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Checklists for Conducting and Interpreting Archival Research

Jordan R. Humphrey

For the last four hours, you’ve been sitting inside the university’s archives reading through letters, notes, and diaries written by students in the 1920s. Your head is pounding, and your stomach growls, reminding you that you chose to skip lunch in order to continue working. Picking up a new folder, you begin to read another paragraph of barely legible hand-written text. Then you see it. There, scrawled in the margin of the letter, is the name “Sarah Marshall.” Campus rumors of Sarah’s involvement with the student government led you on this search, and you now have a piece of evidence that suggests that the rumors are true. The phrase “Ask Sarah Marshall about the meeting” implies that Sarah may have been, in fact, the first woman to sit on the traditionally all-male student governance board, and your thesis on the involvement of women in university student governance hinges on the truthfulness of this campus rumor. You realize you may have just found your historical “smoking gun.”

Many of us will never experience the thrill of finding buried treasure, yet as historians we continually embark on our own form of a treasure hunt. Archival research is like a treasure hunt. An administrative memo leads to a letter from a student that then leads to a page from a faculty member’s diary. The excitement that comes from following the clues that lead to the discovery of archival treasure is what brings most of us back to the archives time and time again. And many of us are drawn to the study of history because of our time spent conducting research in archives. Holding, smelling, and touching pieces of history and then using these pieces to re-create a moment in time is what drives many historians.

Archives hold the primary sources that are the hallmark of historical research and thus often serve as the principal sources of information for historians. Yet archival research can challenge even the most experienced historians. The path to finding buried treasure is not always an easy one to navigate. From the location of sources to the interpretation of evidence, archival research can be expensive, time-consuming, and frustrating. Archival research can be equally rewarding, however. Using examples from my own research, this chapter provides historians with the tools to successfully conduct archival research and then accurately interpret the sources their research uncovers.
These tools are provided in the form of checklists that researchers can use to help prepare for archival visits and maximize their efficiency during their archival research. A second checklist offers strategies for the interrogation of evidence uncovered within the archives.

PREPARING FOR YOUR VISIT TO THE ARCHIVES

My most recent research project required me to conduct archival work at Barnard College, an all-women’s liberal arts college with ties to Columbia University. A colleague and I were working on a paper that explored the role of students in curricular change, and we identified two institutions—Barnard College and Harvard University—that had active student organizations involved in curricular change on campus. We divided the research work, and my colleague traveled to Cambridge to do research at Harvard while I traveled to New York City and Barnard College. Being graduate students, we had limited time and money to conduct this research so we chose to conduct our archival research during the week of our university’s spring break. Such limited resources, therefore, made it imperative that we maximized our efficiency at our respective institutions. To do this, I developed a “to do” checklist for myself aimed at guaranteeing that I was prepared for and successful during my visit to the Barnard archives. Although in no way exhaustive or flawless, I offer the list below.¹

1. Do Your Homework

Much of the work involved in archival research is done before one even travels to the archives. Aside from the identification of a topic and supporting literature, conducting research on your archival site can prevent pitfalls and frustrations during your actual on-site visit. The Internet is a great place to start your research on the archive you intend to visit.

Archives vary in size and type. Understanding the type of archive you will encounter during your trip helps reduce the possibility of surprises that may impede your research endeavors. There are generally two types of archives—public and private. Until recently, only public documents were held in public archives like the Smithsonian Museum or the Holocaust Museum, both located in Washington, D.C. This is changing, however. A number of college and university archives now maintain collections of public documents, which are in addition to their own institutional materials. The archives of Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana, house land deeds and county birth, death, and marriage records from around the country. These documents, in turn, have made the Earlham archives a Mecca for many genealogists.

Private archives, on the other hand, typically hold only personal papers, memoirs, family papers, etc. Traditionally, these are located on college and university campuses. Selected pieces of correspondence penned by Robert Frost can be found at Dartmouth College and manuscripts by William Faulkner and Thomas Jefferson’s architectural drawings of Monticello can be found in the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia. Some individual institutions also specialize in certain holdings. For example, the Special Collections Library at Penn State University maintains the only official holdings of the United Steelworkers of America and Bowling Green State University’s Center for Archival Collections contains the National Student Affairs Archives.
Most archives offer online finding aids for their holdings. These databases catalog the specific holdings for each archive, and allow users to search through available materials before they get to the archives. Although often not exhaustive nor a complete representation of the archive’s holdings, finding aids can allow you to identify the materials at each archive. Searching through these lists and then recording the call numbers of the materials you would like to use before you arrive saves both you and the archivist valuable time. Additional materials can always be pulled from the shelves of the archives during your visit, but providing advance notice of the materials you would like to see guarantees that the materials are ready and available as soon as you arrive to begin your research. I contacted the archivist at Barnard College weeks before my scheduled trip and provided her with a list of the call numbers for the materials that I wanted to examine. The boxes were waiting for me when I arrived, and I was able to begin my research as soon as I sat down. This saved me an incredible amount of time and allowed me to immediately get down to the task at hand.

