for researchers to know whether original order has been maintained in the materials they examine.

For example, as was evident from the materials themselves, but was also confirmed by colleagues who worked closely with him, Berlin's professional papers—those related to his teaching, research, and faculty service—were organized into file folders that were titled by subject and filed in alphabetical order. When Shirley developed the plan for arranging the papers, Berlin's existing file order was maintained to the extent possible. Understanding how what was "possible" was determined can serve as a useful example for researchers unfamiliar with archival arrangement. Detailed information regarding how a collection's arrangement may have changed after being processed is typically not included in a publicly accessible finding aid, and researchers may wish to consult the archivist for these types of specifics.

It's perhaps self-evident that researchers from different disciplines come to archives with different kinds of questions and therefore need different kinds of information about the collections there. Rhetoric and composition researchers are no different. Because of their interest in discursive genres, rhetoric and composition researchers are likely to want more information about archival document types and forms. Because of their interest in rhetorical contexts, they are likely to have extensive and specific questions about the provenance of records, and be especially interested in the form in which records were originally created and the purpose for which they were created. They will also want as much information as possible about the history of how a collection has evolved from the time of the original creation of its contents up through processing decisions made by the archivists in whose custody they reside.

As any student of rhetoric is well aware, a knowledge of the rhetorical situation, or the context and events that gave rise to discourse, is critical to understanding that discourse. Researchers examining materials in a collection will draw inferences about the intellectual relationships among the materials from their physical relationships to each other. Materials in files organized alphabetically by subject will have a different relationship to one another than materials in files placed in chronological order. For example, Berlin arranged his folders containing copies of typescripts by academic colleagues alphabetically by the author's last name. He could have chosen other organizational methods—he might have ordered them by date of his receipt of them, or he might have organized them according to the subject of the manuscripts. One can imagine reasons either of these alternative orders might have been useful to Berlin as the original creator of the files, but the fact that he ordered them alphabetically by author's names tells us something about how he anticipated possibly consulting them at a future date, which in itself reflects Berlin's conceptual organization of intellectual content of the files: relationships among authors are more salient than relationships among subjects.

Because respect for the original order of archival materials is a fundamental principle of archival practice, determining whether and to what extent original order has been altered is one of the archivist's highest priorities in working with a collection. Determining the original order is a kind of educated guesswork based on the archivist's knowledge of the creator's life and activities and the circumstances of creation of the materials. This determination enables the archivist to make good decisions about appropriate arrangement and description and to make good judgments about re-filing materials that appear to be misfiled or removing materials that have no relevance to the life of the creator of the records. *Original order* is sometimes more a concept represented in an intellectual model of the collection (through the collection's finding aid) than it is a description based on actual physical proximity. Thus it is more important to "know" the original order of materials than to actually physically keep materials in their original order.

For the researcher, understanding this about the archivist's work will be critically important to knowing what conjectures can safely be drawn about the relationships between materials. Furthermore, as it should be clear, the researcher should consult the archivist to learn what she can about the rationale for the arrangement of collection materials. In addition to the public finding aid, the archivist will very likely also have access to the original container list created when the collection was accessioned and other accessioning and processing notes that will reveal the order the collection was in when it was received by the archives.

Determining who may have used the files and altered their original order after they left the creator's custody is not always an easy task, particularly when papers are kept by a family over an extended period of time or custodianship has changed between the time the creator organized the files and the time they were acquired by the archival repository. In some cases even the archivist will not be aware of how original order has been compromised prior to the materials arriving at the archives. A separate, but equally interesting, problem is the collection that arrives with no original order at all. The collection may have been organized in the past, but perhaps when the materials were packed they were jumbled together and switched around in order to make them fit better into boxes. Or worse, perhaps the creator had no discernable arrangement scheme—perhaps the creator knew how to locate his or her own files but the system was indecipherable for anyone else. In the interest of making the collection accessible, archivists will sometimes have to make choices about arranging these types of collections. When this happens, archivists rely on their training to guide them into arranging the collection in a way that is most likely to reflect the creator's own view of the relationships among materials. For this task, the archivist must "reconstruct" original order through researching the life and activities of the creator prior to establishment of an arrangement scheme. Most archivists will already have researched the creator anyway, in order to better understand the materials in the collection during processing or description.

Because significance can often be attributed to the order of materials, it is critically important that when researchers use archival collections they maintain the order in which they find materials even if they cannot identify an ordering principle or the original order appears to have been disrupted. Otherwise, the next person who consults the materials—who may well be the researcher himself or herself, back for a second look—will be misled. If a researcher believes materials have been disarranged, he should call it to the attention of the archivist, who will be able to make an informed judgment about the order.

