

ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description

by **INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON ARCHIVES***

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A draft general rules was developed by a sub-group of the Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards. The sub-group was established at the first plenary of the Commission during its meeting in Höhr-Grenzhausen, Germany, October 1990.
- 1.2 The sub-group consists of:
 - Wendy Duff — Coordinator
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- 1.3 The group met in Liverpool, UK, in July 1991 to complete the draft which was discussed, amended and extended at the plenary of the Commission at its meeting in Madrid in January 1992. The draft was formally adopted at that meeting and is presented here as the Madrid draft or ‘‘ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description.’’
- 1.4 The ICA Commission on Descriptive Standards acknowledges and thanks Unesco for its financial support for this project. It also thanks the National Archives of Canada for its support of the Secretariat.

PREFACE

- P.1 In keeping with the *Statement of Principles Regarding Archival Description*, this set of general rules for archival description is designed to
 - a. ensure the creation of consistent, appropriate, and self-explanatory descriptions;
 - b. facilitate the retrieval and exchange of information about archival material;
 - c. enable the sharing of authority data; and

- d. make possible the integration of descriptions from different repositories into a unified information system.
- P.2 As **general** rules, these are intended to be broadly applicable to descriptions of archives regardless of the nature or extent of the unit of description. The rules guide the formulation of information in each of twenty-five (25) elements that may be combined to constitute the description of an archival entity.
- P.3 Each rule consists of:
- a. the name of the element of description governed by the rule;
 - b. a statement of the purpose of incorporating the element in a description;
 - c. a statement of the general rule (or rules) applicable to the element; and
 - d. examples illustrating implementation of the rule(s).
- P.4 The rules present a structure for any given description incorporating elements governed by the rules. Within this structure the elements are grouped in five information areas:
1. Identity Statement Area
(where essential information is conveyed to identify the unit of description)
 2. Context and Content Area
(where information is conveyed about the origin, arrangement, and subject matter of the unit of description)
 3. Condition of Access and Use Area
(where information is conveyed about the availability of the unit of description)
 4. Allied Material Area
(where information is conveyed about materials having an important relationship to the unit of description)
 5. Note Area
(where specialized information is conveyed).
- P.5 All twenty-five elements covered by these general rules are available for use, but only a subset need be used in any given description. A very few elements are considered essential to every description:
- a. reference code;
 - b. title;
 - c. dates of creation of the material in the unit of description;
 - d. extent of the unit of description; and
 - e. level of description.

These five elements represent the minimum amount of descriptive information that could be exchanged effectively in an international information system. These elements are marked with an asterisk (*).

- P.6 The extent to which a given archival description will incorporate more than the essential elements of information will vary depending on the nature of the unit of description, and the requirements of the information system of which it is a part. Some information systems may include descriptions of the constituent parts of the fonds (e.g., series, items) as well as the fonds itself. To assure the efficiency and clarity of such systems, preparation of the multilevel descriptions within them should be guided by the rules concerning their linkage and informational content. Multilevel rules designed to accomplish this have been incorporated in these general rules.
- P.7 The elements of description covered by these general rules are those thought to have the widest applicability in an international archival context. This is only the beginning of a standardization effort. Further specific rules should be formulated to guide the description of special types of material (such as cartographic materials, motion pictures or electronic files) and specific levels of description.
- P.8 Access points are based upon the elements of description. The value of access points is enhanced through authority control. Because of the importance of access points for retrieval, international guidelines should be developed for formulating them. Vocabularies and conventions to be used with access points should be developed nationally or separately for each language.¹

0. GLOSSARY OF TERMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE GENERAL RULES

- 0.1 The following glossary with terms and their definitions forms an integral part of these rules of description. The definitions are to be understood as having been formulated specifically for the purposes of this document.

Access. The ability to make use of material from a fonds, usually subject to rules and conditions.

Access point. A name, term, etc., by which a description may be searched, identified and retrieved.

Appraisal. The process of determining the archival value of a set of records.

Arrangement. The intellectual operations involved in the analysis and organization of archival material.

Authority control. The control of standardized forms of terms including names (personal, corporate or geographic) used as access points.

