



Archival Research for Beginners

Have you ever wanted to research your family history, your community's past, or a particular historical event? Maybe you've read secondary sources but are intrigued by the possibility of digging through unpublished material. It's time to visit an archives! For those who have no idea where to begin, I've gathered the top tips from five Canadian archivists who have appeared in my blog's Archivist Interview series. Questions? Email me at margaret@mbondbooks.com.

"Do your secondary source research first. Read books and articles on the subject before you delve into archival documents. It will give you understanding of the historical context and useful keywords to facilitate your archival search."

- Andrew Chernevych, Archivist, Galt Museum & Archives

"My most important tip for researchers is to be prepared. Using archival records can be very difficult for anyone who hasn't already done enough secondary research to know their subject pretty well. Archival research almost always takes longer than people expect it will, so whenever possible it's best to get a head start by looking at any available online resources ahead of time and making a list of records to view. If researchers are having trouble identifying what records might be relevant, it's a good idea to email or call the archives well ahead of time and ask for advice. While archivists can't usually do people's research for them, I think most are happy to try to point clients in the right direction."

- Heather Beattie, Archivist, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Archives of Manitoba

"Try to narrow down your search to 5 specific questions. Rather than asking a question like 'I would like to find all information that you have on the Weaver family of Malahide and Bayham Township in Elgin County,' for example, try to ask for information on 5 specific members of that family. Write down, in advance, the birth, marriage and death dates of all of those individuals, and the location of those events, in a list. That makes it much easier for the Archivist to think of and locate specific records which might be useful. Chances are, you will end up finding out information about other relatives along the way."

- Gina Coady, Assistant Archivist, Elgin County Archives

"Try to contact the Archivist or Archivist Assistant in advance of the research visit. Try to contact them at least a week in advance. And provide them with this list of 5 specific people. That will give the reference person some time to think of and retrieve the relevant records in advance of your visit."

- Gina Coady, Assistant Archivist, Elgin County Archives

"If your research inquiry is not related to specific individuals, but more to a type of record, again, list the top 5 types of records that you are interested in. For example: land records; census records; newspaper birth announcements, marriage announcements, or obituaries; cemetery records or church records."

- Gina Coady, Assistant Archivist, Elgin County Archives

"If the archives has an online database which is available to the public, try to do a thorough search of this database in advance so that you can focus on what records are only available at the archival facility, and are not available to the public as a whole."

- Gina Coady, Assistant Archivist, Elgin County Archives

"Keep an open mind about the possible value of records that are seemingly unrelated to your chosen topic. I have often had researchers show reluctance to consult records that I feel may be of use to them, but which at first glance may appear irrelevant."

- Kyle Neill, Senior Archivist, Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA)

"Fight the urge to rely strictly on resources that are digitized. The vast majority of any archive's holdings are not available as digital files, and using only material that has been born digital or digitized will compromise the depth and quality of one's research."

- Kyle Neill, Senior Archivist, Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA)

"Make sure to let the reference person know what research you have already done. This helps to reduce duplication of efforts and narrows the focus of the search."

- Gina Coady, Assistant Archivist, Elgin County Archives

"I think my biggest pieces of advice are ask your friendly reference archivist when you need help in learning how to use the finding aids/reference resources and always use a pencil."

- Glynys Hohmann, Team Lead, Government Records, Provincial Archives of Alberta

"Remember to write down the accession number whenever you make notes or photocopy archival materials. It is very frustrating to when you cannot find that one key document just because you did not take time to record the number."

- Andrew Chernevych, Archivist, Galt Museum & Archives

"Bring a USB stick with you – many archives now have digital microfilm readers that allow researchers to make digital scans. If you make use of such a machine be sure to always include the citation in the file name."

- Kyle Neill, Senior Archivist, Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives (PAMA)

A big thank you to all the archivists who contributed research tips! If you're interested in learning more about their work, be sure to check out their institutions' websites.