**Using Archives as Geographers and Environmental Scientists**

This document provides suggested activities, or a session plan for one long, or three shorter sessions, exploring the practical processes of preparing for, gathering, and analysing archival research.

**Overarching session aims:**

* Introduce students to the practical processes involved in archival research
* Provide students with practical exercises and resources to ensure that they can undertake productive archival research
* Provide students with an opportunity to critically reflect on their archival research methods

**1. Practical preparations before going to visit an archive**

**Aims:**

* Explore the range of questions that can be answered using archival data.
* Prepare students for the challenges of archival research – most notably working with pre-existing data.
* Introduce students to the practical steps required before gathering archival data.
* Provide activities to walk students through the process of preparing to undertake archival research.

**1.1 What sorts of research questions can archives help us answer?**

Archives help us understand the past and how the past informs the present. That can be the very distant past or the much more recent past. This means that archives are a good place to look for data to answer questions about:

* How a particular place has changed over time.
* How the design, use, and experience of landscapes, environments, or types of buildings have changed over time.
* How perceptions of broader concepts and practices – e.g. environmental change, climate change, social housing etc. – have changed over time.
* How a particular place looked, was used, perceived, and experienced at a particular point in the past.
* How past practices, spaces, designs, perceptions etc. inform contemporary practices.

**Task:**

Read one of the articles listed below and identify the range of research questions that archival data is helping them answer.

*(Students could be asked to read different articles and then collectively establish a list of the range of research questions)*

Suggested articles:

* Iwama, D., Umemoto, K. & Masuda, K. (2021). Calling Nikkei to Empire: Diaspora and trans/nationalism in the redevelopment of historic Little Tokyo. *Journal of Historical Geography* 74, 44-54.
* Hein, C. & Sedighi, M. (2016). Iran’s Global Petroleumscape: The Role of Oil in Shaping Khuzestan and Tehran. *Architectural Theory Review* 21(3), 349-374.
* Joseph, S. (2017). Farming the desert: agriculture in the oil frontier, the case of the United Arab Emirates, 1940s to 1990s. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45(5), 678–694.
* Samuel-Azran, T. & Hayat, T. (2020). The geography of the Arab public sphere on Twitter. *Technology in Societ*y 62, 101327.
* Sojoyner, D. M. (2021). You Are Going to Get Us Killed: Fugitive Archival Practice and the Carceral State. *American Anthropologist* 123(3), 658-670.

**1.2 Preparing to using pre-existing archival data to answer your research questions**

One of the biggest challenges of undertaking archival research is that **you are working with data that already exists**. Rather than creating new data using methods specifically designed to help you answer your research questions, **you have to look through a range of different sources and creatively use them to answer your questions**.

While some of the creative process happens after you have been in the archive and you are analysing your data (see below), it is also often necessary to think creatively as you choose the archival material you are going to look at.

You may also find that **it is necessary to combine archival research with other methods of collecting data**. But if you are conducting research into the very distant past, this will not always be possible.

To help you begin to identify the sorts of archival material that will help you answer your research question, it is also important to do several things:

1. Write clear research questions.

Knowing exactly what you are trying to find out will help you filter available archival material and identify the most relevant documents, images etc.

**Task:** Write three clear research questions that you are trying to answer using archival research.

2. Do some background research into your broad area of research

This will help you to get a sense of the sorts of archives that may be available to you and where they might be located.

**Task:** Do some research into your topic, thinking about things like:

* What organisations and institutions were prominent and related to your area of research in the time period you are looking at?
* Who has worked on your research topic before and how have they done it? What might they have missed out on?
* Ask yourself: Why is it important that you specifically do his work? And how does what you are doing relate to the work of others?
* What are the geographical scale and boundaries of your research question?
* Are there archives outside of the geographical context (city, region, country) you are interested in that could tell you something about your geographical context?
* Have you thought about free online materials? Maybe the Internet Archive (archive.org) can help you. This video gives you an idea how to navigate through it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MulUpCW5_Aw>

3. Observe how others have used archives to answer similar research questions.

This will give you inspiration and show you the range of different types of archival material you might want to look for to help you answer your research questions.

