IASC PROCESSING INTRO GUIDE

For student employees, interns, and MITemps
Processing personal archives + Institute records in
MIT's Institute Archives & Special Collections

What is Processing?

"Processing" is a term used by archivists to describe the means and methods of preparing a collection for researchers to use in a library.
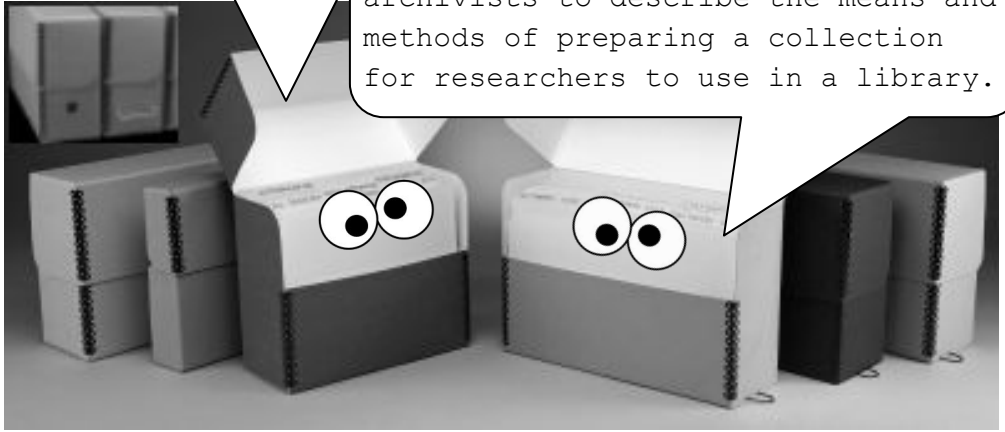
Steps in processing can include:

1. Reboxing/refoldering papers or materials into acid-free, archival housing.

2. Reviewing the collection for preservation risks, sensitive content, or other restrictions.

3. Interleaving, sleeving, and numbering photographic or audiovisual materials.

4. Arranging/rearranging folders into groups, based on their content or format (known as series and sub-series).

5. Creating an inventory and description of the collection's contents. The final product is usually a catalog record and a collection guide that we publish on the web (aka a Finding Aid).

When done well, processing...

>>>1. Keeps materials safe for future generations.

We find preservation threats, like mold or bugs, and can prevent further damage.

Bookworms are bad!

We can remove hanging file folders and rusty paperclips.

The New York Times
MEN WALK ON MOON
ASTRONAUTS LAND ON PLAIN; COLLECT ROCKS, PLANT FLAG
Voice From Moon: 'Eagle Has Landed'
A Powdery Surface Is Closely Explored

We can photocopy or digitize papers that are intrinsically unstable -- like thermofax paper or crumbly clippings.

We can separate and potentially reformat (digitize or copy) at-risk media like electronic records and audiovisual formats. We can transfer or migrate the content to prevent it from being lost as equipment, programs, and formats become obsolete.

Most of the time, we keep the originals, regardless of their condition. Reformatting these items helps us preserve their content along with the object itself.
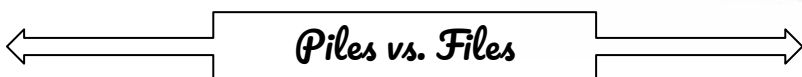
When done well, processing...

>>>2. Respects the intention of the original creator while helping the researcher find and use the collection's contents.

Original Order is important*

Pay attention to how the materials are ordered when you first open a box. There tend to be clues as to how they were assembled and used by their creator, and **WE CARE** about that.

Piles vs. Files

*but it is not exclusively important.

➡ Sometimes there is no comprehensible order. The processor makes order from chaos.

➡ Sometimes the original order is very confusing, and we need to explain or change it for the researcher to find anything. Your supervisor will help you do this.

➡ Sometimes the original order is fine but the collection's condition is terrible. We can re-create the order in new folders and boxes.

Messy does not mean BAD. Great things can start in crappy boxes.

Writing GOOD description is just as useful as having neat boxes.

If we change anything, we need to be upfront about it and explain what we did.

