

Disrespecting Original Order

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THE CONCEPT OF ORIGINAL ORDER was molded into the form familiar to contemporary archivists over three quarters of a century ago. In 1898 S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin published their influential *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*. There they wrote, "The system of arrangement must be based on the original organization of the archival collection."¹ This principle became widely accepted by archivists dealing with governmental or other institutional records. Archivists responsible for the care of personal papers have been far more reluctant to accept the principle. At the very least, however, such archivists have felt compelled to justify their belief that the principle's application to personal manuscripts is limited. Despite hesitancy and some opposition, a general trend among archivists exists to accept the principle of original order as the normative organiz-

ing method.

Nowhere is this trend shown more clearly than in the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) own *Basic Manual Series Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description*, by David B. Gracy II. Gracy acknowledges prior writers' difficulties with the principle of original order and concedes such objections were "valid in terms of the smaller collections once the staple of manuscript repositories." But in the next breath he concludes that today "these objections blur before the massive organizational records and voluminous bodies of personal papers characteristic of the twentieth century." Gracy knows that exceptions to the principle may be made legitimately even today, but for the most part modern archivists "lean toward 'restoration' work, toward maintaining, or reestablishing, the files as closely as possible to the order in which they were

¹S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 2nd ed., trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1968), p. 52.

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kept by the creator.”² Here, clearly stated, is the belief that original order is the normative organizing principle for all historical material.

Gracy’s supposition that original order has won the war, if not all the battles, is open to question. Resistance to the principle among those who deal with personal papers remains fairly strong. The writings of Kenneth Duckett, Lucile Kane, and Ruth Bordin and Robert Warner all challenge either the principle’s applicability or the idea itself.

Kenneth W. Duckett, writing in *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual For Their Management, Care and Use*, is the most generous toward the principle. He concedes its primacy quickly, but then dismisses the principle as generally inapplicable to personal papers. Most frequently, he says, “a set of papers arrives in almost complete disorder.” This means “the curator is constantly confronted with collections, large and small, which retain few if any traces of the original order.”³ To Duckett, original order is an interesting, but most often inapplicable, idea.

Lucile M. Kane’s *A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts* accepts the idea of original order but adds to it a second, limiting principle. “Fundamental to any organization,” writes Kane, “are two important principles: respect for the integrity, or basic structure, of the collection, and consideration for those who will use the material.”⁴ Within her framework, original order may be modified if it can be justified in terms of user need.

The contemporary manual most critical of original order is Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner’s *Modern Manuscripts Library*. Their view of original order is not one that recognizes the principle’s primacy. Rather, they suggest that it is merely one of several competing organizational schemes. “Original order, provenance, and chronology will solve most arrangement problems.”⁵ In fact, they go so far as to suggest that for personal papers original order is not even the best of the competing organizational schemes. It can be “extremely useful,” but “no system of arranging personal papers other than a chronological one comes as close to life as it is experienced.”⁶

While the resistance to the principle of original order among those who work primarily with personal papers is both well known and clearly articulated, uneasiness with the concept also exists among those who deal primarily with governmental records. Criticism by governmental archivists has not been gathered together into a single, cogent argument. Despite its fragmented nature, such criticism is extremely interesting since it was among those working with governmental records that the idea of original order first appeared.

The National Archives’s short-lived Division of Classification publicly conceded in the profession’s early years that even for government records, original order “was difficult of practical application.”⁷ This conclusion is not surprising after considering European sources first made available in the United States

²David B. Gracy II, *Archives & Manuscripts: Arrangement & Description* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), p. 8.

³Kenneth W. Duckett, *Modern Manuscripts: A Practical Manual for Their Management, Care and Use* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1975), p. 120.

⁴Lucile M. Kane, *A Guide to the Care and Administration of Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1966), p. 13.

⁵Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner, *The Modern Manuscript Library* (New York: Scarecrow Press, 1966), p. 45.

⁶Ibid., p. 44.

⁷Gracy, p. 8.

through T.R. Schellenberg's writings. In his research, Schellenberg discovered several criticisms of the principle written by European state archivists prior to World War II. In the 1920s Georg Winter, then Director of the Prussian State Archives, wrote, "There existed, particularly in earlier periods, registries in which the grouping and maintaining of records was without system, foolish and impractical. In such cases, the archivist should not—as every one with any insight will admit—literally ride the principle [of original order] to death."⁸ Gustaf Weibull elaborated on Winter's point in 1930: "The justification—that the original order adequately served official purposes and still served these purposes—is hardly tenable. In most instances, officials in the beginning allowed documents to accumulate without arranging them according to a well thought out system."⁹ Schellenberg made available to American archivists the experience of their European colleagues with original order.

