

How Archives Organize Their Holdings

Although archives organize and describe their records according to their own policies and procedures, they generally share a common method, terminology and approach when performing this work.

Records are transferred to archives from a variety of public and private sources, including government departments, private companies, individuals, etc. After transfer, the records are processed for use by the public. This **processing** can involve an appraisal of the documents to determine those that have enduring value, an account of what is contained in the documents and a biographical sketch of the creator (these accounts are commonly called **descriptions**) and physical arrangement of the records.

In Canada, many archives describe their holdings based on the **fonds** principle – the fonds is traditionally described as being the entire body of records created by the transferring entity (for example, an individual, a government department, or private company). The records related to that fonds may be further broken down into series, which are based on a common topic or function. Depending on the complexity of the records, the series level of description may be broken down further into smaller hierarchical units, such as sub-series and sub-sub-series. As an example, at Library and Archives Canada, the records of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (or RCMP) have been organized into a fonds. Some of the series within this fonds include E Division, B Division, C Division, Special Events, the RCMP Band, etc. Within E Division, the sub-series include Letterbooks, Local Orders, Daily Journals, etc. Please note that all records from a particular organization may not enter an archives at the same time, but instead, transfers can occur over a period of time, even years.

Many archives develop **finding aids** to detail the particular records in a fonds. One finding aid may exist for an entire fonds, or many may exist for one sub-series. It often depends on how the records were transferred, the nature of the records, and the way that the archives processes records.

Archival records are usually maintained in files, boxes or volumes, and it is at this level that finding aid descriptions usually begin. Researchers can begin by looking at fonds and series level descriptions to find materials related to their topic. Once the series or sub-series of interest has been located, the finding aid for those records can be consulted. So, if you were interested in the letterbooks from E Division of the RCMP, you would consult finding aid 18-18.

The staff at your local archives will be able to explain the way their holdings are organized and help you identify records related to your interests. To discover your local archives, visit <http://www.archivescanada.ca/car/menu.html>.