Corporate body. An organization or group of persons that is identified by a particular name and that acts, or may act, as an entity. Typical examples of corporate bodies are associations, institutions, business firms, non-profit enterprises, governments, government agencies, religious bodies, landed estates and conferences. One corporate body may consist of a number of other corporate bodies.

Creator. *See* Provenance.

Date of accumulation. The period over which the material within, or forming part of, the unit of description has been accumulated by the creator.

Date of creation. The actual date at which the archival material in a unit of description was created.

Diplomatic. Data required for the interpretation of documents through the technical study of their form and content.

File. A set of related records, usually within a series, capable of being handled or processed as a unit.

Finding aid. The broadest term to cover any description or means of reference made or received by an archives service in the course of establishing administrative or intellectual control over archival material.

Fonds. All of the documents, regardless of form or medium, naturally generated and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family or corporate body in the conduct of personal or corporate activity.

Form. The physical or material character of the archival material in the unit of description.

Formal title. A title which appears prominently on or in the archival material being described.

Item. A single indivisible unit in an archival entity.

Level of description. The position of the unit of description in the hierarchy of the fonds. (*See Appendix.*)

Location. The repository or address of a private owner, at which a unit of description is held.

Physical character. The medium, shape or substance of the archival material, e.g., parchment rolls, magnetic tape.

Provenance. The office or person of origin of the archival material, that is, the particular person, family or corporate body that created and/or accumulated and used the documents in the conduct of personal or corporate activity.

Series. Documents arranged in accordance with a system or maintained as a unit because they result from the same activity, have a particular form, or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation.

Supplied title. A title supplied by the archivist for a unit of description which has no formal title.

Title. A word, phrase, character or group of characters that names a unit of description.

Unit of description. Any archival entity being described.

I. MULTILEVEL DESCRIPTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The nature of the broadest unit of description, the fonds, is that, in the great majority of cases, it consists of parts. (*See Principles*, para. 2.1 & 2.2.)

The fonds as a whole should be represented in one description, using the elements of description as outlined below in section 3 of this document. If description of the parts is required, they may be described separately also using the appropriate elements from section 3. The sum total of all descriptions thus obtained, linked in a hierarchy, as outlined in the model in the Appendix, represents the fonds and those parts for which descriptions were made. For the purpose of these rules, this technique of description is called **multilevel description**.

Four fundamental rules, flowing from the *Principles*, apply when establishing a hierarchy of descriptions. They are set out in rules 2.1 to 2.4.

2. **MULTILEVEL DESCRIPTION RULES**

2.1 **DESCRIPTION FROM THE GENERAL TO THE SPECIFIC**

PURPOSE: To represent the context and the hierarchical structure of the fonds and its parts.

RULE: At the first level of description give information for the fonds as a whole. At the next and subsequent levels give information for the parts being described. Present the resulting descriptions in a hierarchical, part-to-whole, relationship proceeding from the broadest (fonds) to the more specific.

2.2 **INFORMATION RELEVANT TO THE LEVEL OF DESCRIPTION**

PURPOSE: To represent accurately the context and content of the unit of description.

RULE: Provide only such information as is appropriate to the level being described. For example, do not provide detailed file content information if the unit of description is a fonds; do not provide an administrative history for an entire department if the creator of a unit of description is a division or a branch.

2.3 **LINKING OF DESCRIPTIONS**

PURPOSE: To make explicit the position of the unit of description in the hierarchy.

RULE: Link each description to its next higher unit of description, if applicable, and identify the level of description. (*See* 3.1.4.)

2.4 **REPETITION OF INFORMATION**

PURPOSE: To avoid redundancy.

RULE: At the highest appropriate level, give information that is common to the component parts. Do not repeat information at a lower level of description that has already been given at a higher level.

3. **ELEMENTS OF DESCRIPTION**

NOTE: The asterisked elements of description are the elements required in a minimum description regardless of level of description.

3.1 IDENTITY STATEMENT AREA

3.1.1 Reference code(s)*

PURPOSE: To provide a link between the archival material and the description that represents it.

RULE: Record the country code in accordance with ISO 3166, followed by the repository code in accordance with the national repository code standard, followed by the local reference code.