**Some places to start:**

<https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>

<https://theconversation.com/historians-archival-research-looks-quite-different-in-the-digital-age-121096>

<https://www.arts.ac.uk/ual-decolonising-arts-institute/projects/decolonising-archives-2021>

**Task:** Write a list of potential archives you could use to answer your research questions – these could be obvious ones, or archives that you could take a slightly more creative approach to.

**1.3 Looking for archives to answer your research questions**

Once you have established your research questions **you need to find appropriate archival material** to help you answer these questions. It is normal to engage with a range of different archival sources and to combine data from archival research with data gathered using other methods.

Top tips for finding the most relevant archival material:

* Think about all the different reasons why the issue or topic you are interested in might have been discussed and where these discussions may have been recorded. Go and find these documents/images/publications etc.
* Reflect on the scale at which you are interested in your issue or topic. Find archives that correspond with your specific local, national, or international focus.
* Think about who’s perspective you are interested in. Find archival material made by these institutions, organisations, companies, or people.
* If these institutions, organisations, companies, or people did not leave records or you can’t get access to them, think creatively. Is there a way you could find their perspective in alternative archival material?

**Task:** Using the list below as a starting point, select an archive that may hold archival material that will help you answer your research questions. Reflect on why you think this archive will be helpful

**List of online archives:** (see supporting documents)

**1.4 How do you find out what is in a specific archive?**

Once you have selected an archive that you think might include material that will help you answer your research questions, you need to find specific items in that archive to look at.

* Sometimes you will be searching on an online or physical database for documents that you can look at in person.

Here are some tips for searching an archive database for relevant material:

<https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/diversity-in-archives/search-strategies>

* Sometimes you will be able to search through digitalised versions of paper archives that have been made accessible online, or on a computer in an archive.

Here are some tips for searching digitalised archival collections for relevant material – including very specific sections of text or images:

<https://libguides.westminster.ac.uk/c.php?g=681142&p=4859341>

**Extra reading:**

* Strandgaard Jensen, H. (2020) Digital Archival Literacy for (all) Historians. *Media History,* 27.2, 251-265.
* Cannelli, B. & Musso, M. (2022): Social media as part of personal digital archives: exploring users’ practices and service providers’ policies regarding the preservation of digital memories. Archival Science 22, 259–283.

**1.5 Preparing for an in-person archival visit**

If you have found items that you would like to look at in a physical archive, you will need to plan your trip to this archive.

For further help with this step have a look at the University of Hull’s guide to [Visiting Repositories](https://libguides.hull.ac.uk/finding-archives/visiting-repositories).

The most important thing when preparing to visit an archive is to **BE PREPARED**. The more you know about how an archive works and what you are/are not allowed to do while in the archive the better.

**This check list** provides a useful resource to check that you have thought through everything before you go on your visit. The more prepared you are the better.

* What days and time are the **archive open** (archives often have very specific opening times)?
* Do you need **to book a visit** beforehand, or can you just turn up on the day?
* Can you **order the items** you want to see beforehand so that you don’t have to wait for someone to find them for you when you visit?
* Do you need to **take proof of ID** etc. to gain access to the archive? If so, what documents do they want to see?
* Will you be able to photograph archival material? Will you need to pay to do so?
* Will you be **able to take your laptop into the archive room**? Will you be able to take a pen into the archive room? Will you have to use a pencil in the archive room? Make sure you have one if you will need one.
* Will you be **able to see the physical archive**, or will you be given access to a digitalised version?
* Do you need to complete a **risk assessment** before you visit the archive? If you are conducting archival research as part of your university studies, it is advisable to do so.
* What are the **ethical implications of your research**? How will this inform how you engage with this data?

Here are some helpful **resources to help you complete this check list**.