Archival Preservation Principles

While archival preservation materials and techniques vary, some practices are standard; a researcher might, in fact, be able to recognize whether or not a collection has been processed by a qualified archivist by noting the preservation measures that have been taken. While techniques and materials change with improvements in technology and accelerated aging tests, archivists' decisions about appropriate preservation steps are informed by two general principles: chemical and physical damage to materials should be prevented, stopped, or slowed where possible, without undermining the integrity of the records' content and form; and, to the extent possible, preservation steps should serve to make materials more accessible to researchers rather than less accessible. Archivists follow the motto of conservators and medical practitioners when considering treatment: "First do no harm." No action an archivist or conservator takes to preserve, repair, or stabilize archival material should be responsible for harm to the material over the long term, and ideally any preservation steps taken should be reversible. For this reason, only specific types of adhesives and other conservation supplies are used when treating archival materials. The idea is not just to repair a torn page, but also to ensure that the materials used in that repair do not cause future damage such as staining or embrittlement of the page over time.

Some of the preservation steps taken with the James Berlin Papers will illustrate the application of these principles. The removal of metal paper clips and staples was a high-priority task because, after ten years, they had already begun to leave rust deposits on the papers. Removing staples and paper clips introduces some risk of separating materials that were originally together, but that can be ameliorated by replacing metal fasteners with plastic paper clips or folding acid-free, lignin-free paper around packets of papers that must remain together. Berlin's teaching materials included a number of newspaper clippings of articles related to the economy and education; because the high acidic content of newsprint causes it to deteriorate quickly—and to damage other paper it touches, photocopies of these clippings were made and the originals were discarded. Though photocopying and then discarding the original clippings might seem to undermine the integrity of the original materials, it was justified for three reasons: 1) the newsprint would damage the other materials, 2) newspapers are mass produced and thus clippings have informational value but not artifactual value, and 3) the clippings themselves were not created by Berlin. The *collection* of the clippings—that is, their selection and organization--was created by Berlin, and the integrity of that collection could be maintained with photocopies of the clippings.

Following standard practices and using standard materials, Shirley also replaced original folders and cardboard file boxes with acid-free, lignin-free folders and boxes, which slow the natural aging process of paper. These steps also make the materials much more accessible to researchers, because the standard folder sizes and uniform folder tab length minimize the likelihood of overlooking a file and the archival manuscript boxes are a convenient size for transporting and reviewing.

Researchers need to be able to distinguish preservation steps taken by archivists from those taken by the records creator in order to avoid jumping to erroneous conclusions about the format or condition of materials. For example, in most cases, creators do not use or have access to professional archival preservation supplies such as acid-free, lignin free folders, so their presence in a collection suggests a certain level of processing work by an archivist. As with many of the other steps of processing, some account of the preservation measures is likely to be provided in the collection file maintained by the archivist. Even if this is not the case, an archivist who does not know first hand what preservation steps were taken during processing will very likely still be able to distinguish professional preservation work from steps taken by the records creator and will be able to advise a researcher who inquires about the preservation steps that have been taken. Researchers who become aware of preservation risks within an archival collection, such as torn pages, staples or metal paper clips, rubber bands, highly acidic newspaper or other damaging materials should bring these to the attention of the archivist. Because damage can occur when removing rusty staples and similar items, if you haven't been trained to do so, don't attempt to remove such items yourself.

Archival Arrangement

As we explained in our earlier discussion of original order, the arrangement of archival materials is determined to a great extent by their creator and his or her context. In this section we will provide several examples of how original order governed specific arrangement decisions for the Berlin Papers. Because James Berlin was a college professor, his professional work throughout his career had been assigned to the three general categories of research, teaching, and service. Regardless of the degree to which Berlin himself might have been able to intellectually integrate his work across the categories or might have found the categories problematic, these categories organized his professional life insofar as he was assigned to specific classes each semester, served on specific committees, and worked on specific research projects. Each of these activities generated its own discrete materials; thus, the traditional triad for college faculty work also informed Shirley's decisions and choices for the archival arrangement of these materials.

A second example of how the creator's original order determined arrangement of the collection materials is in Shirley's decision to arrange the teaching materials by course number after dividing them into groups based on the institution at which Berlin taught the courses. This division by institution could have easily been placed in chronological order. But because Berlin often re-used teaching materials when he taught a course numerous times, grouping materials by course was more in keeping with how Berlin himself would have arranged the files, so that determined Shirley's final decision about arrangement. Yet, because chronology is relevant, Shirley drew from various sources in the collection materials to create a chronological list of courses taught by Berlin from 1981 through 1993. That list became part of the collection file and can be consulted by any user of the collection in the future, if he or she knows to ask for it. That list is not filed with the collection itself because it was not created by Berlin, and a researcher is unlikely to learn of its existence if she doesn't ask about the contents of the repository's own files on the collection—another reason a researcher should not skip the reference interview with the archives staff or forgo an onsite visit to the archives if possible.

Archival Description

"Description" is the general term archivists use to name the various documents they compose in the process of creating a narrative account of the contents of a collection. Archivists prefer the term "description" to the library term, "cataloguing," because describing archival materials involves more than creating catalog records, a complexity that rhetoric and composition researchers can certainly appreciate. Archival description can include creating finding aids, collection guides, MARC records, encoded archival description (EAD), and other files and/or documents describing the collections themselves. Description is not simply a matter of listing the contents of boxes and folders; its purpose is to record the information necessary to composing a narrative account of the collection. In other words, description documents provide the information from which a story about the collection and its contents could be constructed by providing information about the creator of the documents and about the context of their creation.