- An <ARRANGEMENT NOTE> in the collection guide clarifies what the archivist has done while processing.

- Good description can solve a lot of problems when dealing with collections that have unconventional arrangements. Sometimes you don't need to change the order, only describe what is there and let the researcher figure it out.

>>>2a. Sometimes we can highlight features of a collection that the creator did not intentionally or knowingly assemble.

There is nothing like [pointing out the presence of] **a dame** [or formerly invisible person/group]**!**

Try to help researchers find hidden voices and previously untold stories.

Remember, small amounts of material from suppressed, marginalized, colonized, or minority communities may be the only available documentation we have of their activities or historical role. Even if the collection's creator didn't notice or value these people, we can alert researchers to their presence in the archives.

How to find hidden voices

1: Look for evidence of suppressed or opposing views to the "official policy" that we tend to see in administrative or political records. Who are the troublemakers in your collection, and what are they trying to do?

2: Account books or receipts can be revealing. They might document a woman's domestic activities; the education of children; the purchase of slaves or payment of laborers; or something else entirely.

Ex: This is a receipt from 1830 for 20 pairs of shoes made for a plantation's slaves. The slaveholder paid $8.

3: Not everyone was able to read or write; look for other evidence of their agency.

Ex: Sometimes legal contracts are signed with an X, indicating the signer could not read or write.

4: Learn the lingo of the collection's creators, including their slang and abbreviations. Don't be discouraged by cursive handwriting; you will get better at reading it with practice.

Ex: Look for terms like "col'd," "colored," "Negro," "servant," "laborer," "cook," and "maid" and you might find documentation of enslaved African Americans, freedmen, or sharecroppers.
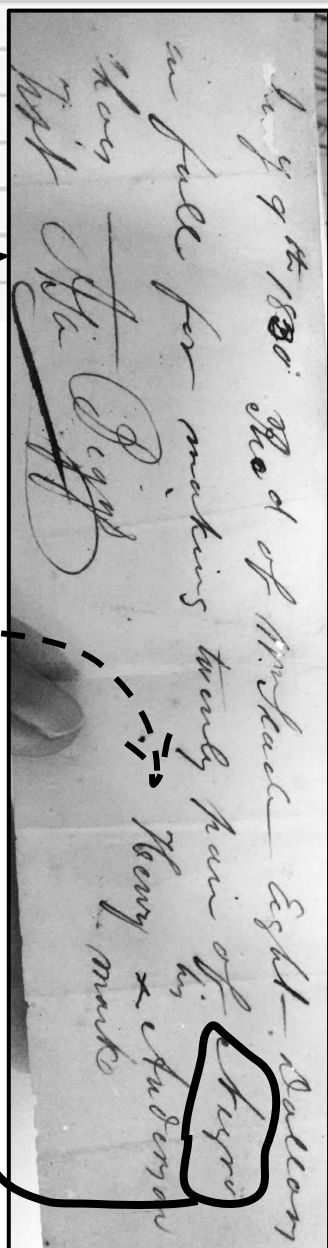
>>>3. Includes useful, reusable description.

Archivists gather and record information about each collection's creator, content, and origins (aka its **provenance**). We create description by following professional guidelines outlined in Describing Archives: A Content Standard (aka **DACS**) and Resource Description and Access (aka **RDA**).

KEY ACCESS POINTS

to look out for as you arrange and describe your collections:

❏ **NAMES**: Who was writing; who was being written about; who was the audience?

❏ **PLACES**: Where were the records created; what cities/counties/countries were mentioned?

❏ **SUBJECTS**: What were the topics, events, ideas, & activities covered in the collection?

❏ **DOCUMENTARY FORMS**: Are these meeting minutes, diaries, letters, newsletters, ledgers...?

❏ **OCCUPATIONS**: What sort of occupation did the creator have?

❏ **FUNCTIONS**: How did these records come to be created?

Descriptions should be accurate, meaning that

Dates, Names, and Spellings

are correct. Check your work.