If the doubts created by Schellenberg's research unsettle those raised with a literal faith in the Dutch trinity, section 16, a wider reading of their chapter and verse has a similarly unsettling effect. Section 16, in which Muller, Feith, and Fruin define original order, is primarily concerned with arrangement at the record group level. The authors are quite dogmatic in the application of the principle at this level, arguing their case at length. Nevertheless, even at the record group level, they concede the possibility of rearrangement by the archivist. Sec-

tion 17 begins, "In an arrangement of an archival collection, therefore, the original order should first of all be reestablished as far as possible. Only thereafter can one judge whether, and to what extent, it is desirable to deviate from that order."¹⁰ Although the subsequent text makes clear that Muller, Feith, and Fruin do not believe deviations will often be necessary, they recognize that the possibility exists.

Below the record group level, Muller, Feith, and Fruin become ever more liberal in allowing the archivist to vary the documents' original order. In discussing series level arrangement, they state, "It may also happen that the trouble which would have to be taken in order to reconstruct the old organization is out of proportion to the result to be obtained."¹¹ At the filing unit and document level the authors border on abandoning entirely their carefully developed ethic of conservation:

But it is unnecessary and even undesirable to adopt in every detail also within these limits the old order of the documents. Our early archival administrators, who in their inventories pursued a different purpose from ours, produced until far into the 18th century work that is entirely inadequate for present needs. Their highly superficial arrangement of documents, therefore, not only may but positively must be modified.¹²

⁸T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 190.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹⁰Muller, Feith, and Fruin, pp. 59–60. As the concept of levels of arrangement was first clearly articulated by Oliver W. Holmes in 1964 ("Archival Arrangement—Five Different Operations at Five Different Levels," *American Archivist* 27 [January 1964], pp. 21–42) its application here is obviously *ex post facto*.

¹¹Muller, Feith, and Fruin, p. 83.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 59.

If the principle of original order is as tenuous as all of the criticisms here cited would make it appear, it must be asked why the archival community has expressed faith in the principle for so long? It seems that there are two basic sets of reasons which explain this situation. Broadly categorized, the reasons for the continuance of the idea of original order are first, practical, and second, theoretical.

Practically, the principle of original order has two mainstays. The first is that it frequently works. While it is not universally applicable, while a great number of exceptions to it must be made, nevertheless, it is not so flawed that it is totally unworkable. It contains enough truth to muddle by. The second practical mainstay of original order is its economy. Faced with perpetually underfunded budgets, the archival community often has not had the capability to implement alternative organizational schemes upon large bodies of documents, whatever the theoretical considerations. Original order makes virtue of necessity.

Theoretically, maintaining a collection's original order serves two purposes, one historical and the other archival. Historically, the ordering of documents by their creator reveals information about the character and organization of the creator independent of the documents' content. Original order has evidential value. It also has archival value in that it broadens considerably the cardinal principle of provenance. Provenance insists that archivists respect a creator of a body of documents by maintaining that group of records as a distinct unit, neither adding to nor subtracting from the files. Maintaining the documents' original order amplifies this respect. Not only is the integrity of the creator's documentary body respected, but also the creator's ordering. In this framework original

order flows organically from provenance.

The fundamental question to ask is if these practical and theoretical considerations are sufficiently compelling to lead to the reaffirmation of original order despite its frequently noted limitations. The practical considerations do not have such force. Any theory of organization that is a good rule of thumb and is reasonably cheap to implement would serve practical purposes. The theoretical issues, however, are more complex.

It cannot be refuted that the ordering imposed upon documents by their creator has evidential value. The ordering makes a statement about the creator. Despite this, original order can be changed. Every manual available, even the work of Muller, Feith, and Fruin, concedes this by statement or implication. At what point may such legitimate alteration occur? This question is rarely addressed in the literature. The reason for this omission is that the historical value of original order and its archival value have become closely entwined. While the question of evidential value can be dealt with straightforwardly, its analysis becomes muddled when archival considerations are laid upon it.

In considering the point at which legitimate alterations of a filing system for historical considerations may occur, it is necessary to weigh the relative evidential value of the documents themselves against the evidential value of the filing system. In such a balance, it is clear that the documents are of primary interest. Creators first create documents. It is into this activity that they pour most of their labor. It is in the completed documents that they express their deepest thoughts and profoundest emotions. Documents are filed when this process is finished. Filing is a secondary activity, constrained by a finite number of logical organizational schemes. Frequently, files are organized and main-

tained by persons other than the documents' creator, a situation which lessens the evidential value of the filing system. For all these reasons, when a filing scheme imposed on documents by their creator proves unworkable it becomes legitimate for the archivist to destroy the original order insofar as it is necessary to insure that the evidentially superior documents may be successfully used.

Considerations of archival theory complicate this relatively straightforward analysis. An archivist strongly influenced by the perceived relationship between provenance and original order is doubly hesitant to tamper with original order. Not only will evidence be lost, but archival shibboleths will also be disturbed. The result is that the archivist will tend to leave original order as it stands, however poor access to the evidentially superior documents may be.