Usually, this work of description begins at the point of accessioning materials into the archival repository's holdings, with a brief and general statement noting the number and size of the containers and their contents and continues through the creation of a finding aid prepared with the audience of potential users or researchers in mind. Several factors govern an archivist's decisions about the extent of description, and an awareness of these factors can help a researcher to accurately interpret the finding aids and other descriptive documents. Some factors are related to available resources such as staff expertise and time for doing description, which often translates into financial resources. Here again, the more communication between researcher and archivist, the better the choices made. Other factors are related to the archivist's assessment of potential users' interests in the collection materials. Effectively, the archivist must continually be making cost-benefit analyses in order to make choices about where to direct limited resources.

The purpose for description is to let researchers know the general content of the collection, not the content of individual documents within the collection, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two. For example, Shirley had to decide whether or not to mention the existence of copies of William Blundell's *Wall Street Journal* article "The Days of the Cowboy are Marked by Danger, Drudgery, and Low Pay" in various files in the Berlin papers, since she knew that a researcher familiar with Berlin's work would be likely to immediately recognize this title as a text used in the writing courses in which Berlin was developing a cultural studies pedagogy for composition studies.[6]

[6] Berlin discusses his use of this article in his *Rhetoric Review* essay "Poststructuralism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom."

The location of multiple copies of the “Days of the Cowboy” essay in the Berlin papers also serves to illustrate that while some materials in a collection have intrinsic value, other materials are important only because of their relationship to the collection’s creator. While the copies of the essay are self-evidently not one-of-a-kind materials, their presence among the teaching materials for one of Berlin’s courses has evidentiary value because it could be interpreted as evidence that the course was one in which Berlin used a cultural studies pedagogy.

The “Days of the Cowboy” essay also illustrates how the archivist’s familiarity with the creator’s work can influence decisions about processing a collection, from appraisal through arrangement, to description. As a specialist in contemporary rhetoric and composition studies, Shirley was familiar with Berlin’s published scholarship, and as a Purdue faculty member, she was familiar with the curriculum of the graduate rhetoric and composition program and the mentoring program for first-year composition instructors in which Berlin taught and with the daily practices of life in the English Department. This meant that her context for identifying, interpreting, and evaluating collection contents was especially rich. Often, the archivist who processes a collection does not have the advantage of working from so rich a context, and when that is the case, researchers using a collection may discover that they can provide valuable information that can be used to revise or supplement finding aids.

Decisions about describing items found in archival collections must be made throughout the processing phase, so archivists must be trained to recognize items in collections that are either confidential by law or may infringe on the privacy rights of individuals. For example, while processing materials, archivists often must make decisions about how extensively to describe materials that are confidential. This is particularly important for materials that can legally be made accessible after the passage of sufficient time. The public finding aid should not include any information that would effectively undermine the confidentiality of the materials, yet enough information must be included to help ensure that potential users know of the materials' existence if appropriate. For example, the James Berlin Papers included confidential materials of several different kinds, each requiring a different means of arrangement and description. Information about students' course enrollment and grades is protected by law, so Shirley removed course rosters from folders of teaching materials in order to make the remainder of the folder contents accessible to researchers. Separation sheets noting the removal of the rosters were placed in each folder, and the rosters were then collected in a separate folder and filed with other confidential materials from the Berlin papers.[7] Other confidential materials found in the Berlin Papers included tenure and promotion reviews Berlin wrote for colleagues around the country. Such letters are typically considered confidential by their writers and readers. Though individual institutions' actual practices in this regard vary, and typically a review writer would be informed about whether his or her letter would be treated confidentially, the Berlin papers included no information about which of these reviews Berlin had written with the expectation that they would be kept confidential. Therefore, Shirley decided that all of them should be filed with the confidential materials and remain inaccessible for seventy years, a standard length of time used by archivists for restricting information that may infringe on privacy rights, and also a sufficient amount of time to ensure that they would have no potential for affecting the professional careers of their subjects, as all are likely to be deceased by the time 70 years has passed. For these materials, however, no separation sheet was filled out and left behind with remaining materials because to do so would be a clear sign that such a letter had been written, and thus an important

[7] "Separation sheets" are forms that let the researcher know that an item or items were originally part of the folder's contents but were removed during processing. Ideally, separation sheets should identify the reason for the removal and the new location for the items that were separated.

element of the confidentiality of the process of tenure and promotion review would be undermined. Instead of preparing separation sheets for each of the files, Shirley prepared a list of the folders of tenure and promotion reviews and related materials that were placed with confidential materials and included this list in the collection file. This provides an example of an instance in which consultation with the archivist, who will have access to the contents of the collection folder, could be particularly helpful to a researcher.

