NARA Finding Aid Requirements – An Introduction

# Where to Find Current NARA Requirements

NARA’s [Finding Aid Requirements page on archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning/finding-aid.html) lists the latest information about requirements for permanent records accessioning and finding aids.

NARA’s [Accessioning Guidance and Policy page](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning) and [Transfer Guidance page](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/policy/transfer-guidance.html) can also help you understand the permanent records transfer process and the role of finding aids.

# Overview

## What are finding aids?

Finding aids are tools that help a user find information in specific collections of records. For example, an index to a set of case files might help locate a particular case by name, location, and case number. A folder list for a set of correspondence files will help identify the topics covered by those records. An inventory of the locations, dates, and map scales used will help future generations access historical maps.

Agencies use finding aids to track records and access information quickly. Your agency may already have finding aids for the records, such as a docket listing court cases, a public affairs office’s log of press releases, an inventory of project names, numbers, and dates, or a photographer’s listing of photo locations, dates, and subjects.

Researchers use finding aids to determine whether a particular set of records holds information relevant to their research. Archivists and researchers use finding aids to identify relevant records and access them quickly. Good finding aids also help NARA protect and manage historical records so that sensitive information is protected when needed, and so future generations will be able to access and understand our history.

## Why are finding aids required?

Detailed finding aids are an essential part of the permanent records lifecycle. Finding aids ensure that your agency can identify and retrieve its permanent records while they are in use during the active phase, and they help your agency understand which records have been transferred to NARA at the end of the lifecycle.

NARA requires good finding aids for all records which will be accessioned. Finding aids ensure NARA can retrieve, manage, protect, and provide access to records once they become part of NARA’s holdings. Finding aids also help future generations of researchers, archivists, and agency employees locate, understand, and use historical records.

## What is required for each new accession of records?

When permanent records reach the end of the lifecycle, they are accessioned into the holdings of NARA. This process transfers the ownership of the records from your agency to NARA. It also relieves your agency of the costs of, and responsibility for, storage, retrieval, protection, and management of the records.

To complete the accessioning process, your agency will need to complete:

* A **Transfer Request** in NARA’s Electronic Records Archives (ERA) system for each individual record series being accessioned.
* A **finding aid** for each series being accessioned. The finding aid must include enough detail to allow NARA to accept, process, manage, protect, and provide access to the records.

NARA will not complete the accessioning process until it receives an accurate, complete Transfer Request and finding aid for the records.

# Finding Aids and Transfer of Permanent Records to NARA

## Annual Move

The Annual Move involves permanent records stored by agencies in NARA’s Federal Records Centers. Each year, NARA works with agencies to identify, confirm eligibility, and complete the accessioning of transfers of permanent records which have met their retention dates and are now eligible to become part of NARA’s holdings.

[36 CFR §1232.16(3)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1232) outlines requirements agencies must satisfy when transferring records to off-site storage, including the requirement for folder title lists or equivalent detailed records description for permanent and unscheduled records.

### Is the SF-135 an acceptable finding aid for records in the Annual Move?

For permanent records transferred for accessioning through the Federal Records Center Program (FRCP), per [36 CFR §1233.10(c)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1233/section-1233.10#p-1233.10(c)), a Standard Form (SF) 135, or equivalent, is required and will satisfy the requirements described under [§1232.14(c)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1232/section-1232.14#p-1232.14(c)), as long as the SF-135 includes a folder title list, or equivalent detailed records description.

Since NARA receives the SF-135 from the FRC, agencies are not required to provide it for Annual Move transfers from Federal Records Centers. If an SF-135 is not available from the FRC, or if it is insufficient as a finding aid, NARA will reach out to the agency requesting a finding aid for the proposed records.

## Direct Offers

Direct Offers involve transfers of records stored by agencies in agency space and commercial records storage. Agencies identify and propose transfers of records which have met their retention period and are eligible to become part of NARA’s holdings.

Finding aids are required for all Direct Offers and must be attached to the ERA TR at the time of submission to NARA.

### Is the SF-135 for the records an acceptable finding aid for Direct Offers?

For Direct Offers made for records previously stored in the Federal Records Center system NARA may accept an SF-135 if the SF-135 includes an accurate and up to date file list or equivalent detailed records description. However, NARA generally requires a new list if the box contents have changed or if the original file list is insufficiently detailed.

# Finding Aid Requirements for Specific Media Types

## What finding aid format is required?

Finding aid formats and data points differ depending on record and media type. Some record types, such as aerial photographs, architectural blueprints, maps, case files, photographs, and video recordings, require specific data points for researchers to identify them and for archivists to retrieve, protect, maintain, and provide access to them.

