

If you are a new archive user you may not have heard of a finding aid before. You're not alone, many first-time users are confused by them. A finding aid contains information relating to a specific collection. It is created by archivists and used by researchers to help determine if the material in a collection is relevant to their research. Think of it like a table of contents for a collection. Finding aids may:

- Provide a collection overview
- Contain administrative information (restrictions, citation, usage)
- Highlight key subject terms
- Establish a biographical or historical context
- Describe the scope and contents
- Specify the arrangement
- Provide a list of boxes and folders

**Collection Overview:** After the title and date range of the collection, you'll find a brief descriptive overview. This is a short summary about the collection's creator, physical extent, arrangement, and a brief abstract of the collection, among other details. Every collection we receive has its own collection identifier that is its own Manuscript Collection number (MC #). When requesting boxes be sure to include this information.

Scan the overview to get a concise view of vital information about the collection. Pay special attention to the specified date range, particularly if you are looking for items from a particular time period.

Also note the extent of the collection. Different units for measuring the extent of a collection (linear feet, cubic feet, or items) may occur across collections. This number will give you an idea of its size and is helpful when considering how much time it will take to complete your research. Below are examples:



*0.2 cubic foot box*



*0.4 cubic foot box*



*1 cubic foot box*

**Restrictions:** Occasionally there are collections that contain records that have access restrictions. Some collections contain electronic records on obsolete formats, while others may have fragile documents. This doesn't mean these items are completely restricted, but we have to limit access for long-term preservation.

Sometimes we have collections that have certain use restrictions, such as donor clauses or collections that have medical information protected under HIPAA or personally identifiable information (e.g. social security numbers). As best we can, we inform users what the collection contains that is restricted.

**Preferred citation:** To ensure that users of our materials cite our collections correctly, we include a preferred citation note. This will also help you keep track of what information comes from which source.

**Subject Terms:** Use the subject terms to get a broad idea of the content in a collection. These terms are assigned to reflect major topical concentrations within the collection and are like the subject headings in a library catalog. Online, these terms can link to a list of other collections that use these subjects. Subject terms can be a great way to find similar collections on a particular topic.

**Historical or Biographical Note:** This note summarizes the history of the individual or organization who created the collection. You'll find notable eras, dates, and/or events in the life of the organization or individual. This essential information places the collection in the context of its creation and is often helpful in understanding the materials within the collection. It can be a great starting point for understanding the life, activities, and relationships of an individual, or the significant dates, changes in structure, and general administrative history of an organization.

**Scope and Content Note:** This section of a finding aid contains a lot of useful information that can help you decide if the collection is relevant to you. Here, you'll find a summary of the contents of the collection. It will describe the particular subjects or topics found in the records, as well as events, eras, notable people or organizations, and particular highlights in the records.

It also lists the different types of primary sources held within the collection (photographs, correspondence, minutes). If the collection is arranged in different series or subseries, a description of each appears here, which can include subject coverage, date span, and arrangement of materials. The arrangement will tell you how the collection is intellectually organized. Often the arrangement is a hierarchical structure of related series and subseries. For organizations, it often goes from top down through the company. For individuals, it's often chronological from education thru career. Usually, it mirrors the original order it was received in, so you can see the use of the records as the creator did.

Pay close attention to the arrangement of a collection. Documents related to your topic may appear across the records or only selected series or subseries. You can save time by studying its arrangement.

**Box and Folder List:** This listing physically inventories the intellectual content of the collection. The listing records the titles of each series and subseries in the collection, and if applicable, the titles of each folder found within each physical box of the collection.

Series are groups of like material in a collection, mainly based on subject and/or format type. Sometimes there are also subseries, which are narrower subjects of collection material nested under a series. The folder title describes the nature of the documents contained within the folder. As you browse the listing, make note of interesting folders related to your topic as you'll need this when you visit the Center.

When you find a folder title that sounds significant for your research, also look at the titles around it. There may be similar folders nearby! Remember to think broadly about the topic you are researching as you scan the list. For example, if your topic is the development of nursing education, a folder entitled "nursing curriculum" might also contain relevant documents for your project.