The collection folder often contains additional details about the collection that will be of interest to researchers, and especially likely to be significant to scholars of rhetoric and composition. Information about the history of the collection, such as the details of its acquisition, and rationales for processing decisions such as arrangement choices are often included in the collection file and can provide explanations for aspects of a collection that might otherwise be puzzling or mysterious. For example, the collection file for the James Berlin Papers includes an account of Shirley's work with the collection over a span of several years, explaining that when she first received Berlin's papers from Sandy Berlin in 1998, she worked with several graduate students in a "Documentation Strategies in Writing Programs" seminar to develop an initial general inventory of the materials, place them in sturdy standard sized cardboard file storage boxes, and remove paper clips that were rusting. That account clarifies that though the seminar members' work focused primarily on developing recommendations for processing and included only minimal hands-on work with the materials, Shirley did have a general idea of the overall contents of the collection.

When Shirley's fellowship project began in 2006, her first step in developing a description of the collection was to create a complete list of the file folders (using folder names already assigned by James Berlin or others) in each box. The second step was to develop more detailed notes on the folder contents that would be used later in the scope and content notes for the collection. It is important to note that listing each item in the collection was not part of the project; instead, notes were taken on types of materials found in the collection, inclusive dates, overall subjects included, and so forth. Once that was done, Shirley had the basis for identifying suitable series titles for describing the arrangement and content of the papers. Though some of the materials had clearly been displaced, most of Berlin's original organization seemed to be still evident, and suggested the following series as the major components of the collection:

> **1. NEH Seminar Materials, 1978-1879.** Documents Berlin's participation in the seminar. Included are meeting handouts, notes, and readings.
>
> **2. Teaching Materials, 1981-1994.** Documents Berlin's teaching career, with most materials related to his tenure at Purdue University (1987-1993). Included are materials related to his development of a cultural studies composition pedagogy for graduate teaching assistants.
>
> **3. Research Materials, 1984-1994.** Includes handwritten research notes from composition-related journals, annotated copies of articles, unpublished drafts and conference papers.
>
> **4. Collegial Correspondence, 1979-1994.** Includes letters and notes from colleagues and copies of works in progress sent to Berlin for review.
>
> **5. Faculty Governance and Community Activism, 1987-1994.** Includes faculty meeting minutes, proposals, and materials related to governance and activism.

6. Confidential Student Records, Correspondence, and Committee Work, 1981-1994. Contains student records (course rosters and grade sheets, dissertation prospectuses, exams); letters of recommendation; tenure and promotion reviews; and confidential notes from faculty searches.[8]

Shirley ordered the series according to best archival practice, by ranking the series according to importance to the creator (James Berlin); she therefore placed materials that represented the creator's overall achievement and contributions first. In addition, materials created by Berlin, such as his teaching materials, were ranked higher in the hierarchy of the finding aid than materials not created by him, such as the faculty governance materials. Due to the importance of Berlin's attendance at the NEH seminar to the field of rhetoric and composition, this series was placed first.

Familiarity with standard archival description practices benefits researchers by allowing them to more efficiently locate the information they are seeking in typical archival finding aids. A researcher needs to know the various documents of description and their purpose in order to know what kinds of information can be gleaned from them. First of all, it's important to understand that even a descriptive document so apparently straightforward as a list of folder titles is a report on the archivist's examination of the materials, and will be shaped by the sense the archivist is making of the apparent order and organization of the folders. Thus, a finding aid is a text that is not transparent but must be interpreted by a researcher. At the same time, standard practices of description have evolved, and a set of conventions are developing—in part as a result of technology's effects on the profession's descriptive practices—and the capabilities for

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[8] Purdue University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections. "Inventory to the James Berlin Papers," 2006, http://www.lib.purdue.edu/spcol/fa/pdf/berlin.pdf

developing searchable electronic databases radically alter researchers' virtual access to finding aids, and, in some cases, digital versions of documents themselves.

A finding aid may be viewed as a map of a collection, designed to help the user find his or her way. The main purpose of the finding aid is to let researchers know that a collection exists, where it can be found, and how to access it; ideally, the finding aid will also provide a general idea of the contents of the collection so users can judge the relevance of the materials to their research projects. However, it must be kept in mind that archivists are trained to describe collections at different levels: fonds (collection or record group level), series (major categories within the collection), box (general summary of each container's contents), or folder (general summary of each folder's contents). Though researchers are usually interested in specific items in a collection, archivists are strongly discouraged from describing collections at the item level.[9] Researchers may wonder why archivists do not describe in detail each letter, photograph, artifact, diary, or other item in a collection. After all, it is undoubtedly easier for the researcher to know if the exact item he or she may be seeking as crucial to his or her thesis is contained in the collection. The main reason archivists do not describe to this level is resources—there are too few staff members to document every piece of paper in a typical archival collection, which usually includes thousands of individual documents, photos, and related materials. This can be likened to the cataloging of book: when books are described in library catalogs they are described in an overall summary—each page of the book is not described because it would be time and cost prohibitive. The same is true for archival collections—they are most often described as an overarching unit, with some detail added but usually not to the individual page

[9] Museum professionals differ from archivists in this manner, instead relying on their training for describing each item in their collections.

level. Ultimately, the researcher must be willing to invest time into finding details that may not be included in a summary catalog record.