A selection of finding aid requirements for specific types of records can be found below. The latest information related to each type can be found on NARA’s [Finding Aid Requirements page on archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning/finding-aid.html) or by talking with your NARA points of contact.

## What if my agency has special types of records?

Some record types may require specific data points unique to those types. For example, investigative case files, immigration case files, and patent case files are all retrieved by their own specific data fields. When an agency has records requiring specific access points, NARA will work with the agency to develop acceptable finding aid criteria.

## Finding Aid Criteria by Format

[Aerial photography](#_heading=h.30j0zll)

[Architectural and engineering drawings](#_heading=h.1fob9te)

[Cartographic records](#_heading=h.2et92p0)

[Electronic records](#_heading=h.tyjcwt)

[Moving image and sound recordings](#_heading=h.3dy6vkm)

[Still pictures, posters, and other graphic materials](#_heading=h.1t3h5sf)

[Textual records](#_Textual_Records)

## Aerial Photography

When proposing aerial photography accessions, a finding aid consisting of item or frame level information must be submitted with the records, per 36 CFR §1235.42(h)(5).

This information should include:

* Format
* Mosaic or map index (if one exists)
* Geographic coverage (latitude and longitude center or corner points if no mosaic)
* Scale
* Date
* Spot number (if applicable)
* Can number (if applicable)
* Container List
* Other unique agency identifiers that cross reference to records

### Questions About Aerial Photography Finding Aid Requirements

Please email carto@nara.gov with any aerial photography accessioning questions.

## Architectural and Engineering Drawings

When proposing permanent architectural and engineering drawings to the National Archives, a finding aid consisting of the following information is required

under [36 CFR §1235.42(i)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/#p-1235.42(i)):

* Background and context of the series, with as detailed a description as possible
* Format
* Container List
* Scale (if applicable)
* Folder or Item Lists (if applicable)

### Questions About Finding Aid Requirements for Drawings

Please email carto@nara.gov with any accessioning questions related to architectural and engineering drawings.

## Cartographic Records

When proposing permanent maps and charts to the National Archives, a finding aid consisting of the following information is required under [36 CFR §1235.42(g)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/#p-1235.42(g)):

* Background and context of the series, with as detailed a description as possible
* Format
* Container List
* Scale (if applicable)
* Folder or Item Lists (if applicable)

### Questions About Finding Aid Requirements for Cartographic Records

Please email carto@nara.gov with any cartographic accessioning questions.

## Electronic Records

For electronic records, “finding aid” generally refers to documentation and metadata.

### Structured Data

Documentation requirements for structured data files, digital geospatial data files, and documents containing SGML tags are defined in [36 CFR §1235.48](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/subpart-C/section-1235.48) – *What documentation must agencies transfer with electronic records?*

### Metadata

By extension, [NARA Bulletin 2015-04](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2015/2015-04.html): *Metadata Guidance for the Transfer of Permanent Electronic Records* further defines “documentation” by specifying the minimum set of metadata elements that must accompany transfers of permanent electronic records to the National Archives.

### Capstone Email

The general transfer requirements associated with Capstone email, including documentation, are defined in [*Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about GRS 6.1: Email Managed under a Capstone Approach*](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/grs/grs06-1-faqs.html)*.* Please see the section titled *Questions About Transfer* and the answer to Question 36 for information on documentation.

See the [Accessioning Electronic Records and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Transferring Permanent Electronic Records to NARA](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/faqs/transfer-erec) for details.

### Questions About Electronic Records Finding Aid Requirements

Please email *etransfers@nara.gov* with any electronic records accessioning questions.

## Moving Image and Sound Recordings

When proposing permanent moving image and sound records to the National Archives

for accessioning, an item list by container, or file list by storage media, with the following

information as noted in [36 CFR §1235.42(a), (b), (e) and (f)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/subpart-C/section-1235.42) is required:

* Title
* Agency assigned identifiers or control numbers, if available (e.g. production numbers, file names, barcodes)
* Production Date
* Format (e.g., motion picture film, videotape, audio cassettes, discs or file types)

Additional characteristics that are useful if available but not required:

* Film gauge or video tape format
* Running time
* File size
* Sound or silent
* Color or black and white
* Edited or unedited
* Does video have closed captioning
* Indicate whether digital files include embedded metadata

Any item level content descriptions are useful if available but not required:

* Content summaries
* Subject keywords
* Geographic locations
* Prominent figures
* Contacts for known rights and permissions by title

All corresponding finding aids, including additional metadata not specified above, should be transferred with the records. In addition to metadata, any associated textual records such as scripts, rights and permissions files, production files and shot lists should be transferred.

