

The Commonwealth Record Series (CRS) System

Placing records in their context

To fully understand a record, there may be information about it you need to know in addition to its content. You may need information about who created the record, when it was created, its purpose, or what other records exist that deal with the same issue or subject.

All of these elements form the context of the record – the information that helps people interpret what the record is really about, determine its relevance, and decide how accurate or complete it might be. This type of information can also help you to find more records that might be relevant to your research.

The National Archives documents this contextual information using the Commonwealth Record Series (CRS) System. More information is available in the [CRS Manual](#), available on this website.

The Commonwealth Record Series (CRS) System

The CRS System allows the National Archives to keep track of the various agencies of the Commonwealth government, the series of records they produce, and all the individual items in those series, by registering and describing each of these elements in [RecordSearch](#), the National Archives' main online database.

There are four primary elements to the CRS System:

- organisations;
- agencies and persons;
- series;
- and items.

The National Archives gathers information about each of these elements, so that by looking at the information about an agency you can also find which organisation controls it, details of its predecessors and successors, the series it produced, and the individual items in those series. Information can also be traced in the other direction – ie from the item to the series to the agency. This information is available online using [RecordSearch](#).

The following are the four main elements of the CRS System described in more detail.

Organisations

An organisation is a whole government, learned society, church or company that is independent or broadly autonomous. The National Archives registers organisations with a CO (Commonwealth Organisation) number:

- CO 1, Commonwealth of Australia, 1901–ongoing
- CO 116, Commonwealth Serum Laboratories Limited, 1990–ongoing

Knowledge of the 'parent' organisation provides you with the broad administrative context in which records are created. You can use the CO number to retrieve details from [RecordSearch](#) about the agencies an organisation controls.

Agencies and persons

Agencies are distinct and recognisable bodies that have responsibility for carrying out administrative functions. They create records to document those functions. Agencies can be head, state or local offices of Commonwealth government departments, statutory authorities, courts, or tribunals. The National Archives registers agencies with a CA (Commonwealth Agency) number:

- CA 1401, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1971–ongoing

The information gathered about agencies describes the administrative context in which the agency created its records and provides clues as to what the records produced by each agency might be about. You can use the CA number to search [RecordSearch](#) to find information about all the series that an agency produced, and other agencies that were responsible for the same function.

The National Archives also collects the records of individuals who have had a close association with the Commonwealth, such as Prime Ministers, senior public servants, and Governors-General. These people create records in the same way as an agency might. The National Archives registers persons with a CP (Commonwealth Person) number:

- CP 268, Joseph Benedict Chifley, 1885–51

You can use the CP number to search [RecordSearch](#) to find information about the agencies with which the person had an association, and the series of records the person has deposited with the National Archives.

Series

Agencies and Persons create records in series. A series is a group of records that has resulted from the same accumulation or filing process (with the same numerical, alphabetical, chronological or other identifiable sequence) or which has a similar format or information content. A series can be a single item or many items. The National Archives identifies series with a series number:

- A907, Ships' passenger lists – inwards (Form P2), 1924–1964

You can use a series number to find the items the National Archives holds that are part of that series (see below). The National Archives also documents links between series, so that by looking at the information about one series, you can find out which other series are related to it.

Items

Items are the individual files, volumes, maps, films or any other units that make up a series. In most cases the National Archives identifies each item by the number or symbol that the agency used when it created the item:

- 1957/599, Immigrants from Italy – general representations, 1950–1961

The National Archives requires agencies to provide lists of all the items that they transfer to archival custody. You can see the item list for each series in the research centre where the records are held. As more and more item details are made available online through [RecordSearch](#), paper-based item lists are progressively being replaced by their online equivalent.