Examples:

CA NAC ANC-C2358
 US LC 72-064568
 MY P/AMM Z4

3.1.2 Title*

PURPOSE: To identify the unit of description (e.g. fonds, series, file, item) either by transcribing the name when that unit carries one, or by assigning a name if it does not.

RULES: When the unit of description bears a formal title, transcribe it exactly as to wording, order and spelling but not necessarily as to punctuation and capitalization.

Example:

Account of occurrences at Peace River 1832

If no formal title appears in or on the unit of description, compose a brief title. The supplied title should include the name of the creator and a term indicating the form of the material comprising the unit of description and, where appropriate, a phrase reflecting function, activity, subject, location or theme.

Examples:

Minute books of the Women's Christian Temperance Movement
 Letters of Presbyterian missionaries serving in Manitoba
 Videotapes of Ronald Reagan's campaign speeches
 Records of the Coast and Geodetic Survey
(Fonds level title)

Records of the Office of the Superintendent
(Sub-fonds level title)

Letters sent
 Letters received
 Drafts of Annual Reports to the Congress
(Series level titles)

Draft of the First Report
(File level title)

Papers of the Rockefeller Family
(*Fonds level title*)

Papers of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.
(*Sub-fonds level title*)

Correspondence relating to business affairs
Correspondence relating to philanthropic activity
Personal correspondence
(*Series level titles*)

Letters to J. Pierpont Morgan
Letters to Theodore Roosevelt
(*Item level titles*)

3.1.3 Dates of creation of the material in the unit of description*

PURPOSE: To identify and record the date(s) of creation of the material in the unit of description.

RULES: Give the dates of creation of the material in the unit of description as a single date or a range of dates as appropriate. A range of dates should always be inclusive.

Examples:

23 Mar 1927
1858
1907-1949

Optionally, also record the predominant dates or significant gaps. Never enter predominant dates without inclusive dates.

Examples:

1703-1908 (predominant 1780-1835)
1923-1945 (lacking 1933 to 1935)

3.1.4 Level of description*

PURPOSE: To identify the level of the unit of description.

RULE: Record the level of this unit of description.

Examples:

Series
Sub-series
File
Item

3.1.5 Extent of the unit of description (quality, bulk or size)*

PURPOSE: To identify and record

- a. the physical extent and
- b. the type of material of the unit of description.

RULES: Record the extent of the unit of description by giving the number of physical units in arabic numerals and the specific unit designation appropriate for the broad class of material to which the unit of description belongs.

Examples:

2 film rolls
128 photographs

Alternatively, give the linear extent of the unit of description.

Example:

30 m

If the statement of extent for a unit of description is given in linear terms and additional information is desirable, add the additional information in parentheses.

Example:

4 m (ca. 10 200 items)

3.2 CONTEXT AND CONTENT AREA

3.2.1 Administrative / biographical history

PURPOSE: To provide an administrative history of, or biographical details on, the creator of the unit of description to place the material in context and make it better understood.

RULES: Record concisely any significant information on the origin, progress, development and work of the organization or on the life and work of the individual responsible for the creation of the unit of description. If additional information is available in a published source, cite the source.

For persons or families record information such as full names and titles, dates of birth and death, place of birth, successive places of domicile, activities, occupation or offices, original and any other names, significant accomplishments, and place of death.

Example:

Louis Hémon was a French writer born at Brest, France, in 1880. He died in Canada at Chappleau (Ont.) in 1913. He studied law at La Sorbonne in Paris. He spent eight years in England before going to Canada in 1911, where he lived in Montréal and on a farm at Péribonka (Lac Saint-Jean). In his short career, he wrote several books and articles. Hémon is famous for *Maria Chapdelaine: récit du Canada français*, published for the first time in 1916.

For corporate bodies record information such as the official name, the dates of existence, enabling legislation, functions, purpose and development of the body, its administrative hierarchy, and earlier, variant or successive names.

Examples:

The Freedman's Bureau was established in the War Department on 3 Mar. 1965, to supervise all activities relating to refugees and freedmen and to assume custody of all abandoned or confiscated lands or property. Abolished 10 June 1872, and remaining functions transferred to the Freedman's Branch, Office of Adjutant General and after 1879, to the Colored Division of the Office of Adjutant General.