This situation is particularly troublesome because the principle of original order, considered independently from the principle of provenance, cries out for reformulation. It does not address the problems of a whole class of archival material: those papers lacking all order, either originally or due to hopeless confusion. Even for those papers which retain their order, the principle can be applied only with qualification and discretion. Used in any other way it can be, to paraphrase Georg Winter, ridden to death. This being the case, the apparently neat and direct relationship between original order and provenance becomes original order's chief value. Compatibility, however, does not demonstrate validity. Validity must be independently established. Within the framework of independent validation, it can be asked if a theory of organization can be developed

that is broader than the current theory of original order and that, as a secondary issue, can be related successfully to the principle of provenance.

Any new principle of organization should include several features absent in original order. Most obviously, it should offer advice to the processor faced with an unordered collection. More subtly, it should recognize the evidential superiority of documents over filing order by making access to documents a virtue superior to the simple retention of filing systems. Any new theory should also be pragmatic. It should be a rule of thumb at least as applicable as original order, and it should reflect economic reality.

A melding of ideas from various sources may offer a theoretical construct which meets these criteria. Schellenberg wrote that the archivist "should have no compunction about rearranging series in relation to each other or single record items within them if by so doing he can make the records more intelligible and more serviceable. The test here is a very practical one of usability."¹³ The idea of usability, which can be defined as a describable, direct method of locating documentation, is a valuable one in the organization of papers. It gives the processor faced with an unordered collection a clear objective. Furthermore, it directly addresses the problem of relative evidential value of document access against the evidential value of the original ordering of the documents. But usability, in itself, does not go far enough. Faced with an unordered collection or a collection in which the original order is inadequate to accomplish efficient access, an archivist could imagine many usable organizational schemes. Usability does not help the archivist select among them.

¹³T.R. Schellenberg, "Archival Principles of Arrangement," *American Archivist* 24 (January 1961): 24.

Bordin and Warner's book addresses this problem of selecting among competing arrangement schemes. They state, "The simpler the arrangement, the greater its usefulness."¹⁴ Applied here, their suggestion would lead the archivist considering various organizational schemes to adopt the simplest. Put together in a single dictum, Schellenberg's idea of usability and Bordin and Warner's concept of simplicity could be expressed as follows: Records in an archival institution should be maintained in a state of usability, their exact arrangement being the simplest possible which assures access to the documentation.

Defined in such a way, a theory of simple usability would establish a minimal archival standard which could be supplemented by more elaborate descriptive devices but which at its basic level seems capable of withstanding both pragmatic and theoretical considerations as well as or more successfully than the principle of original order. Pragmatically, it is a good rule of thumb. If a filing system is usable it should be retained. If the original filing scheme is marginal, or flawed in part, the least complicated changes needed to make it acceptable are mandated. If the filing system inherited by the archivist is unusable, or if there is no order, the rule of organization is simplicity. Simple usability is also economically practical. It does not require the reorganization of adequately arranged material, nor does it impose elaborate criteria by which unorganized material must be arranged. Comparing the pragmatic values of original order and simple usability, it would seem that the two are approximately equal financially, but usability is a broader, more encompassing rule. Because it is a better rule, usability is the more pragmatic principle.

In terms of theoretical considerations about evidential value, simple usability is vastly superior to original order. Usability acknowledges the evidential superiority of documents over filing systems by placing primary emphasis on access to documents. Usability, however, is also mindful of the evidential value of filing order and mandates the preservation of the original filing scheme if it is usable, the simplest system available almost invariably being the creator's filing system. The framework of original order has no mechanism through which relative evidential values can be weighed. Because usability corrects this deficiency, it is superior to original order when the evidential value of archival collections is discussed.

A concept of simple usability also relates well to the archival principle of provenance. Considered broadly, provenance requires the archivist to respect, as fully as possible, the integrity of the creator's work. Simple usability shows this respect by seeking to give full and complete access to the deepest thoughts of the creator expressed on a permanent medium. It recognizes the primacy of that thought over the less interesting and occasionally incapacitating arrangement of the medium. Simple usability transforms the organizational objective of the archivist from slavish preservation of file clerks' work to the fullest possible availing of the creator's mind for the use and enrichment of all who would care to examine it. Clearly such a goal shows the profoundest respect for the creator. It goes far beyond the simple respecting of order.

For all the differences between the principle of original order and a concept of simple usability, a bond exists between the two. Their relationship is analogous to that which exists between the physics of Newton and Einstein.

¹⁴Bordin and Warner, p. 45.

Newton's ordering of the universe often supplies a fully adequate description of observed physical phenomena, just as original order often fully describes what organizational steps an archivist must take. But either theory, pushed to its limit, breaks down. Einstein took Newtonian physics and placed it in a broader context of space and time. Newton's laws became a special case in a larger universe. So too a theory of simple usability does not replace the idea of

original order. Rather it incorporates the idea into a better description of the archival community's responsibility in arranging the documents it cares for. Original order is to be respected when it is usable; but just as Einstein's theory guides physicists when Newtonian law can be applied no further, so a theory of simple usability can guide archivists when original order becomes inadequate.