

Standards for Archival Description

Dancing the Continental: Archival Descriptive Standards in Canada

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Abstract: The author summarizes the descriptive standards development process under way in Canada, which focuses on rules for description and means of providing access points to archival descriptions.

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IF ONE OF THE goals of the Working Group is to work toward the establishment of North American (or even international) descriptive standards for archival material, it is essential to know what is happening in Canada. The work planned or underway in the Canadian community under the direction of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists' Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards (PCDS), can be divided into two broad areas: the development of rules for description of various forms of archival holdings, and the study of various means of providing access to the descriptions.

Rules for Description

Working groups composed of experienced archivists have been, or will be, established to develop rules for all levels of archival description. The first group was established in April 1987 to develop rules for description at the *fonds d'archives* level for all archival media. Their report has been circulated throughout the Canadian archival community for comments; these comments have been compiled and have been considered by the PCDS and the Fonds d'Archives Working Group. The final report, expected in early 1990, will include an introductory chapter containing general rules for the description of archives at all levels (similar to Chapter 1 of *AACR 2*). A chapter on rules for the description of multiple media fonds and a discussion of the concept of multi-level description will also be included. These rules will serve as an essential foundation for the rules for description of specific media and for other levels of archival description.

Additional working groups have been established to develop rules for description of particular media at the series, filing unit

(where appropriate), and item level. The working groups are listed below, together with the date of their first meeting.

- Textual materials (January 1988)
- Moving image materials (October 1988)
- Graphic materials (September 1988)
- Sound recordings (November 1988)
- Machine-readable archives (Spring 1990)
- Cartographic materials (Spring 1990)
- Architectural records (Spring 1990)

A small working group has been established to ensure the consistent use of terminology by all the working groups. These groups will submit their reports at various points starting in early 1990, and will follow a similar process to that of the Fonds Working Group: review by the PCDS, circulation to the community for comments, incorporation of necessary revisions, and distribution to the community. The PCDS is planning to have the process completed by 1992.

Providing Access to Archival Description

Other groups are considering the issues involved in providing various forms of access points to these descriptions. Despite their reliance on provenance as a main access point, archivists do not truly understand name authorities; library literature on the topic has been inaccessible or inappropriate. The PCDS has already produced one publication written particularly for archivists and another is planned. *An Introduction to Authority Control for Archivists*, published in 1989, discusses the reasons for authority control, its application to archives, and the components required in any system, whether manual or automated.¹ A second publication, building on the first, will be a detailed procedural manual for implementing authority control.

The Subject Indexing Working Group began its meetings in January 1988, charged with the task of investigating the theory and methodology of indexing, and the appli-

¹Louise Gagnon-Arguin, *An Introduction to Authority Control for Archivists* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, 1989).

cation of existing systems to archives in the context of descriptive standards. These also are areas not well understood by archivists; this report and its recommendations will provide valuable guidance for future work.

The Choice of Access Points Working Group, which began its work in August 1988, is considering the theory and methodology of choosing access points to descriptions of archival material. It will be developing definitions and rules for the choice of access points, and the structuring of multi-level description. In its discussions, the group is considering some of the

theoretical issues associated with basic archival principles. Its report will provide a valuable articulation of these issues.

Further information about any aspect of this work may be obtained from:

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