The Kingston Steam Trawling Company was incorporated in 1891. Hellyer Bros acquired a majority shareholding in 19[?] and the company was absorbed into Associated Fisheries when Hellyer Bros merged with that company in 1961. It ceased trading in 1965 and was dissolved in 1972.

3.2.2 Dates of accumulation of the unit of description

PURPOSE: To supply date(s) of accumulation of the unit of description (e.g., series), file) by its creator.

RULE: Give the date(s) of accumulation of the unit of description by the creator as a single date or a range of dates. The date or dates recorded here refer to the record-keeping actions of the creator and may not antedate the date of establishment of the creating corporate body or the date of birth of the creating individual. These dates may differ from the dates recorded at **3.1.3 Dates of creation of the material in the unit of description**, in cases where the unit of description resulted from an activity involving accumulation of documents created prior to filing by the creator, such as documents accumulated from a variety of sources during an investigation or legal action.

Examples:

1892
1910-1934

3.2.3 Custodial history

PURPOSE: To provide information on changes of ownership and custody of the unit of description that is significant for its authenticity, integrity and interpretation.

RULE: Record the successive transfers of ownership and custody of the unit of description, along with the dates thereof, insofar as they can be ascertained. If the custodial history is unknown, record that information. When the unit of description is acquired directly from the creator, do not record a custodial history but rather record this information as the Immediate Source of Acquisition. (See 3.2.4.)

Examples:

The Ocean Falls Corporation records remained in the custody of Pacific Mills Ltd., and its successor companies, until the mill and townsite were taken over by the British Columbia provincial government in 1973. In 1976 the records were transferred to the Ocean Falls Public Library, which began the rearrangement of the records in their current form . . .

Originally collected by George Madison and arranged by his nephew, John Ferris, after Madison's death. Purchased by Henry Kapper in 1878 who added to the collection with materials purchased at auctions in Philadelphia and Paris, 1878-1893.

Records inherited by Houghton Urban District Council in 1937 and later deposited at Durham Record Office. Transferred to Tyne and Wear Archives Service on 27 July 1976.

3.2.4 Immediate source of acquisition

PURPOSE: To record circumstances of the immediate source of acquisition.

RULE: Record the donor or source from which the unit of description was acquired and the date and/or method of acquisition, if any or all of this information if it is not confidential. *Optionally*, add accession numbers or codes. If the source or donor is unknown, record that information.

Examples:

Transferred from Department of Geography, 16 June 1977.

Donated by the sisters of Peter Neve Cotton, Mrs Mary Small of Saltspring Island and Mrs Patricia Jarvis of Bellevue, Washington, March 1983

Purchased at Sotheby's auction, 29 Mar 1977

Discovered in disused store at the rear of Transport Office

The orderly books were transferred from Pension Office, 1909; the letter books were transferred from the State Department, 1915

Received from: Euroc AB, Malmö. Date of acquisition: 1878-10'27-

3.2.5 Legal status

PURPOSE: To provide information on the legal status of the unit of description.

RULE: Record information on the legal status of the unit of description.

Examples:

Public records transferred under section 4(1) of the Public Records Act 1958

3.2.6 Appraisal, destruction and scheduling information

PURPOSE: To provide information on any appraisal, destruction and scheduling action taken.

RULE: Record any appraisal actions taken on the unit of description if that action affects the interpretation of the material.

Where appropriate, record the authority by which the action has been taken.

Example:

Files of every tenth year have been retained

3.2.7 Accruals

PURPOSE: To inform the user of possible changes in the extent of the unit of description.

RULE: If future accruals, additional transfers or deposits are expected, give an estimate of their quantity and frequency when possible.

Example:

Records from the Office of the Ceremonials Assistant are transferred to the archives five years following the academic year to which the records relate. On average 40 cm of records are transferred to the archives annually on 1 Aug.

3.2.8 System of arrangement

PURPOSE: To provide information on the arrangement of the unit of description.

RULE: Give information on the arrangement of the unit of description. Specify the principal characteristics of the internal structure, the order of the material and, if appropriate, how these have been treated by the archivist.

