

What are archives?

The term 'archives'

The term 'archives' can mean:

- records that are preserved permanently because of their enduring value
- the building, room or storage area where archival material is kept
- an organisation responsible for the care and control of archival material

This fact sheet discusses archives as records.

Are all records archives?

No. All archives are records, but not all records become archives. Government agencies, individuals and organisations create and accumulate records; these include files and reports, maps, plans, photographs, films, videotapes, sound recordings, optical disks and computer databases. Many of these records are destroyed once their usefulness for current purposes ceases. Those preserved because of their enduring value are called archives.

How are archives selected?

Only if records meet certain criteria are they considered to be of enduring value. The National Archives identifies and selects records as archives if they possess one or more of the following values – administrative, research, evidential, legal, financial or display. It is one of the responsibilities of the Archives to ensure that valuable Commonwealth government records are identified and preserved, and not damaged, lost or destroyed through carelessness, error or improper handling.

How do archives differ from library material?

Archives have unique characteristics which make them very different from books or journals in a library. Library material is usually published and is often held by other libraries or individuals; if it is lost or stolen it can usually be replaced. By contrast, archives are original records, often unique and usually irreplaceable. When you use an archival record you are often using the only copy that exists.

Why can't archives be browsed on the shelves?

Because of their age archives are fragile and the information they contain is vulnerable to damage or loss through constant or improper handling; thus strict rules govern their handling and use. For example, they are kept in environmentally controlled conditions to minimise their deterioration; they may not be browsed on the shelves as in a library; and they may not be borrowed. When requested by researchers they are delivered to research centres where they must be used under supervision. Researchers agree to observe these and other rules when they are issued with a researcher card. In these ways the National Archives seeks to maintain and preserve the archives in its care for future generations.

Why are archives not arranged by subject?

Whereas books in a library are catalogued and shelved according to subject and other classification systems, archives are arranged to preserve their value as evidence. The two rules governing the arrangement of archives are:

- that the archives of an agency or an individual not be mixed or intermingled with those of other agencies or individuals, and
- that archives should be maintained in the same sequence and filing system in which they were created and maintained.

This enables present day researchers not only to use the information they contain but also to understand something about the way the department that created them was organised and administered. To reorganise the records into a subject arrangement would destroy these contextual links and would diminish their value as a source of evidence and information.

The respect for provenance and original order in the arrangement of archives has implications for the way they are used for research. It is useful to remember that in most cases they were created to meet the immediate needs of agencies or individuals, not the diverse research needs of a wider community some years later. Because archives are not arranged by subject, finding the information you want will often be time consuming, but it can also be challenging and exciting.

Finding the archives you need

To locate archives related to your research you usually need to identify which agencies might have created relevant records and when. You then use the original indexes created by these agencies to identify individual files, volumes, etc. These indexes and other item listings may have idiosyncrasies and shortcomings that make them – and the filing systems they describe – time consuming and frustrating to use. To make your task easier the National Archives creates and maintains databases, fact sheets, guides and other reference tools – called finding aids – to help you identify relevant agencies and the records they created.

Using archives

Under the Archives Act 1983 you have a legal right of access to Australian Government records once they enter the open access period. Records not in the open access period are not available for public access.

Some files contain a notice documenting the removal of sensitive national security information. Other such notices may indicate the removal of valuable or rare objects or artefacts, which you may see upon request.

You can find out more about why information is withheld and how you can apply to have decisions to withhold information reviewed by reading the following fact sheets:

- *Fact sheet 9 - Searching for records*
- *Fact sheet 11 – Viewing records in the research centre*
- *Fact sheet 12 – What to do if we refuse you access*
- *Fact sheet 46 – Why we refuse access*
- *Fact sheet 229 – Access to damaged, fragile or contaminated records*

You may also ask research centre staff for more information