



Book Review: *Describing Archives - A Content Standard*

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Abstract

A new, but not entirely unfamiliar, standard has entered the archival scene. One could say that it is both “new” and “improved” without advertising falsely. No matter what your knowledge of archival description standards here-to-fore, you have probably followed a standard that has been incorporated into *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, also known as DACS. . . *Describing Archives* is the most recent addition to a lineage of national and international standards for archival description . . . Overall, *Describing Archives* is an excellent and much-needed addition to the continuum of description standards for archival materials. It is inevitable that as archival practices develop and evolve, so will this content standard.

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***Describing Archives: A Content Standard*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004.**

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A new, but not entirely unfamiliar, standard has entered the archival scene. One could say that it is both “new” and “improved” without advertising falsely. No matter what your knowledge of archival description standards here-to-fore, you have probably followed a standard that has been incorporated into *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, also known as *DACS*. *DACS* emanated from a joint U.S.-Canadian grant-funded endeavor, CUSTARD (Canadian-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description), that was initiated in 2001. In spring 2003, the group decided that differences between the two countries’ practices were too different to develop a single standard, and the American contingent split from the group and developed *DACS*. The influence of the collaboration, however, has produced a content standard for American archivists that not only builds on previous U.S. standards but also interweaves current international archival descriptive standards.

Describing Archives is the most recent addition to a lineage of national and international standards for archival description. From the days of using the second edition of *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules (AACR2)* to describe archival and manuscript materials, through two editions of *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM)*, the last published in 1989, to updated and recent data structure standards such as the concise format of Machine Readable Cataloging (MARC 21) and Encoded Archival Description (EAD), we thought we had come a long way. International standards such as the General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G)), the latest version in 2000, and International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons, and Families (ISAAR(CPF)), last updated in 2004, have added new possibilities for international compatibility and information sharing. *DACS* represents the culmination of a collective effort to compile functional data standards that apply to current practices of describing archives and manuscripts.

Describing Archives, it is clear, replaces *APPM*, the standard with which the majority of American archivists are probably most familiar. The second edition of *APPM*, already set for review and revision in the early 1990s, also serves as the basis for *DACS*. With the introduction of EAD in 1996, archivists began to give more attention to archival description for finding aids, and many guidelines and concepts from EAD have been added to the *APPM* foundation. International standards such as ISAD(G), also in concert with EAD, played a large part in the development of *DACS*, and thus, the composite result focuses more on the content of description and not just the context. The organization of the manual is similar to that of *APPM*, but has been expanded from *APPM*’s two parts, “Description” and “Headings and Uniform Titles,” to three, “Describing Archival Materials,” “Describing Creators,” and “Forms of Names.”

Drawing heavily from the organization and terminology of ISAD(G), Part I, “Describing Archival Materials” consists of twenty-five essential “elements,” or rules, that if used will ensure consistency across all levels of description (single or multilevel). Many of the twenty-five elements correlate to Part I, “Description” in *APPM*, but in *DACS* the rules are grouped conceptually into eight chapters, and several rules have been expanded. Chapter 1, “Levels of Description,” presents three levels of description—minimum, optimum, and added value—for use in either single or multilevel descriptions and the minimum to maximum essential elements needed for each of these levels. In this instance and others throughout the book, *DACS* encourages standardization as much as possible, but also acknowledges that local practice and professional judgment may supercede the standard in certain situations.

Descriptions of each element or group of rules in Chapters 2 through 8 contain consistent subheadings such as “Purpose and Scope,” “Sources of Information,” and “General Rules,” as well as helpful commentaries that provide reasoning for rules and typical uses or implications. Examples in both EAD and MARC 21 structures close the description of each rule family, although DACS does not advise a specific descriptive product. A highlight of this section includes Chapter 3, “Content and Structure Elements,” which contains expanded coverage of scope and content notes, including comments, examples, and discussion of particular features of optimal notes.

Part II, “Describing Creators,” consists of three chapters solely related to describing collection creators. Of note is Chapter 10, “Administrative / Biographical History,” which discusses in detail the essential parts of the commonly-termed “Biographical/Historical Note” field that was only briefly covered in *APPM* and is one of the core elements in the description of archival materials. Chapter 11, “Authority Records,” introduces the concept of an archival authority record based on international standard ISAAR(CPF). *DACS* suggests creating an archival authority record as an alternative to the traditional practice of identifying and describing the creator and constructing the authority name each time it is needed for the finding aid and catalog record. The introduction to Part II provides a lengthy discussion of the advantages of maintaining such records for standardization within and across repositories, the benefits for information sharing, and the need for a more archivally-focused authority record, since name authority records provide comparatively little information about the creator. Chapter 11 follows up this discussion with rules and examples of the most important elements of an archival authority record.

Part III, “Forms of Names,” maintains close ties to *APPM* and *AACR2* rules, even with rule numbering (with the exception of the chapter numbers) purposefully aligning with the 2002 edition of *AACR2*. That said, *DACS* has made minor changes, omissions, or additions to tailor the rules even more than *APPM* did to archival description needs. Three chapters constitute this section and include rules for names for persons and families (Chapter 12)—the addition of families as creators reflecting a necessity for archival description not covered in *AACR2*—for forms for geographic names (Chapter 13), and for names of corporate bodies (Chapter 14).

DACS also includes several unique features that support and enhance the rules text. A “Statement of Principles” at the beginning of the book defines eight archival concepts based on theory and practice, and forms the basis for the rules. An “Overview of Archival Description” provides a summary of access tools, both manual and automated, and a detailed overview of the genres of access points and references to authority sources to verify them. The “Appendices” include a wealth of reference information, including a glossary of archival terms defined in context of the rules; “Companion Standards” including those for non-textual materials (since *DACS* does not address these specifically), print and web-based thesauri, and data structure standards; cross-walks between *DACS* and other standards including *APPM*; and several full EAD (2002) and MARC 21 examples for a variety of types of descriptions.

For all of *DACS*’s good points, the omission of an index is conspicuous, as one would be particularly useful in light of the evolving terminology of some familiar concepts and rules. The crosswalks can provide some help in this situation, but, for some chapters, they are not detailed enough to be useful. If *APPM* is your archival description “bible,” do not discard it until you have familiarized yourself with *DACS*’s terminology.

Overall, *Describing Archives* is an excellent and much-needed addition to the continuum of description standards for archival materials. It is inevitable that as archival practices develop and evolve, so will this content standard.

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