Most archival repositories are understaffed and at the same time staff face an enormous backlog of unprocessed collections that are practically inaccessible to researchers due to their lack of description. The archivist must then choose between devoting limited staff resources to creating a small number of detailed, item-level finding aids for select collections and leaving the bulk of the collections undescribed and therefore inaccessible; or, using staff time to create quicker, more summarized descriptions or finding aids of the bulk of the collections but relying on researchers to delve into the collections themselves to discover particular documents. Neither choice is ideal, but archivists usually decide to spread out their staff resources over many collections rather than spending all of their staff time describing in great detail only a select grouping of collections in their repository. Researchers should be aware of the benefits of this—after all, if the archives devoted the bulk of its staff resources to describing only a select few collections, what collections might remain invisible to researchers because they are not described or cataloged yet? Of course, archivists must prioritize which collections to process first, and to what level of detail each collection will be processed. In prioritizing processing, the archivist considers the mission, goals, and objectives of his or her institution, the collection development policy that provides guidance and outlines collection strengths, and the current and potential future use of the collections themselves. In addition, some collections are more problematic for processing due to their size, the nature of their content, their lack of arrangement, or the condition of the collection. For example, if a collection was in complete disarray and would require considerable time and effort to put in useable order, the collection might be lower priority for processing due to time and staff constraints. Often the collections that have the highest potential for research use are processed earlier out of a commitment to accessibility. The level of processing will also differ between collections. For example, collections that contain unusually valuable documents, such as autographs by celebrities or historic figures, may be described at a more detailed level for security purposes—so that if an item is missing the archivist will have a record that it at one time was part of the collection. And collections that are digitized, as more and more are each year, are often described in more detail.

Researchers need to understand that more than thirty years ago typical finding aids appeared to be created as much for the archivists themselves as they were for researchers. For example, many older finding aids included numerous abbreviations that only archivists could decipher. This is because in the past serious researchers would usually visit the archival repository and speak directly to the archivist about what the collections contained that might be of relevance to their research. The archivist, then, would often keep notes and supporting documents about a collection that would help him or her assist the researcher in using the collection. Over time, however, archivists began to review the finding aids they were creating—they began to compare differences in finding aids created by different repositories and they began focusing on making the finding aids easier for researchers to use. In other words, attempts were made to use less archival jargon, improve the format and layout of finding aids, and to include more helpful information for researchers so they could work more independently and not have to rely on the archivist for every bit of information about the collection. Now that finding aids are often posted on the Internet, their level of descriptive content, visual design, and layout are more important than ever, since many researchers are likely to refer to them without consulting the archivist first. It is especially interesting for rhetoric and composition scholars to see the changes that have taken place in finding aids since the creation of the Internet, and to acknowledge the dramatic increase in researcher queries for particular collections that may have not been used heavily in the past before the finding aids for those collections were made available online. Even with these changes, however, a researcher should not forego direct consultations with the archivists in whose custody the research materials are held.

Researchers should be aware that various finding aids/descriptive documents created at the time of original accessioning of materials for current audiences or research situations may not comprehensively address all subjects of interest to researchers of today and tomorrow. Archivists must base their decisions about what aspects of a collection need to be mentioned on their assumptions about who is likely to be using the collection and for what purpose. As research topics grow and change over time, finding aids created decades ago may or may not address current research topics such as women’s studies, ethnic studies, and so forth.

Making Effective Use of Archival Finding Aids

By becoming familiar with the typical components and layout of finding aids, researchers can more efficiently and effectively utilize finding aids for locating the information they are seeking. Although finding aids differ greatly across archival repositories in form, style, layout, and language, good finding aids are alike in that they contain certain basic elements: introductory/administrative information; biographical/historical sketch of the author or creator of the collection; scope and content note providing a brief overall summary of the collection; and a container list or inventory of the contents of the collection.

The introductory/administrative section includes information on how the collection is to be used; for example, if there are any restrictions on access to the collection. Often archival collections are stored outside the main repository in offsite storage, due to space restrictions. A good finding aid will let researchers know if they need to contact the archives in advance of their visit to allow time to retrieve offsite materials. The administrative section of a finding aid may also include information on how the collection was acquired—in other words, its provenance, which may be of interest to researchers.

The biographical/historical sketch is usually a brief biography or history of the person or organization that created the materials in the archival collection or brought them together as a collection. Researchers who are already familiar with this information may wish to skip over this general introduction to the author. Sometimes archivists will include a timeline relating to the person or organization and this may be helpful to researchers.

The purpose of the scope and content note is to provide a quick summary to the overall collection. It will include information on how the collection is arranged, a description of the series or major parts within the collection, any major subject areas or important people or events covered, a range of inclusive dates for the collection, and types of materials included, such as documents, photographs, artifacts, and so forth.

