

Archives, Research and Collective Responsibilities

Handbook of Good Practices for Accessing and Using Materials

I. The Archival Relationship

An archive is not merely a place where documents are preserved. It is a space built over time through relationships among people, materials, emotions, and memories. **Research is part of this network of relationships.**

It is important to acknowledge that archives preserve not only documents, but also fragile traces of experiences, affections, and social relationships; some stories survive through official acts, others through letters, photographs, notes, testimonies, or personal and ephemeral objects. Archives are places where care, responsibility, and research are interwoven, but so are pain and loss.

It is therefore important to remember that archives are never value-neutral and are always partial. Every archive is the result of choices: what to preserve, catalogue, and make accessible, and what not to. Many of our stories were never archived by institutions, or were preserved thanks to collective initiatives, social movements, or informal networks of research and activism. Others remain absent, have been erased, or have chosen to remain silent, to be forgotten. Working with an archive also means confronting what is missing and assuming the amount of lost material is remarkable. The archival relationship between presence and absence requires researchers to take on the responsibility of reading fragments of memory with rigorous attention to their historical and social context.

Documents never exist as isolated objects. Letters, recordings, photographs, notes, objects, administrative documents, and working materials are part of broad, layered documentary systems. Extracting fragments without restoring their context can produce partial or distorted interpretations. Contextualizing materials is therefore a responsibility for those who consult and use them. This principle applies to all archival documents, including oral sources, which are part of specific relational situations.

For this reason, archival research requires time. **Archives are not fast-food restaurants.** Consulting one does not simply mean quickly gathering information useful to one's research, but entering into a relationship with the materials and with the people who care for their accessibility and preservation. In archival studies, there is growing discussion of “slow archives” (**lentezza archivistica**): an approach that invites us to slow down the processes of study and inquiry in archives, in order to grasp collective relationships and the responsibilities that make their existence possible. Slowing down means listening to what happens within and around the documents, building trust with those who care for them, and

recognizing preservation work as necessary to the valorization of collective social heritage. **The quality and often the very success of research relies on archival relationship, on dialogue with those who work there, but also on a willingness to understand the context in which the documents were produced and preserved.** Many archives exist thanks to the work of collectives, associations, independent researchers, or volunteers. This caretaking work often remains invisible, but is fundamental for the survival of the materials. **Archives are not data mines from which to extract information, but participatory spaces for the production and transmission of knowledge.** Using an archive means adopting these ethical principles. In this sense, research always implies a responsibility: toward the documents, toward the people who produced them, toward the communities that preserved them, and toward the relationships that make them knowable and usable, including for more creative purposes (writing, reading, documentary and artistic production).

II. Guidelines for Consultation

Before accessing an archive, it is useful to prepare for research. Learning about its history, consulting the inventories, checking whether related research already exists, and clearly presenting one's own project all help to better orient the work and facilitate dialogue with those who manage the archive. **Unlike libraries, which collect books and published works and organize them by subject or author, archives preserve documents born out of collective or individual activities, and keep them linked to one another and to the historical and social context in which they were produced.**

Access to materials may require different timeframes and procedures. In non-institutional archives, consultation depends on the availability of those who manage the archive, and on the sustainability of the work needed to make the materials accessible. **Archives are not automated services, but spaces built through community practices.**

During consultation, it is important to respect the procedures established by the archive, to cite sources correctly, and to always keep the overall documentary system to which a document belongs to in mind. **Decontextualized or pretextual uses of documents should be avoided.**

For further information on the responsibilities related to the processing of personal data for historical purposes, see the Code of Ethics and Good Conduct for the Processing of Personal Data for Historical Purposes ([available here](#)).

Digital reproduction of materials may be authorized but requires caution. Photographing or recording documents is permitted only with authorization and in compliance with any restrictions set by the archive. It is also important not to reproduce or disseminate documents containing sensitive data without consent. **Reproducing a document also means taking responsibility for its digital life. It is therefore important to avoid the**

unauthorized dissemination of materials online, not to share documents on social media, and to protect files containing personal data.

Many archives also preserve unconventional materials, such as letters, diaries, photographs, personal objects, audio or video recordings, testimonies, and ephemeral materials. **These materials are often essential for reconstructing stories that left no trace in institutional documents, and require particular care in their consultation and use;** they are often especially vulnerable sources, built on the intimate and unrepeatable encounter between a collector, and the person who recounts their life experience.

III. Giving Back to the Archive

Research does not end with the publication of its results. Using an archive also implies a form of reciprocity toward the people and institutions that made access to the materials possible.

Giving back the research means sharing the results of one's work and acknowledging the role of the archive in producing it, and more broadly, the role of collective knowledge and awareness. This can mean delivering a copy of thesis or publications to the archive, connecting with other researchers working in the same places, sharing materials produced during the research, or contributing knowledge of the archival holdings through one's own work. **From this perspective, digitizations made during the research — particularly those produced through photographic reproduction — should, wherever possible and agreed upon with the archive, be made available to the archive itself, thereby contributing to the growth, preservation, and accessibility of the documentary heritage.**

Giving back is the ethical and political tool that prevents research from becoming an extractive practice. Using an archive should not simply mean taking information and leaving, but rather contributing, whenever possible, to the very life of the archive: helping to reconstruct the historical context of the holdings, pointing out related materials or new information, sharing data useful for cataloguing, or even donating new documents.

The relationship between research and archive can and should be reciprocal. **Every research project should aim to leave the archive richer than it found it, contributing to the transmission and knowledge of the materials for future research and to greater collective awareness of the shared historical heritage that the archive protects and cares for.**

Giving back to the archive is not merely a courtesy owed, but part of the archival relationship itself.