* Risk assessment model: [See](https://seafile.rlp.net/lib/2dacb5a0-4881-48ef-a4f6-1f1500183254/file/OER%20bundles/Archive%20methods/Ethics%20%26%20Risks/Model%20Archival%20Visit%20Risk%20Assessment%20Form.docx) supporting documents.
* Ethical issues to think about: [See](https://seafile.rlp.net/lib/2dacb5a0-4881-48ef-a4f6-1f1500183254/file/OER%20bundles/Archive%20methods/Ethics%20%26%20Risks/Ethics%20and%20archives.docx) supporting documents.
* Helpful information about ethical and legal issues to consider when using data collected from social media: [See](https://seafile.rlp.net/lib/2dacb5a0-4881-48ef-a4f6-1f1500183254/file/OER%20bundles/Archive%20methods/Ethics%20%26%20Risks/Ethics%20and%20archives.docx) supporting documents.
* Model archive custodian information form if you are using private archives: [See](https://seafile.rlp.net/lib/2dacb5a0-4881-48ef-a4f6-1f1500183254/file/OER%20bundles/Archive%20methods/Ethics%20%26%20Risks/Ethics%20and%20archives.docx) supporting documents.
* Model archive custodian consent form if you are using private archives: See supporting documents.

**1.6 Archive preparation activity**

You can use the following activity to help you do the necessary preparation work before visiting the archive.

(This activity is based on material from University of Hull’s library resources)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **Ask Yourself** |
| Think - Look at your research question or project brief, break it down into smaller sections  E.g.  Main research question:  How has my local town changed over time?  Broken down into smaller sections:  When was my town first established?  What did it contain when it was first established?  At what stages in history did my town grow or develop?  What key changes happened each time?  Why did these changes happen? | What information do I need to find out in order to discuss each section?  E.g.  (How) has the location, design, and quantity of the housing/shops/transport links changed?  When and why did these changes happen? |
| Think - Consider what archives are available  Online archives  Local archives  National archives  Social media  Photograph archives  Newspaper archives | What type of records are likely to contain the information I need?  E.g.  Maps  Minutes of planning meetings  Photographs  Newspaper reports about the opening of new shops/transport links etc. |
| Search - Use online archive portals, finding aids and repository catalogues to look for archive material | What keywords are likely to help me find the records I am looking for?  Name of town  Map  Urban design  Planning permission  Trains  Buses  Shops  Retail  Road building  Housing  Development |
| Make a list - Write down reference numbers and brief descriptions of any records you would like to use | Which records do I want to look at and in what order? |
| Visit - Email repositories and make arrangements to visit in order to see the records on your list | What do I need to bring with me and are there any ID requirements? |

**2. Visiting a physical archive**

**Aim:**

Provide students with advice and resources to make sure they make the most of visits to physical archives

**Top tips for visiting an archive:**

If you are visiting an archive in person, it is important to remember that each archive is different and that they will have specific rules for how you should behave and engage with the archival material. These rules exist to keep you and the archival material safe.

Make sure that you pay attention to the instructions provided. Common requests may include:

* Putting personal belongings in a locker before entering the archive
* Not bringing pens or rubbers into the archive
* Not bringing food or drink into the archive
* Asking permission and potentially having to pay to photograph documents
* Wearing gloves when handling specific items
* Placing books and fragile items on book rests or cushions
* Using specific ‘book snakes’ or weights to hold books open and documents in place

Here are **some reflections from people who have a lot of experience** of working in physical archives. They have shared their experience to help make sure that you can make the most of your time in the archives.

* Dr Carl Griffin, reflecting on a day in the archive: <https://soundcloud.com/user-361850255/griffin-archive-visit?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing>

**2.1 Gathering archival data – when using physical and digital archives**

**Top tips for gathering archival data:**

It is really important that you **take the time to make comprehensive records** while collecting archival data. You may want to think about **developing a spreadsheet or database to record the information** about the archival data you have looked at. This will help you to keep track of what you have or haven’t seen and begin to see themes emerging in the data.

The most important thing is that you **record all the information you would need to reference a piece of data** if you were to use it in an assessment or publication.

This could include information in the categories below. But be aware that depending on the sort of archival material you are working it, it may not be possible to collect all of this information:

* Author
* Name of document (as included in archival catalogue)
* Date of production/publication
* Location (i.e. in which archive it is located)
* Archive catalogue reference

As you work with your archival material, you might also want to **begin to label documents with relevant keywords and categories**. Developing these keywords or categories is an iterative process. You may go into the archives with a particular sense of the categories, issues, topics, individuals that you are interested in. However, while in the archive other keywords and categories may emerge.

**For example:**

Research Question: How city A transited to an important cargo storage node during the mid 20th century?