HUMAN, YOUR TYPOS

DO NOT ENTERTAIN ME

memegenerator.net
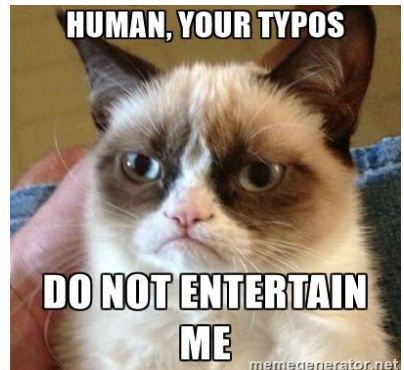
COLLECTION GUIDE FIELDS
YOU MAY BE ASKED TO WRITE

`<BIO/HIST>`: A paragraph or timeline summarizing the creator's lifespan.

`<SCOPE/CONTENT>`: A paragraph or more summarizing the content of the collection. Scope notes can be included for each series, subseries, and file, if needed.

`<ABSTRACT>`: 1-2 sentences summarizing the creator and the collection's content.

`<ACCESS RESTRICTIONS>`: Explains if parts of the collection are closed, and if so, why.

`<EXTENT>`: How big is the collection or part of the collection? We measure in folders, cubic feet, or in megabytes.

`<ARRANGEMENT NOTE>`: Explains how the collection or series are sorted. (Alphabetically, chronologically, etc.)

WE WANT TO TYPE THE INFORMATION ONE TIME,
BUT POTENTIALLY REUSE IT MANY TIMES.

You will enter most of your description into a spreadsheet or into ArchivesSpace, our collection management system. It might then be published in a collection guide, digital project, catalog record, or an exhibit. We want your metadata to perpetuate into the future, so

DO YOUR BEST WORK.

Make sure your facts are accurate. Write and type them correctly. Don't be sloppy.

Aim to produce INFORMATIVE DESCRIPTION.
When you write file titles, scope/content notes, and historical notes that include Key Access Points, you will help researchers

- Verify that this collection has content relevant to their project.
- Locate the right parts in the right box.
- Link this collection to other collections or books held in the library or in other repositories.

Assume that researchers are keyword-searching your descriptive text for personal names, organizations, projects, and subjects. Spell out acronyms at least once, don't abbreviate, and be consistent in your language and phrasing so that the description reads coherently.

Sometimes you might find oddball weird stuff or interesting side notes -- like doodles by children, political campaign buttons, or snapshots of a small town -- that are ephemeral or minor in the grand scale of the collection, but which are still worth noting in the description. Mention these things in a scope/content note. **(But don't imply that the whole collection is about one tiny fragment -- researchers will feel misled.)**

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ABOUT DATES:
Every series, subseries, and file title should also include a date or dates. Formatting is very important for this field. Record thusly:
> --1980 August 15
> --1980 August 15-October 3
> --1980 August-1983 July
> --1980-1982
> --1980-1982, 2005
> --1980s (NOT 1980's)
> --1980s-1990s
> --1982 and undated
> --undated
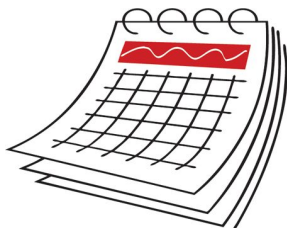
When done well, processing...

>>>4. Doesn't take too long.

Usually, we are processing groups of materials (hence the word "collection") and we are not trying to touch or describe every scrap of paper.

Rehousing, arrangement, and description efforts should be tailored to the needs of the collection and the anticipated needs of the researcher. Levels of description should match levels of arrangement.

This sort of strategic processing allows for us to revisit collections later, if needed, based on researcher use and the evolution of needs at our institution.
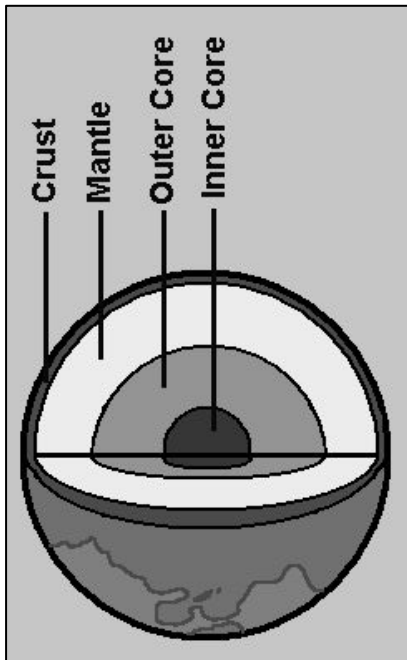
Collection level: tends to be for collections that are being accessioned, but will not be available to researchers (because of restrictions, backlogs, format challenges, etc.). Typically means rehousing, but little arrangement or description.

