

Archives

Activity

Tracey Loughran

This is a seminar plan for a discussion-focused session lasting 50 minutes that explores the topic of ‘Archives’. The plan can be adapted to undergraduates at different stages; the recommended reading is pitched at first-year undergraduates, but the questions and task could be fruitfully explored at any point in a student’s degree programme.

Context and aim

There are two main parts to this activity. The first part encourages students to think about how and why archives come into being, and how collections are formed, remade and made available to different publics. The second part furthers these discussions through students’ engagement with the online presence of an archive of their choice. The tutor then brings these parts together. The session aims to introduce students to the concept of ‘the archive’ while also helping students to develop practical and critical skills in negotiating online encounters with archives.

Preparation

Students should prepare for the seminar by reading two short chapters and undertaking one task.

Reading:

Federica Ferlanti, ‘Archives’, in Tracey Loughran (ed.), *A Practical Guide to Studying History*, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2026).

Laura A. Millar, 'What are Archives?', in her *Archives: Principles and Practices*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 3–22.

Task:

Locate an archive (if you are stuck for ideas, Ferlanti includes many examples) and analyse its web page, considering the following questions:

- How does this archive describe itself on its web page?
- How much information is given on:
 - (a) the origin of the archive;
 - (b) its collection policy;
 - (c) the availability of its materials?

Description of activity

Introduction [5 minutes]

Tutors should provide students with a brief overview of the aims of the session, and then lead a brief open discussion on the following questions:

- What is an archive? Can anything be an archive?
- Why are archives important for historians?

Part 1: Small group discussion and report back [15 minutes]

Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions, with reference to the set reading, for 10 minutes:

- Are archival collections 'biased'?
- What part does political and historical context play in what is kept in archives and made available to historians?
- Are there any potential ways around omissions and silences within archival collections?

This should be followed by reporting back to the full group for 5 minutes.

Part 2: Task-based small group discussion and report back [20 minutes]

In the same small groups, students should discuss the set task for 10 minutes, focusing on the following areas:

- Explain to other students what archive you selected, and why.
- How difficult (or easy) did you find it to locate information on the origin, collection policy and availability of materials of the archive?
- Having spent some time on this archive's website, are you confident that you would know what is needed to visit the archive and how to order material?
- Come up with a list of as many questions as possible about the archives under discussion that the website *doesn't* seem to answer.

Each group should nominate one person to report back answers to the main group. Allow 10 minutes for the reporting back and subsequent discussion. The discussion provides an opportunity for tutors to gauge students' ability to negotiate the websites of archives and any practical difficulties they might encounter.

Part 3: Large group discussion and conclusion [10 minutes]

The tutor should select one of the archives that a student group has discussed, access the website of that archive on a PC in the room, and project the screen. They should ask students to help them negotiate the web page:

- What tab should I click on to find out information about the background of the archive?
- What tab should I click on to find out about its holdings?
- What tab should I click on to find out about visiting information?

This exercise should reassure students that websites can be difficult to negotiate, while also providing practical guidance on how to do so. Working through the exercise as a group enables the tutor to reinforce any aspects around using archives that students do not seem to understand, but also to demonstrate the rich potential of archives once you do get to grips with them. In conclusion, ask students to write on a Post-It note one 'takeaway point' from this session. These can be collated and shared on the module's Virtual Learning Environment.