After your background research, you find out for instance the development of the first railway project which connected city a. to location b. in 1945 is important for your research question. You decide yo have the “railway project 1940s” as a key word. You start searching for the planning documents, maps and letters related to this railway project and through the research you find out that the railway was part of a larger planning scheme of let’s say massive copper mining in location a. in 1940s that was rendered unsuccessful in 1950s and therefore, you did not read about it in secondary sources. The knowledge of this large-scale mining activity is vital to answer your research question now. So you create the new category, “copper mining 1940s”. The “railway project 1940s” is a keyword redirected under “copper mining 1940s”. There may be other infrastructural and urban plans which were pursued through the copper mining project. Or there may be other railway projects that were developed outside the copper mining project. It is important to reorganize your categorization in order to find the right data while writing your paper.

**To help you with this process:**

* Here is a sample document that you might want to use to collect information about each archival document you look at: See supporting documents.
* We have asked some people who have lots of experience of working with archives to discuss how they go about collecting and recording archival data:

**1)** **Jane Bunting (University of Hull):**

[https://uni- trier.zoom.us/rec/play/KjFD6uZitwKvrAySUHZZhsx0XtEl93NcfhzxIzrxw2eDcj6kqhzRYI 4qdudIw1Q49I2u3eZrh1vN4pHR.bbWEY2pLOjKD517j?continueMode=true&\_x\_zm\_r taid=tqHrqBUTQbyzu9yd6VR1Eg.1663053077574.dc779ed627973e4c742d6a521908 e3d4&\_x\_zm\_rhtaid=425](https://uni-trier.zoom.us/rec/play/KjFD6uZitwKvrAySUHZZhsx0XtEl93NcfhzxIzrxw2eDcj6kqhzRYI4qdudIw1Q49I2u3eZrh1vN4pHR.bbWEY2pLOjKD517j?continueMode=true&_x_zm_rtaid=tqHrqBUTQbyzu9yd6VR1Eg.1663053077574.dc779ed627973e4c742d6a521908e3d4&_x_zm_rhtaid=425)

**2)** **Lucia Crowther (University of Hull):**

<https://uni-trier.zoom.us/rec/share/7IiRyC05yzXWLmclIr33bzjfYE9TNIPIkHM0Rrh71DOAPrnjoEWpLHkxPDaOAJmS.V8Exwc2bjkjh79ja>

**3) Hannah Wilson (University of Hull):**

[https://uni-trier.zoom.us/rec/share/pqu2I1PTIh2ia3elQ80q7nEv-xDVSnaBx61r- 0Ycv8slntcJGZs7Fh3AjQjvo2KH.Fu0tSwm6VCUnKmAI](https://uni-trier.zoom.us/rec/share/pqu2I1PTIh2ia3elQ80q7nEv-xDVSnaBx61r-0Ycv8slntcJGZs7Fh3AjQjvo2KH.Fu0tSwm6VCUnKmAI)

*(Password: @2HHj#t9)*

**4) Ruth Slater (University of Hull):**

<https://uni-trier.zoom.us/rec/share/EJ351IFCoNKynNS4Lead4QrZoQ2SSOP7AJrw4xR0T8r6rQP-bL9p3bAhdrIQJYHI.r-E_SfiA7pwRhUEw>

*(Password: q%v34ry@)*

**3. After you have gathered your data**

**Analysing archival data:**

Once you have collected your archival data, **you need to ‘analyse’ it, i.e. explore how it helps you answer your research questions**. This will look different depending on the sorts of archival data you are using and the research questions you are answering.

Different methods of analysing archival material have been described: See “What is archive” session.

The following activity will help you to put some of these skills into practice before analysing archival data that you have collected.

**Activity**

Look at your archival documents and answer the following questions:

* What can you see in this archive? What does the text say or what can you see in the image?
* When do you think this archive was made? Why?
* Who do you think it might have been made by? Why?
* Who do you think it might have been made for? Why?
* What might have been the purpose of this archival document?
* Doe this document represent a real or imagined space?
* What does this archive tell you about geographical space?
* What sorts of architectural structures or landscape features can you see/are described or mentioned?
* What does it suggest about the use of space? Are there thing that can happen and things that can’t happen? Do you think this reflects reality or intention?
* What does it suggest about who is and isn’t in this space?
* What does it suggest about the relationships of people in this space?