Examples:

There are 5 series: minute books; ledgers; other volumes from a racked store room; the contents of a number of metal deed boxes holding deeds, agreements and a variety of other documents, not all legal; files from filing cabinet of older papers

Files are arranged alphabetically by file title. A subseries of 17 files (numbered 163/1-17) depend on file 163, dealing with the purchase of the Seaford Dock

3.2.9 Scope and content note / abstract

PURPOSE: To identify the form and subject matter of the unit of description to enable users to judge its potential relevance.

RULE: Give a brief summary of the form and subject content (including time period) of the unit of description. Give specific dates which extend and explain the dates of creation of the material, if appropriate. Do not repeat here information already given elsewhere in the description.

Example:

General policy files and registers of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Housing and Local Government relating to extinguishment of tithe rent charges. The files contain information about grants to local authorities, rates and rate refunds, and evidence submitted to the Royal Commission on Tithe Rent-charge in 1934. The registers contain records of payments of grants to various authorities from 1938 to 1955 under the Title Act 1936.

3.3 CONDITIONS OF ACCESS AND USE AREA

3.3.1 Language of material

PURPOSE: To identify the language(s), scripts and symbol systems employed in the unit of description.

RULE: Record the predominant language(s) of the materials comprising the unit of description. Note any distinctive alphabets, scripts or symbol systems employed.

Examples:

In Portuguese

Main text in Latin; endorsements in Norman French

3.3.2 Physical characteristics

PURPOSE: To provide information about any important physical characteristics that affect use of the unit of description.

RULE: Indicate any important physical details and/or the permanent physical condition of the material that limits use of the unit of description.

Examples:

Images faded

Legible under ultraviolet light only

Optionally, indicate any significant diplomatic characteristics that might affect use of the unit of description.

Examples:

Seals and watermark

Illuminated text

3.3.3 Access conditions

PURPOSE: To identify any conditions that restrict or affect access to the unit of description.

RULE: Give information on conditions that restrict or affect access to the unit of description. Indicate the extent of the period of closure and the date at which the material will open.

Examples:

No access may be given to the material without the written permission of the director of the firm

Family correspondence closed until 2010

All records subject to Access to Information and Privacy Act

No access until microfilmed

3.3.4 Copyright / terms governing reproduction

PURPOSE: To identify any restrictions on the use or reproduction of the unit of description.

RULE: Give information about terms governing the use or the reproduction of the unit of description after access has been provided. If terms governing use, reproduction or publication in respect to the unit of description are unknown, no statement is necessary.

Examples:

Rights held by CHYZ-FM

No reproduction without permission of the president of the company

Photographs may be copied for reference purposes only. Use of photographs in publication cannot be made without written permission of Kenneth McAllister

3.3.5 Finding aids

PURPOSE: to identify any finding aids to the unit of description.

RULE: Give information about any finding aids that the repository may have that provide information relating to the contents of the unit of description. Also include finding aids compiled by the creator, if relevant.

Examples:

Box list

Detailed finding aid available; file level control

Finding aid: Records of Parks Canada (RG84) / Gabrielle Bails. - (General inventory series / Federal Archives Division). - Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1985

Geographical index

Correspondence index

3.4 ALLIED MATERIALS AREA

3.4.1 Location of originals

PURPOSE: To identify the repository, corporate body or individual which holds the originals if the unit of description is a reproduction.

RULE: If the unit of description is a reproduction, and another repository, corporate body or individual holds the originals, record their name if the information is not confidential. Give also any identifying numbers that may help in locating the original material. If the originals are known to be no longer extant, give that information.

Examples:

Original in National Archives of Canada, C2358

Originals destroyed after microfilming, 1981

Originals retained by the Society of Friends, Newcastle upon Tyne (access by permission from the Secretary)

3.4.2 Existence of copies

PURPOSE: To indicate the existence and location of copies of the unit of description.

RULE: If the unit of description is available (either in the institution or elsewhere) in another format, give that information. Record the other format(s) in which the material is available and their locations, if that information is known.

Examples:

Diaries and correspondence also available on microfilm

Films also available on videocassette

3.4.3 Related units of description

PURPOSE: To identify related units of description.