Visiting an archive’s webpage prior to your visit also allows you to check on the availability of the site to outside researchers. Some archives are an extension of a college or university library and therefore may not have a full staff assigned to the location. This can result in the archives being open for only limited hours during the day or on specific days of the week. Visiting scholars may also need to get special permission to use the institution’s archives. Some archives are open to visitors while others require an appointment, a letter from your home institution, or other proof of your research status. The policies differ for every institution. Being aware of each archive’s policies and availability helps ensure that you will be able to conduct your research when you arrive.

Data collection for my doctoral dissertation entailed conducting archival research at four different liberal arts colleges. My research agenda required spending between four and five days at each site, and my limited research budget required me to drive from State College to each location and back. Consequently, I needed to be very strategic about the time (and money) I allocated for each visit; I could not waste a moment or a dollar.

In planning for each of these four visits, I quickly discovered that each institutional archive in my dissertation maintains different hours of operations and different policies toward visiting scholars. For instance, two of the colleges—Dartmouth College and Earlham College—are open on the weekends, whereas the other two—Franklin & Marshall College and Hamilton College—are open only during weekdays. Also, the Dartmouth, Earlham, and Franklin & Marshall archives maintain visitor hours for the entire day, but the Hamilton archive is open only from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m., with hours extended by appointment only. Being aware of these differences became imperative as I scheduled my trips to each institution. Before I scheduled each trip, I contacted the archivist at each institution to confirm the archive’s policy toward visiting scholars and also to confirm that the hours of operation on the archive’s webpage were accurate. In two of the cases, after I contacted the college’s archivist I was informed that the information I found online was incorrect; the archives were available on more days and for longer than I had anticipated. Recognizing these inaccuracies allowed me to better plan for my trip and conserve the funding I had received by packing five days of research into four days. (A word of caution—if you plan to conduct archival research at colleges and universities during the summer, it is essential that you confirm the availability of the
site. A lack of students on campus and staff vacations can severely limit the availability of smaller archives.) Thus, recognizing the distinctiveness of the archives that you intend to visit will allow you to maximize your on-site time in addition to helping you avoid an unnecessary trip if the materials you need are not available or not available within the time frame in which you are working.

2. Contact the Archivist
My number one piece of advice on archival research is this: the archivist is your friend! No one knows more about the archives you are visiting than the on-site archivist. Identify the name(s) of these individuals prior to your visit and contact them as soon as you decide that you will be making a trip to their institution. First, these individuals can help you to schedule your visit. Second, the archivists can help you to locate the materials you need for your research. Providing the archivist with a general idea about the topic you are researching helps ensure that you will locate all the relevant materials within the archives. Although you, as the researcher, are largely responsible for identifying the materials for your research, the archivist can direct you to other materials that may prove to be equally significant to your topic. I never fail to be surprised by the materials that archivists bring to me once they have a better idea of the topic I am researching. On most occasions, the documents they produce are ones that I would never have identified on my own; there was no way for me to know that such documents existed. Again, a good rule to subscribe to is that no one knows more about the archives than the archivist. It is not a coincidence that the archivist is one of the most commonly thanked individuals in the works of historians.

3. Bring a Pencil, Not a Suitcase
Just like the variation in availability, different archives maintain different policies on what you can bring with you to conduct your research. Almost all archives require that you take your notes in pencil; this is to ensure that any accidental markings made on a document can be easily removed. So leave your pens at home, but be sure to bring plenty of pencils and erasers. Do not rely on your laptop. Although many of us cannot survive without our cell phones in hand and our laptops on our desks, not all archives welcome such technology. Be prepared to take notes the "old-fashioned" way. Take advantage of those technology-friendly archives, however. A mini-scanner or digital camera, in addition to your laptop, helps you to capture documents and photos that you may not otherwise be able to record. One of the best investments I have made as a historian is the purchase of a portable scanner. My scanner is small and fits nicely within my archive-friendly attaché bag. The scanner allows me to import documents directly to my computer and saves me the headache of making (or requesting) photocopies for the documents I want to take home with me.

