

UNDERSTANDING ARCHIVES

LEVELS OF ARRANGEMENT

Repository

Any type of organization that holds documents, including business, institutional, and government archives, manuscript collections, libraries, museums, and historical societies, and in any form, including manuscripts, photographs, moving image and sound materials, and their electronic equivalents. A University Archives and Special Collections could have several repository levels: rare books, manuscripts, university archives, artifact collection, photograph collection.

Collection

A group of materials with some unifying characteristic, usually a shared history of creation and ownership.

Series

Documents maintained as a unit because they result from the same accumulation or filing process (development office files); relate to a particular function, subject, or activity (training courses for 2006); result from the same activity (monthly reports); have a particular form (minutes); or because of some other relationship arising out of their creation, receipt, or use. A series is also known as a records series and can include sub-series.

File

A group of documents related by use or topic, typically housed in a folder (or a group of folders for a large file).

Item

An item may consist of several pieces but is treated as a whole. For example, a letter may have several pages but is treated as an item because of its content. A decision about the boundaries of an item is sometimes ambiguous; a photograph album may be considered an item, and the individual photographs within the album may also be considered items. Items are generally considered to be the smallest archival unit.