RULE: If the unit of description consists of material that has a direct and significant connection to another unit of description, indicate the relationship. Use appropriate introductory wording. If the related unit of description is a finding aid, use the **Finding aids** element of description to make the reference to it.

Examples:

These include many stray medieval accounts similar to material in E101 and SC6

For further documents concerning the Queen's Jointure see LR5

Related series: In-letters from the Office of the General Manager

3.4.4 Associated material

PURPOSE: To identify the existence in other repositories of material associated by provenance to the unit of description.

RULE: If material in another repository has a relationship by provenance to the unit of description, provide information about the associated material and the repository.

Example:

Associated materials: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Ernest Buckler fonds

3.4.5 Publication note

PURPOSE: To identify any publications that are based on the use, study or analysis of the unit of description.

RULE: Record a citation to, and/or information about, a publication that is based on the use, study or analysis of the unit of description.

Example:

Folios 23-24 published in *Chronicon Petriburgense* ed. T Stapleton (1849), pp. 176-82

3.5 NOTE AREA

3.5.1 Note

PURPOSE: To provide important additional information.

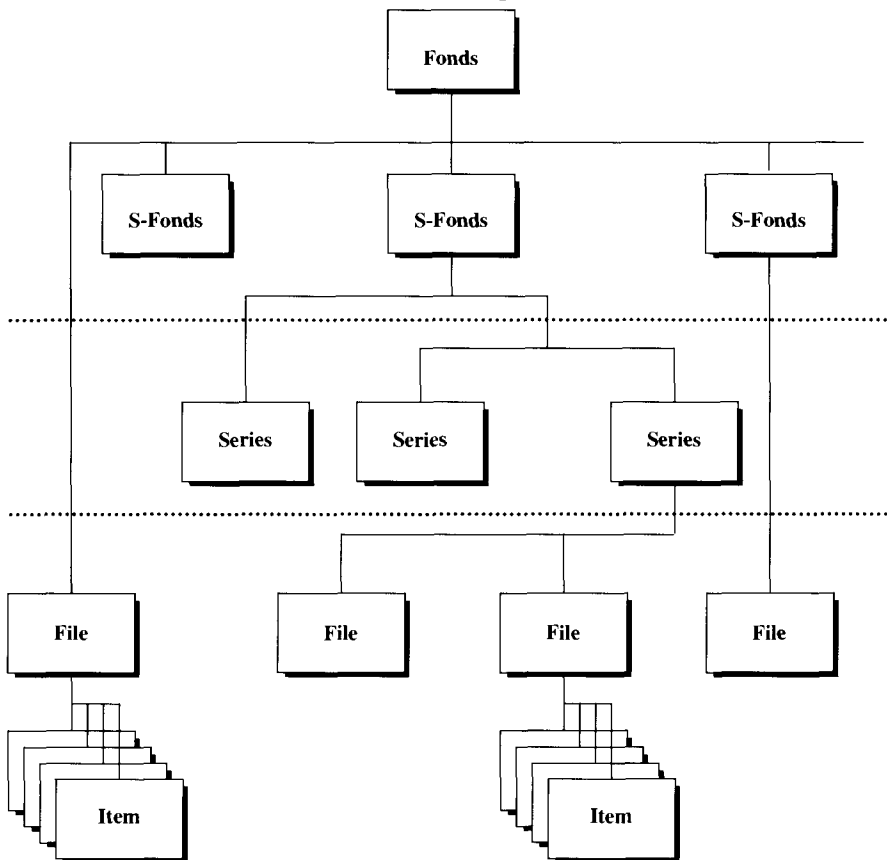
RULE: Record important additional information not accommodated by any of the defined elements of description.

APPENDIX

A1 The model shows some typical situations and does not include all possible combinations of levels.

A2 Any number of intermediate levels are possible between any shown in the model.

Model of the levels of arrangement of a fonds



Notes

- * Adopted by the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards, Madrid, 21-24 January 1992; final edited version.
- 1 The following ISO standards are useful when developing and maintaining controlled vocabularies: **ISO 5963** *Documentation - Methods for examining documents, determining their subject, and selecting indexing terms* and **ISO 2788** *Documentation - Guidelines for the establishment and development of monolingual thesauri*.