The "heart" of the finding aid is the container list or inventory. This is where the contents of the boxes, series, and/or folders will be listed out in greater detail. Although it is rare to include listings of actual items in the collection, some repositories do provide this information. The container list or inventory is often the first place a researcher will look for the information he or she is seeking, and it is helpful to know that in most archival finding aids this information is located towards the end of the finding aid document. A researcher seeking something very specific in the collection—such as a letter with a particular date from a particular correspondent—will find it most helpful to scan the series descriptions first, to see if “correspondence” is a series in the collection, and if so where it will be located in the more detailed container list.

Finally, although it is rare, some finding aids include indices that list personal and corporate names and topical subjects. These are often found at the end of the finding aid, after the container list. Often different archives describe or catalog their holdings differently.

Conclusion

The project of processing the James Berlin Papers presented a unique opportunity for a researcher and an archivist to work together to understand each other’s perspectives when approaching archival collections. Reflecting on the experience of processing the James Berlin Papers, Shirley felt that the most important insight she gained was to recognize how her decisions about processing had to be informed by knowledge and understanding of the materials themselves. Because archival materials are one-of-a-kind, there is no one right way to arrange or describe them, and the archivist will always have to make his or her own decisions about how to proceed, informed by an understanding of the materials, their creator, and the context of their creation. Though professional archivists have, over time, developed a set of agreed-upon best practices that continue to evolve as technologies evolve and be refined as historical understanding is refined, those best practices are more like guidelines and principles than like a rulebook.

Shirley also learned how time and labor-intensive the work of archival processing is. Not counting the time she spent re-reading some of Berlin’s publications or the time spent reading about archival theory and practice in the professional literature, Shirley devoted about 100 hours to work on physically arranging and describing the James Berlin Papers. She acknowledges that as a novice she worked less efficiently than a seasoned professional archivist would, because she hadn't determined the most streamlined procedures for handling materials. But she also felt that she lost some time when she would on occasion revert out of her novice archivist's role and back into her more familiar role as researcher. She would often find that she was reviewing materials more for the researcher's purpose of answering specific questions or analyzing documents for evidence to support arguments than for the archivist's purpose of identification and description.

Shirley also found that it took time to learn how to do the appropriate level or degree of description. She learned that appropriate description of folder contents was not a matter of listing every item in the folder, but of characterizing the folder contents in a way that would help a researcher locate the materials if they were of interest. To do this, of course, she had to construct this figure of the "researcher" from her own experience of research, from her knowledge of the significance of Berlin's work in contemporary composition and rhetoric, and from her knowledge of the contents of the James Berlin Papers themselves.

Shirley is now much better able to understand that the professional archivist's intellectual work is comprised of a series of judgment calls from accessioning materials to providing access to those materials. Of course, archivists must make judgments about their priorities for expending their always limited funds, time, and staff. Yet even in an ideal world of limitless resources, archivists would still have to make choices about how to arrange and describe those materials to best reflect their original state. And ideally, the outcome of those choices would be finding aids that were so extensive (yet easy to read) and so precisely attuned to multiple users' interests as to seem transparently composed, so that readers would need no further help finding materials. Thus, ironically, under ideal circumstances, the archivist's best work might well be invisible to most researchers.

For her part on the project, Sammie learned how rhetoric and composition researchers differ from most researchers in the amount of context and detail they require about steps taken during processing archival collections. While the average researcher may not care how a collection was acquired by the archival repository, or why the collection is organized a particular way, or what preservation steps have been taken by the archivist, it became clear to Sammie that rhetoricians in fact do need this information for drawing conclusions from their research. In addition, as Sammie discussed archives work in more detail with Shirley, she (Sammie) began to think about how exposing the details of the archivist's often "invisible" work might benefit the archives profession itself. For example, by explaining what decisions have been made when processing a collection, and what theories and principles guided those decisions, the archivist is not only better able to justify her actions but also to illustrate to researchers the amount of time, resources, and expertise needed to make collections accessible. In addition, if archivists can work to include more information in the collection's own finding aid about the steps that have been taken in processing a collection, this will increase the accountability of the archivist's work by presenting it for critique and discussion, while also preventing false conclusions being drawn by researchers who may assume that steps taken by the archivist were in fact taken by the creator or author of the papers.

Many researchers may not understand that, unlike file clerks, archivists base their actions on not only their practical training for processing collections and describing them but also the theoretical foundation of the archives profession. Archivists must themselves be good researchers to be effective archivists; after all, how can an archivist adequately write a biographical sketch of the records creator without researching the creator's life? How can the archivist reconstruct the original order of the creator's papers without understanding the different facets of the creator's activities? Archivists often feel undervalued, but perhaps by documenting more of the work they do in publicly accessible finding aids they will achieve more recognition for their efforts.

In addition, the profession as a whole should open itself up for study by being more forthright about steps taken in processing collections. Just as the archives profession was an outgrowth of the need to make the government accountable to its people, by offering evidence of its activities through access to its official records, the archives community must be accountable for its actions. This can only happen when archivists are more forthcoming about the steps they take processing collections. This is not to say that archivists as a rule purposefully seek to hide their actions from those outside the profession; instead, it has been a result of archivists' assumptions that researchers do not have the time or inclination to be interested in that level of detail.