### Questions about requirements for Moving Image and Sound Recordings

Please email mopix@nara.gov with any moving image or sound accessioning questions.

## Still Pictures, Posters, and Other Graphic Materials

### Analog Photographs

When proposing permanent analog photographic records to the National Archives, a

finding aid consisting of the following information is required under [36 CFR](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/subpart-C/section-1235.42)

[§1235.42(c) and (f)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/subpart-C/section-1235.42):

* Background and context of the series, with as detailed a description as possible
* Format (e.g., prints, film, slides, glass)
* Size (e.g., 35m, 4x5, 8x10)
* Color (black-and-white, color)
* Container List
* Folder or Item Lists (if applicable)

### Digital Photographs and Graphic Material

When proposing permanent digital photographic and graphic material records to the National Archives, a finding aid consisting of the following information is required under [36 CFR §1235.48(e)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/subpart-C/section-1235.48) and [1235.50(e)](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1235/subpart-C/section-1235.50):

* Background and context of the series, with as detailed a description as possible
* Media (e.g., hard drive, optical disc)
* File Types (e.g., JPEG, TIFF, PNG, DNG)
* Estimated Overall Volume (e.g, gigabytes, terabytes)
* Container List (if the transfer consists of optical discs)

Additional guidance pertaining to metadata for digital photographs and graphic material

can be found under [NARA Bulletin 2015-04](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2015/2015-04.html).

### Analog Posters and Other Graphic Materials

When proposing analog poster and other graphic material accessions, a finding aid consisting of item level information must be submitted with the records, per 36 CFR §1235.42.c&f.1-2. For both photographs and graphic material accessions, all existing finding aids (box lists, folder lists, item lists, indexes, shelf lists, logs, metadata) should be transferred with the records. If the information is not readily available, please contact the accessioning archivist.

### Questions About Still Pictures Finding Aid Requirements

Please email stillpix.accessions@nara.gov with any still picture accessioning questions.

## Textual Records

When proposing permanent textual records to the National Archives for accessioning, all textual records transfers must be accompanied with a finding aid in the form of a folder title list, or an equivalent detailed records description.

### What must be included in a folder list?

A folder list documents all the folder titles in the accession. Record folder titles as they are written on each folder label or tab. At a minimum, folder lists must specify the box number in which each folder is contained and must be sufficiently detailed to provide access to the records by National Archives staff, federal agency staff conducting research at NARA, and members of the public. Be sure to spell out abbreviations and acronyms and identify codes or provide a key with this information.

### What folder list format is best?

An Excel spreadsheet is the preferred file format.

### May we submit a box list for chronological records?

Box lists may be acceptable for some transfers arranged chronologically. A box list is documentation of the first and last folder in each box. If you believe a box list provides enough detail to navigate the series (e.g., records arranged chronologically), please contact your accessioning point of contact prior to submitting your Transfer Request to NARA.

### Additional finding aid requirements for textual records

* **Loose sheets** – Place in a folder or folders. Mark each folder with an appropriate title reflecting the contents of the folder.
* **Untitled folders** – Provide an appropriate title reflecting the contents of the folder.
* **Bound volumes** – Place each bound volume in a file folder if the volume fits within the dimensions of the folder. If a bound volume does not fit into a file folder, it may remain un-foldered. Count each bound volume as a single file in the folder title list.
* **Binders** – three ring binders are accepted and inventoried as a single file. Please provide an appropriate title on the binder(s).
* **Microfilm** - For specific requirements pertaining to microforms please review [36 CFR §1238](https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-36/chapter-XII/subchapter-B/part-1238).

### Questions About Textual Records Finding Aid Requirements

Please email a [textual accessioning contact](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning/textual.html) with any accessioning questions.

# Help and More Information

For questions, assistance, or more information about accessioning and finding aids, consult your NARA point of contact or visit [NARA’s Finding Aid Requirements page](https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/accessioning/finding-aid.html) on archives.gov.

You’ll also find information about research in NARA holdings on archives.gov:

* [Records at NARA by format](https://www.archives.gov/research/start/by-format)
* [Researching records at NARA by topic](https://www.archives.gov/research/topics)
* [Researching records at NARA by federal government organization](https://www.archives.gov/research/start/by-organization.html)