Not all documents can be scanned, however, so you should also make yourself aware of the archive's policy on photocopying. Some archives will make photocopies on demand or will allow you to make your own photocopies, but this is always at a cost to the researcher. If photocopying is permitted, you should come prepared with plenty of quarters for the photocopiers. Other archives permit photocopying, but it is done only by and at the convenience of the archive's staff. If this is the case for the site you intend to visit, leave ample time between your visit and the time that you need the photocopied materials. I had to request that the photocopies I needed from the Barnard archives be
mailed to me via an overnight service because I was working on a tight deadline and I was at the mercy of the archive’s staff for my photocopies. Recognizing this policy ahead of time would have saved me a lot of headache and frustration, not to mention a few dollars of my precious research budget.

Finally, be smart about what you do and do not bring with you for your archival research. Some things you may not think about are: (1) wear layers—archives can often be chilly; (2) pack pain relievers—bringing a supply of ibuprofen, provided you are not allergic, helps to thwart the headaches that can arise from eye strain induced by long days of reading archived documents; and (3) have a protein or granola bar handy—you probably won’t be able to bring this with you into the archives, but you will be happy that it is nearby when you realize you have missed lunch and you cannot find a vending machine. Ultimately, the rule “No Food, No Drinks, Pencil Only,” is a good one to remember. Following this rule will ensure that you have all the materials you need (and not materials you do not need) to conduct your research.

4. Be Flexible

In conclusion, here are a few words of warning about preparing for your archival visit. Some trips will not go according to plan, so be flexible. Have a back-up plan in place in case a site falls short of your expectations and your research needs. Planning and preparation on your end does not guarantee that your archival destination will adhere to the same principle. Despite checking websites, submitting pre-visit requests for materials, and packing only what you need, even the best of intentions can still result in defeat. I offer a recent personal experience as an example of this.

I was about to begin the last leg of the research trip for my dissertation, and I had done all of the preparatory steps I recommend above. I recorded the archives’ hours and visitor’s policies; I confirmed and requested the materials that I believed to be part of the archives’ holdings; and I exchanged numerous emails with the archivist to confirm my week-long appointment at the destination. Upon arriving at the institution’s—which shall remain nameless—archives, however, it became apparent that my preparation was not going to bring the same results as it did at the previous three institutions I had visited. The archivist had forgotten my arrival date and thus had no materials ready for me to use. The archives appeared to be in complete disarray with boxes strewn throughout the small room, and the library’s catalog that maintained the archive’s collection was “down” for repairs for the entire week I would be visiting. With patience and time these administrative hurdles could be navigated; a lack of sources could not be, however. When the archivist began to pull the materials I had previously requested, I suddenly realized that the resources promised were not the resources provided; the primary sources that I thought would be in this institution’s archives were not there or they were extremely limited. This trip was a bust! Thankfully, I had thought about possible substitute institutions before I started my research so I packed my bags, returned home, and began to research this new institution and its archives.

If I had failed to identify a substitute institution prior to my research trip, it is quite possible that I would have tried to make the best of the situation at the other institution and continued with my research. The fruits of this labor are questionable, however. Therefore, you should always be prepared to make a change to your research agenda. Very seldom will you need to implement this plan, but, just like the steps you have taken
to prepare for your visit, having thought through alternatives helps to ensure that you can continue your research with as few interruptions as possible.

YOUR TIME IN THE ARCHIVES

In my pre-graduate student life I worked as an events planner for a liberal arts college. The mantra that helped me to succeed in my professional position is one that also helps me to maximize my efficiency when conducting archival research—(P)roper (P)reparation (P)revents (P)oor (P)erformance. Although my friends and colleagues continually mock me for subscribing to it, the five P’s can make research (and life) much easier. As previously suggested, taking the time to prepare for your archival visit is almost as important as the research you want to conduct. A similar level of planning for your time in the archives can help you to avoid the pitfalls and frustrations that can often accompany archival research.

1. Hit the Ground Running

If you have taken the time to plan for your visit, then you should be prepared to hit the ground running when you arrive at the archives. Developing a plan of attack for your research helps ensure that you are prepared to begin your research. Know the specific dates, names, and types of resources you hope to examine while at the archives. If you have contacted the archivist prior to your arrival, boxes and boxes of archived materials may be waiting for you. Do not panic. Just dig right in.