We hope this brief explanation of professional archivists' work will help our readers to see the extent and significance of the often invisible work archivists do every day to preserve and make collections accessible for research, and perhaps to better understand why so many archival collections remain, for now, "hidden" to researchers as they await description. If nothing else, we hope that our essay will prompt a dialogue between researchers and archivists that will ultimately result in increased accessibility and use of archival collections—bringing the work of archivists' invisible hands within reach of many more researchers' hands.

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Purdue University Libraries, Archives and Special Collections. "Inventory to the James Berlin Papers," 2006.

Appendix: Sample pages from the finding aid for the James Berlin papers

PURDUE UNIVERSITY

INVENTORY TO THE JAMES BERLIN PAPERS, 1978-1994

PURDUE UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

LIBRARIES

http://www.lib.purdue.edu/spcol/

Revised: December 8, 2006
Compiled By: Shirley K. Rose

Descriptive Summary

Creator	Berlin, James, 1942-1994
Title	James Berlin Papers
Date Span	1978-1994
Abstract	Papers relating to the academic career of James Berlin, Professor of English at Purdue University and major figure in the development of cultural studies pedagogy in rhetoric and composition.
Quantity	7 cubic feet
Language	English
Repository	Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries

Administrative Information

Access	Collection is open for research. The collection is stored offsite; 24 hours notice is required to access the collection. One box of confidential student records and peer evaluations is restricted from access until 2064.
Preferred Citation	James Berlin Papers, Archives and Special Collections, Purdue University Libraries
Copyright Notice	Rights transferred to Purdue University by Sandy Berlin, June 2006
Acquisition	Donated by Sandy Berlin, wife of James Berlin, June 2006. Papers were transferred from Berlin's office at Purdue University and from his home in West Lafayette, Indiana to Archives and Special Collections in June 2006.
Accession Number	20060619
Location	HKRP 340
Processed By	Shirley K. Rose, 2006

Subject Headings

Persons
Berlin, James

Organizations
Purdue University- Department of English

Topics
Cultural studies theory
Cultural studies pedagogy
Composition studies
Writing instruction
Rhetoric- history of
Rhetorical theory
Composition theory

Biographical Sketch of James Berlin

James Berlin was a faculty member in the Department of English at Purdue University from 1987 to 1994. He was a nationally renowned educator and scholar in rhetoric and composition, valued for his leadership in the development of a cultural studies approach to teaching writing. He was also known for his scholarship on the history of rhetoric and composition theory.

Berlin was born in 1942 in Hamtramck, Michigan. He attended St. Florian High School, where he played football and basketball. He entered Central Michigan University on a football scholarship, receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree and graduating summa cum laude in 1964. Berlin began teaching in elementary schools in Flint and Detroit, Michigan. In 1969 he entered graduate school at The University of Michigan, working towards a degree in English. He received his Master of Arts degree from Michigan in 1970, and his Ph.D. in Victorian literature from there in 1975. His doctoral dissertation was on the relation of German Idealism to Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold.

After he received his Ph.D. he accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Composition at Wichita State University (1975 until 1981). While at Wichita State, Berlin served as the first director of the Kansas Writing Project. Berlin later worked as Associate Professor of English at University of Cincinnati (1981-1985), where he was also Director of Freshman English. In 1985 he joined the faculty of the University of Texas at Austin as a Visiting Associate Professor of English; at the same time he was serving as a visiting professor at Penn State University. Berlin joined the Purdue University faculty as Professor of English in 1987.

Berlin was a member of the National Council of Teachers of English, the Modern Language Association, the Ohio Council of Teachers of English and Language Arts, the College English Association of Ohio, and the Rhetoric Society of America. He published numerous journal articles on rhetoric and teaching composition, and was the author of *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* (1984) and *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985* (1987). Berlin died suddenly of a heart attack on February 2, 1994. He was survived by his wife, Sandy, and his sons Chris and Dan.

Scope and Contents of the Collection

The James Berlin Papers (1978-1994; 7 cubic feet) contain papers and other materials created or collected by James Berlin during his academic career, with an especially extensive representation of his work during his years as a Professor of English at Purdue University (1987-1994). The Berlin Papers include research and writing notes, instructor's class notes and other teaching records, as well as correspondence with a large and varied group of scholarly colleagues. The collection generally reflects the state of Berlin's academic files at the time of his death in 1994.

The papers document Berlin's participation in the 1978-1979 National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on rhetoric invention led by Richard Young at Carnegie-Mellon University. This seminar has been recognized as among the most significant events in the early development of the contemporary field of rhetoric and composition studies. The bulk of the papers relate to Berlin's work in developing a cultural studies composition pedagogy, particularly materials from seminars in Purdue's graduate program in rhetoric and composition and from mentoring graduate teaching assistants in Purdue's first-year composition program.

