

# *How Searching in an Archives Differs from Searching in a Library*

Carol Buswell, Education Specialist, National Archives  
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## How They Differ

### *The way they receive documents*

#### Libraries, museums, historical societies

COLLECT materials based on pre-determined criteria and budgets.



Do you collect anything? Baseball cards, shoes, historical documents, books by a particular author? If so, do you think you have all that were ever created? Do other people ALSO have collections that look something like yours? Because library materials are “collections” you should always check to see if additional material is available in other institutions as well.

#### Most archives, particularly government archives,

are REPOSITORIES for original documents and other materials created by government agencies and their employees. These documents are kept for historical, operational, or administrative reasons, predetermined by the agency and the Archives.

Everything that has been determined to be of any historical, organizational, or administrative value has been kept and has been (or will eventually be) transferred to that government’s Archives. All temporary, unimportant, or non-historic material is destroyed..

- U.S. Federal agencies send their documents to the **NATIONAL ARCHIVES**.
- State government agencies send their documents to their **STATE ARCHIVES**.
- County government agencies send their documents to their **COUNTY ARCHIVES**.
- City government agencies send their documents to their **CITY ARCHIVES**.

### *The way their materials are organized*

#### Libraries, museums, historical societies

most often organize their records by SUBJECT OR TOPIC. This is how most of us are accustomed to searching for materials.

#### Most archives, particularly government archives

do not organize records by topic, but instead use filing systems that resemble a system you might use in your own filing cabinet.



Can you imagine trying to file your own papers by topic?! Would you file your medical records under “car accident” or “Iraq War” or “effects of plastic surgery?” No, you usually file them under “Medical” or “County Hospital,” or under “Credit Card Statements,” so you can find them in the future. In the same way, archival records are filed in whatever system each contributing agency thought was best for their day to day business.

When groups of these agency records are sent to the archives, they are categorized by the archivists and stored wherever there is available space, usually in acid-free boxes on tall metal shelves. “Finding aids” or “guides” are then produced so they can be found by both archivists and alike. The organizational method used for categorizing the “finding aids” follow:

1. *The agency or person who created the documents.*
2. *An intellectual division of the agency or geographic location of the agency office.*
3. *A single group of related records during a particular time frame, called a “Series.”*
4. *Boxes or other containers holding “file units.” These are usually file folders.*
5. *File folders holding a large or small number of documents*
6. *“Items” or individual documents. Most items (over 99.9%) have not yet been indexed or scanned.*

## **EXAMPLES OF ONLINE SEARCHES**

### ***For National Archives Documents, Images, Maps, Cartoons, Sound and Video Recordings***



#### ***The Online Catalog Approach***

using the National Archives online catalog at [www.archives.gov/research/catalog](http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog).

1. Think of **events** that might have happened surrounding your topic and then imagine what different federal agencies might have been involved. (Level 1)

For instance, if you're looking for "Alaska's Response to the Cold War," think of things that might have happened as a result. Some events might be:

- More military bases and airstrips may have been built.
- Roads may have been improved to accommodate more military traffic.
- Military drills may have increased.
- The Government may have stepped up regulations.
- Civilians may have been taught emergency and defense measures.

2. Then think of related **Federal Agencies** that might have been involved, such as:

- U.S. Army
- U.S. Navy
- U.S. Air Force
- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (They build things.)
- The U.S. Nuclear Regulation Authority
- Office of Civilian Defense
- U.S. Coast Guard

3. Next, narrow your topic by your particular interest ... in this case "Alaska."

4. Then narrow further by time period, say 1945-1975.



#### ***The [www.Docsteach.org](http://www.Docsteach.org) approach.***

1. First, conduct a subject search on the internet to help you understand the issue or event you are searching better. Be careful to choose reliable sources.
2. As you are reading the material, be sure to jot down:
  - The various Federal Agencies listed or referred to in the online articles.
  - Surrounding events and what they were usually called.
  - Locations of events.
  - Time period or periods of events.
3. Do a document search at <http://www.docsteach.org> using "browse" and the Era or time period in question or search by the name of the event. (DocsTeach has been meta-tagged, so it contains more features resembling a library search.)
4. THEN, search the National Archives Online Catalog at <http://www.archives.gov/research/catalog> using any one or a combination of the following and then narrow by time period.
  - The most prominent word in the name of the Federal Agencies you located in DocsTeach
  - A few words from the name of the event or, perhaps, a geographic location.