Series or Box level: tends to summarize formats or types of materials within the collection (ex: Correspondence, Writings, Subject Files) but doesn't include folder titles or details about what's in specific folders.

File level: tends to include a series description (see above) as well as a list of folder titles. May include details about each folder's content.

Item level: tends to include series and subseries level description, as well as a list of folders and/or items. **This level of description is rarely used in the IASC.** It is reserved for collections that are very small; extremely valuable (research-wise, monetarily, physically fragile, or other); or going to be digitized.

Our Physical Processing Guidelines

Q: Should I remove staples or paperclips?
A: Probably not, unless…
--the metal fastener is very rusty
--the fastener prevents access to the materials' content

Q: When should I wear gloves?
A: When you are handling metal objects, photographs, or film.

I'm probably ok!

I'm actually a photo archivist!

⚠️ **CAUTION**

Use a spatula or staple remover to pry apart a rusty fastener. Never risk stressing or tearing the paper. Get help if you need it!

Photographs tend to get special care. Large prints will be foldered and boxed in flat boxes, and may be interleaved with acid-free paper to protect them.

REMOVE ALL BINDER CLIPS

REMOVE ALL RUBBER BANDS

Snapshots tend to be sleeved in preservation-quality binder pages. When sleeving, make sure the backs are visible. Patrons like to see if there are captions.

Replace hanging file folders with acid-free archival folders.

ASK FIRST, but most framed posters will be de-framed. We have tools available!
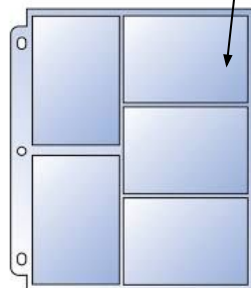
3-ring binders take up space and may rust over time. Most binders are removed during processing. Folder the pages, keeping the tabs and maintaining the order of the papers. Photocopy the cover (if it is relevant) before recycling the binder.

Electronic media and audiovisual materials may need extra attention. Please alert your supervisor if you find these formats.

ALL ABOUT FOLDERS

Foldering is important! Material should fit inside the folder (no edges hanging out). Folders should be the same size as their box. (Letter folders in letter boxes; legal folders in legal boxes; oversize folders should fill the box and not slide around.)

Q: When should I refolder?
A: Refolder if...

...the original folder is torn or missing.

...the original folder is a hanging file folder.

...the original folder is very old, acidic, or brittle.

...the original folder's title is illegible.

...the collection is being processed at the Folder or Item Level.

HANDWRITING IS IMPORTANT. WRITE NEATLY.

Label your folders clearly, but don't use your pencil like a knife carving into wood. It should be easy to erase your labels.

PENCILS ONLY. No pens. Use a good eraser!

HI·POLYMER ERASER Pentel

Square the bottom of your folder only if it is full. Don't overstuff your folder -- it should be less than 1.5" thick. Use spacers if needed to make sure your folders stand up straight in the box.

ALWAYS STAND UP STRAIGHT

NEVER SLOUCH!
memegenerator.net

Folder Labeling Template!

[Left side of the tab]   [Right side of the tab]

| File Title | Date | (if applicable) #/# |

Don't waste your time or our folders! Check your labeling with your supervisor before you make too many folders, or if you have oversize folders to label.

ACCESS RESTRICTIONS:
ALERT YOUR SUPERVISOR IF YOU FIND THE FOLLOWING...