The papers also include copies of articles and book chapters Berlin used for his research; the majority of these contain Berlin's marginalia. The papers also include extensive correspondence with Berlin's academic colleagues, who often sent Berlin drafts of their scholarly works in progress. Materials related to Berlin's work on faculty committees at Purdue University include minutes and notes from committee meetings and activities. Berlin was a member of the School of Liberal Arts Senate when it was reviewing the proposal for its major curriculum revision "Curriculum 2000," a member of the English Department Policy Committee, and a member of departmental committees related to the development of composition and professional writing curricula.

Confidential materials such as student records, letters of recommendation, and tenure and promotion reviews have been separated into one restricted box. Restrictions on access to these materials will be lifted in the year 2064.

The arrangement of the papers reflects Berlin's original order, with a few exceptions. Teaching related materials from Berlin's papers were used and subsequently returned by faculty members who taught Berlin's classes after his unexpected and sudden death; thus, the original order of these materials cannot be certain. Berlin's handwritten research notes have been organized chronologically. Readings included in Berlin's research materials are organized alphabetically by subject or author, reflecting Berlin's own folder titles and order.

The papers are divided into six series:

1. NEH Seminar Materials, 1978-1979 (0.5 cubic feet)

The series documents Berlin's participation in the National Endowment for the Humanities year-long seminar in twentieth century rhetorical theory led by Richard Young at Carnegie Mellon University. Types of materials include Berlin's reading and discussion notes from the seminar, copies of assigned readings, and other materials developed by seminar participants.

2. Teaching Materials, 1981-1994 (2.5 cubic feet)

The teaching materials document Berlin's teaching career from 1981 to 1994, which the bulk of the materials relating to his graduate teaching at Purdue University from 1987 to 1993. Included are materials related to his development of a cultural studies pedagogy for graduate teaching assistants whom he mentored in the first-year composition program at Purdue and materials related to graduate seminars in rhetoric and composition. Types of materials include syllabi, exams, lecture and discussion notes, and copies of course readings.

3. Research Materials, 1984-1994 (1.5 cubic feet)

The series includes handwritten research notes from an extensive historical review of composition-related journals, annotated copies of printed scholarly articles and book chapters, and unpublished drafts and conference papers. Included in the papers are numerous note pads filled with Berlin's research for his publications *Writing Instruction in Nineteenth-Century American Colleges* and *Rhetoric and Reality: Writing Instruction in American Colleges, 1900-1985.*

4. Collegial Correspondence, 1979-1994 (1 cubic foot)

Items in the series include letters and notes from national and international academic colleagues as well as copies of works in progress Berlin's colleagues sent to him for review.

5. Faculty Governance and Community Activism, 1987-1994 (0.5 cubic feet)

Faculty committee meeting minutes, proposals developed by faculty committees, and other materials related to university community governance and activism in which Berlin participated are included in the series.

6. Confidential Materials, 1981-1994 (1 cubic foot)

Confidential materials include student records such as grade sheets and examinations, confidential collegial correspondence such as letters of recommendation, tenure and promotion reviews, and confidential committee materials such as notes on candidates applying for faculty positions.

Preservation Note

All materials have been housed in acid-free, lignin-free folders and boxes. All newsprint has been photocopied and original newspaper clippings have been discarded.

Separations or Transfers of Materials

Confidential student records, letters of recommendation, peer reviews and candidate evaluations have been separated and placed together in a restricted box.

INVENTORY OF THE COLLECTION

Box 1
Series 1: NEH Seminar Materials, 1977-1979

NEH Seminar Notes, 1977 [notebook]
NEH Seminar Notes, 1978 [notebook]
NEH Seminar Readings and Assignments, 1978-1979 [four folders]

Box 2
Series 2: Teaching Materials, 1980-1994

Subseries 1: Prior to Purdue University, 1981-1987

English 825, Wichita State University, undated
English 826, Theories of Rhetoric, Wichita State University, 1981
Director of Freshman English, University of Cincinnati, 1981-1987
E 360M, University of Cincinnati, 1985-1986
Theory and Practice of Composition, University of Cincinnati, Fall 1986
English 730, Teaching College English, University of Cincinnati, 1981-1986
English 325M, University of Texas at Austin, Fall 1985 [materials appear to have been used again in PU English 304]
ENGL 597B and E 387M, Twentieth Century Rhetoric, 1986
ENGL 382, History of Literary Criticism, University of Cincinnati, 1987
English 103, University of Cincinnati, Summer 1987
English 489, Advanced Composition, University of Cincinnati, Spring 1987

Box 3
Series 2: Teaching Materials, 1980-1994

Subseries 2: Purdue University, 1987-1993

Mentoring materials, 1987-1993
- Orientation, 1987- 1990
- Mentoring, 1987-1990
- English 102, 1988
- English 102CS, 1992-1993
- English 304, Advanced Composition, 1990-1991
- English 502, Fall 1989
- English 502, Spring 1993
- Orientation, 1991-1992
- Orientation, Fall 1992
- English 596, Cultural Studies and Rhetorical Studies course proposal, undated