2. Develop a “Triage Strategy”

Develop a strategy for working your way through the archival materials. Essentially there are two methods of conducting archival research—tunneling and fishing. Tunneling entails finding a run of documents—a specific set of dates, for example—and then examining the documents from beginning to end. During my research at Barnard, I found it particularly helpful to begin by examining all of the student curriculum committee notes from 1920 to 1935—my form of tunneling. When I found interesting comments or notations within a document, I made a note of it and then used the fishing method to investigate the notes I recorded. The fishing method therefore differs in that you look through different archived resources in search for materials that fit your hypothesis; it is much like throwing your fishing line into a lake to catch whatever swims up to your bait. These methods can be used independently of each other or in tandem. The key is to develop a “triage strategy” that works best for you. Every researcher eventually develops an understanding of the techniques and methods that work best for them and that fit their research skills.

If your research requires multiple visits, have a daily strategy or set specific goals for each visit. This helps to ensure that you make progress each day and that you stay on target to finish your research in the time you have allotted. Also, develop your own system of cataloging and recording information and then stick with it. A note-taking strategy that some researchers subscribe to is the “one page” rule. This unwritten rule recommends that you retYPE only documents that are one page (or less) in length and photocopy any document that is over the one page limit. If photocopying is permitted and fits within your research budget and time frame, copy everything you can. Traveling home with a ton of photocopied documents allows you to focus your attention on
gathering materials while you are still at the archives, thus leaving the bulk of your analysis to be conducted at home. However, there is nothing worse than analyzing your documents from home and then experiencing researcher regret because you realize that there were documents you forgot or a research trail you failed to explore. Most of us have experienced this feeling. So, a little on-site analysis is warranted and can be beneficial, but do not spend the bulk of your time in the archives analyzing documents. Distance away from the materials and the strain of archival research can bring a better, more in-depth analysis of the documents. You can always schedule a return trip to the archives if you have failed to locate, record, or copy all of the materials you need.

3. Keep Your Topic in Mind, but Be Open to New Discoveries
The joys of conducting archival research often arise when you discover something unexpected—the archival diamonds in the rough. Sometimes these discoveries are not made until you are analyzing the documents at home following your visit. Other times, you locate the “smoking gun” or find the buried archival treasure while you are still on-site. This discovery can be the foundation for your thesis or can instead send you down a totally different research path. Be open to both. On the occasions when your discovery suggests a divergence from your current research agenda, follow that path, but continue to keep your topic in mind. The tangential trips we make as historians often help to create a more complete portrait of the story we are telling. Following too many paths, however, can lead to frustration and misuse of the precious time most of us have for our archival research.

I always make notes of other potential research topics on my laptop. Many of these have been uncovered during the course of my archival research, but were deferred because of their lack of a direct connection to my current research topic. For example, while conducting research on Penn State University during World War II, I discovered some newspaper articles that discussed the challenges some veterans faced upon their return to campus following their service in the war. The articles were related to my topic of the war, but I was interested more specifically in the institutional policies implemented during the course of the war. I thus made a note of the newspaper articles and the questions that the articles raised for me, and I have since returned to the questions through a qualitative study of the transition of Penn State veteran alumni after World War II. Consequently, you should not fear following a new path, but just be sure to leave plenty of bread crumbs so you can find your way back home!

ANALYZING THE FRUITS OF YOUR LABOR
You return home from your archival trip and now find yourself swimming in a sea of documents and historical evidence. The question then becomes: how do you turn your archival treasures into a sound argument or use them to recreate an historical event? Doing historical research is a lot like the old adage about making a sausage—sometimes you just do not want to know what goes into the process. Understanding the process, however, can make you a better historian. Despite the lists of recommendations provided above, locating your sources may be the easiest part of archival research. The hard part comes when you have to interrogate those sources. An advisor once told me that a person learns how to write history just by doing it. That may be true for some people, but for others a few guidelines may be helpful.
As historians, we must critically examine both the internal and external characteristics of each of our documents. Evaluating the external characteristics of each source entails asking where, when, and by whom each document was constructed. We must also ask ourselves about the authenticity of the document we are examining. Internal characteristics such as the intended meaning of the source; the accuracy of the reporting; and the positioning of the author should also be interrogated during our criticism of our sources. The process, therefore, can be complex and trying. Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, in their book *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*, offer their own checklist to aid in the examination of primary and secondary sources.\(^4\) I borrow four elements of Howell and Prevenier's list below and offer them as an aid as you interrogate your sources.