Personal or financial identification numbers or info, such as:
- Social Security Numbers (SSNs)
- Bank accounts or routing numbers
- Student ID numbers
- Passwords

FERPA-related information, such as:
- Student grades and course enrollments
- Student financial/personnel records
- Recommendation letters
- Student and teaching evaluations (unless anonymous)

MIT-related materials that are included under Institute restrictions, such as:
- MIT Corporation records
- Tenure/promotion files
- Hiring/firing/personnel files
- Student records (see FERPA, above)
- Donation information

HIPAA or healthcare-related information, such as:
- Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES) records
- Medical records

Government correspondence or reports that are marked:
- Classified
- Top Secret
- Restricted (Eyes Only)

THESE FILES COULD NEED EXTRA ATTENTION AND IT IS IMPORTANT THAT THEY BE REVIEWED BY YOUR SUPERVISOR.

Self Care 101

Archival processing can be grueling, both mentally and physically. It is important to take good care of yourself. You are your best advocate! You should always feel free to talk to your supervisor if you have any questions or concerns about your work environment or assigned tasks. We care about you and want you to have a good experience while working in the IASC.

Be careful lifting and retrieving boxes; lift from your legs and don't arch your back. Use a ladder to reach boxes on the top shelf so they don't fall on your head. Get help if you need it and use a cart to transport boxes longer distances.

Tell your supervisor immediately if you are injured at work in any way.

IASC may have materials on some topics that you may find emotionally upsetting. If you are distressed by the content of a collection you are processing, it's okay. Please talk to your supervisor and we will work together to find a solution.

LOVE YOUR-SELF

Don't forget to take breaks while you work. You can bring water bottles to designated spots, and you should go ahead and excuse yourself for restrooms, snacks, and fresh air if needed.

water

Use a dust mask when dealing with dirty or smelly collections. You may need to use a fume hood in Wunsch if mold is present.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER PROCESSING?

We label and barcode boxes and store them offsite.

We publish your description in catalog records and collection guides on EMMAS, so students and scholars will know that the Institute Archives & Special Collections has these materials.

Check out existing guides here: https://emmas-lib.mit.edu/

Patrons (from MIT and elsewhere) and staff use our website's tools to determine what boxes should be requested for research in the reading room, which is in 14N-118. (Go check it out!)

Happy researchers in the Reading Room!

When done well, archival processing provides proper housing and labeling for collections, meaning they can be safely shelved for generations. It allows for researchers to search and find materials in our collections. And, it allows for librarians and faculty to use these collections in teaching, exhibits, and research.

You are an important member of the Institute Archives & Special Collections. Thank you for your hard work!
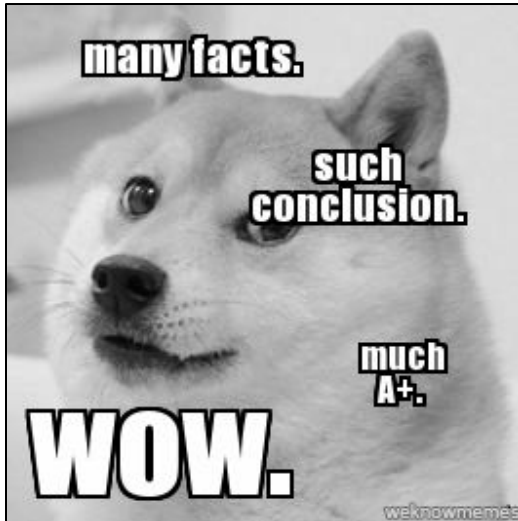
TL;DR RULES OF PROCESSING

1. Do no harm.

Wash your hands before starting work. Handle collections carefully as you rehouse and arrange them. Get help when something arrives damaged or doesn't easily fall into place in our boxes and folders.

2. Do not over-arrange collections.

Use existing order to your advantage as you think of series and file structure.

3. Put thought into your descriptions.

Aim to be accurate but also informative about the collection's contents and creator. Write for your researchers, not for yourself. Check your work for typos and mistakes.

Helpful links (in case you want to read even more!):

DACS: http://www2.archivists.org/standards/DACS

RDA: https://access.rdatoolkit.org/

MIT Libraries website: http://libraries.mit.edu/

IASC Processing Manual: https://wikis.mit.edu/confluence/x/5SHWBw

Society of American Archivists: http://www2.archivists.org/

THE
End