

Draft No. 4: Thinking about *Our* Writing¹

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I'm behind. It's endemic this time of year when we are in the throes of fall; it's a time when users seem to come out of the woodwork after summer vacations that only seem to spawn new ideas for research projects. And, of course, we have our usual responsibilities outside of our "day jobs"—some of us are dealing with kids in new schools or new school years at the very least; some of us are dealing with elderly parents; some of us are starting new positions; some of us are looking for new positions. We support colleagues and friends and family; some of us are feeling a similar loss.² We deal with the emotional work of work and the emotional work of life, and the practical necessities of both. All of us are being challenged—in ways both good and bad.

Since I came to my keyboard to write this essay, I have started it and stopped it at least three times. If I were writing by hand, my wastebasket would register the proverbial overflow of crumbled balls of paper. I've had early morning writing sessions, late night writing sessions, and nothing has "clicked." Of course, life and work intervene, as they do for us all. So here, in my own draft number 4, I simply want to put a few thoughts on the page, inspired by what has been written for this issue of *American Archivist*. Now, I'm no John McPhee or Stephen King or Natalie Goldberg³—I haven't crafted beautifully written essays about what it means to write, in general. However, this issue has inspired a few observations which I believe are at least germane to the process of writing our archival literature. What is it about OUR writing process that makes it such a challenge? Well, I think it's because we're both progressive and measured; expressive, expansive, and precise. This issue—and our literature in general—reflects this.

The first challenge: We are professionals who are deeply interested in improving and building our profession. We work on all aspects of our practice—archival process, professional growth, personal growth, and social responsibility. The articles in this issue, again, reflect all of these. I say “again” because if you’ve been paying attention to the content of the journal over the past few years, you are seeing that, in addition to our conversation about basic archival work such as description, digital preservation, and collecting, our professional identity is actively taking on the personal impact of that work. We are more than our theories—we are questioning how our practice is influenced by our lives, the impact that our work has on our lives, and how we can balance them. This draws out questions such as the ones posed by Alexis Braun Marks, Rachael Dreyer, Jennifer Johnson, and Michelle Sweetser on balancing work and caregiving during the pandemic. It demands us to consider the impact of the professional landscape on early career professionals, as studied by Ashley Todd-Diaz and Alex Poole. It engaged Helen Wong Smith, Dawn Schmitz, and Cyndi Shein, with Lisa Schmitz, to explore whether our profession values cultural competency in recruitment practices. These topics are challenging specifically because the authors have mined the personal to bring that to the professional, insisting that the overlap cannot be ignored. They are right. We feel the impact of our personal lives on our work every day, and we are trying to deal with this in our literature. As you know, every article is peer-reviewed by one member of the Editorial Board and two readers from the membership, and so the importance of how we bring our identity to practice is one that is shared widely and continues to provide a framework for how we think about archives. As we write, we better understand our work and our connections to each other and to society.

The second challenge is to keep exploring our archival practice. Maristella Feustle’s article on archival authority records includes this observation: “Even when an archival collection is ‘about’ an individual, it is the tangible imprint of a community, as a unique assemblage of connections between people.” (p. 388)—and the same can be said of archivists and practice: especially when we are writing “about” some aspect of practice, the “tangible imprint of a community” is apparent. When we write about new approaches to practice—as Lexy deGraffenreid engages description, or Feustle engages authority records, or Maali Alghnimi and Donald Force engage digital preservation—we heighten our collective expertise. The development of our literature and our expertise is a slow process, and one that loops forward and back through “themes” that appear in the literature and then disappear, only to resurface. The challenge of writing about archival practice, then, is that it is double-edged. Practice is easy to understand—we do it every day, and there are principles and guidelines that help us stay on track⁴; but it’s difficult to convey how that practice shifts in response to technology or society or global events. Each article we write develops the context of our work, which rests at the core of our profession.

In one draft of this essay, I was trying to open with a conversation about archival context. The definition in the “Dictionary of Archives Terminology” is concise⁵ but branches off quickly into the theoretical implications that are so hard to convey, especially to the non-archivist. I’ve found myself trying to explain some of these sticky definitions to scholars and researchers recently, and in doing so I’ve come to one final realization about our writing—that we’re constantly finessing our own professional context. Writing about our professional identity as well as its influence on practice, we’re creating the context in which we work. And the very fact that we generate this conversation ourselves means that we shape our own understanding of archival theory, practice, and identity. It also means that we share it. This isn’t precious or insular—that is, we are not wasting our energy creating literature that is primarily by and for archivists. The application of what we write ultimately moves beyond us—it informs how we preserve the records in our holdings for the future, and how we make those materials accessible in the present.⁶ Without archival context, records lose their meaning; I’d venture to say that without the context of our literature, our profession loses its meaning. We preserve the context of records through our work, and we preserve the context of our profession through our literature. The two cannot be easily separated.

Let me close, then, with one practical announcement, and one bit of hope:

First, I will draw your attention to a shift in practice for the journal. In order to improve the workflow of the journal, the Editorial Board has adopted a new approach. We are now actively within the first iteration of a Submissions Window workflow, with manuscripts submitted to be considered in February. You can see the full description and timeline for the Submissions Window here: <https://www2.archivists.org/american-archivist/submissionwindow>. This new approach to gathering your writing for the journal seeks to address all of these needs that I’ve been talking about. It is respectful of the time of authors, peer reviewers, the Editorial Board, and the Editor. At the same time, it values the work and the needs of authors who are writing in challenging times.

To close *American Archivist* volume 87, here is my hope: that the “tangible imprint” of our community—our literature, our writing processes—continues to rise to the occasion; and that we all keep writing through challenging times (whatever those challenges may be), with the full understanding of the context that we’re creating and the value of our time and work. I’ll look forward to seeing all of you—in my inbox, via a submission, at a conference, or simply in conversation—in the new year. . . .

NOTES

- ¹ With a nod to John McPhee. Yes, his book of essays about writing is on my TBR list. The lack of quotes will indicate that I have yet to read it! John McPhee, *Draft No. 4: On the Writing Process* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).
- ² As I was writing this, our colleague and former SAA President Danna Bell passed away quite suddenly, a loss that I felt deeply, and I know that many of us will feel for a long time to come.
- ³ Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*, Expanded Edition (Boston, Shambhala Publications, 2010). The original 1986 edition was the book that started it all for me.... it's been in many editions since. If you're interested in writing, I highly recommend it!
- ⁴ The Archival Fundamentals Series is in its third iteration: <https://www2.archivists.org/archival-fundamentals-series-III>, captured at <https://perma.cc/WRB9-BMEC>.
- ⁵ Society of American Archivists, Dictionary of Archives Terminology, s.v. "context," <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/context.html>, captured at <https://perma.cc/5TJQ-5M4R>.
- ⁶ I would suggest reading Laura Millar, *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age* (Society of American Archivists and American Library Association, 2019). It's an exceptional discussion of exactly why archival theory and practice matter to the public.