1. **Genealogy/Originality of the Document**

As historians, we first need to ask about the origin of the document we are analyzing; the originality of the document can have profound implications for the conclusions we draw from it. Is the document an original? A copy? A copy of a copy? The originality of documents can be hard to determine, however. I offer one of the sources I located at Barnard as an example of how one can test the originality of a source.

During the 1948–1949 academic year, members of the Barnard student curriculum committee developed and administered a survey that examined numerous facets of Barnard's liberal arts curriculum. I hoped that I could use the survey and its results as part of the basis for my argument about the increased technical competency and increased legitimacy of the student group. However, I first had to determine the originality of the document. As this was the only copy of the survey that survived, I had nothing to which I could compare the document. Writing scrawled in the margins of the mimeographed survey suggested that the document had undergone a number of revisions, but this same writing insinuated that the document I had was the final version of the survey. Numbers tabulated beneath each survey question also suggested that the survey was actually completed by members of the Barnard student body. To confirm this, I examined editions of the *Barnard Bulletin*, the college newspaper. One article within the *Bulletin* encouraged students to take the survey, and a second article published a few months later reported the findings of the committee's survey. Thus, from both the survey and the *Bulletin* I could establish that I was examining a copy of the original survey that was administered by the committee in 1948. In my case, I had already determined that no original was available so I knew that I had the best copy of the document available. You should always seek out the best text available, however. If the original is not available, try to locate the most “original” version.

"Placing" the document with other similar texts also aids in the authentication of the source. How does your document compare with similar texts from the same period? Are there glaring differences within the documents such as dates of the event, names of people involved, or details of the story being told? Exploring these questions helps to position your source within a broader context and allows you to determine if your source is the exception or the rule. If I aimed to address a research question about student surveys, then it would be prudent of me to analyze the 1948–1949 Barnard student survey in relation to other student surveys from the same period. Differences I may uncover could suggest something distinct about either of the two documents and may lead me to explore other documents or resources. Consequently, establishing the
originality and position of your document serves to add legitimacy to the foundation upon which you build your argument.

2. Genesis of the Document

We must also always ask ourselves about the sources of our documents. Where was the source produced? Who produced it? When? Under what circumstances was the document created? Was the document written freely by the author or was it written under the coercion of someone? Asking such questions helps us to establish the genesis of the document.

I built much of the foundation for my argument on the role of students in curricular decision-making on the meeting minutes and annual reports produced by the Barnard Student Curriculum Committee that I discovered in the institution’s archives. Determining the genesis of many of these was unproblematic given that most were signed, dated, and labeled. For example, the document labeled Report of the Student Curriculum Committee of 1949 and signed by Margaret Mather, curriculum committee chair, leaves little ambiguity as to its purpose or author. I still verified both the purpose and the author with other archived documents, however. Previous annual reports submitted by the committee to Barnard’s Undergraduate Association establish a precedent for the production of a yearly report. I could see that these reports actually were, as they suggested, published annually. Editions of the Bulletin also substantiated the information presented within the report. Bulletin articles reported much of the same information that was included within the committee’s report. Finally, the Barnard yearbook confirmed that Margaret Mather was, in fact, a student at Barnard during the time in which the document was produced, and that she was the chair of the Student Curriculum Committee as the report insinuated.

Thus, for this document, the process of determining the genesis of the report was rather straightforward. For unsigned or undated letters, notes, or reports, identifying the source can be much more complicated. It is up to you as the researcher to become creative in the way that you determine the genesis of your source. Some details may never be uncovered. Others can just lie embedded within the lines or margins of other documents; hence the ways in which archival research can seem like a treasure hunt.

3. Authorial Authority

Questions about the genesis of a document lead to questions about the authority of the document’s author. As historians, we must interrogate the voice behind the document. With what authority does the author speak? Was the author an observer or a participant? Is the account we are reading a first-, second-, or third-hand account? Is this first-hand account an accurate account of the event?

History is built upon truth and fallacy, and much of this is the result of the voices behind the accounts used to construct history. The proverb “History is written by the winners” suggests that the history we write can be influenced by the perspective from which our sources speak. A Saturday night in a college town illustrates my point.

Two students stumbling out of the local bar engage in a fight with another student walking down the street. Individuals inside the bar, individuals walking down the street, and individuals standing on the street corner all witness the altercation between the students. When the police arrive to investigate the fight, interviews of witnesses reveal a
number of interpretations of the event. It then becomes the police officers’ responsibility
to determine which version of the story is the most accurate.

The job of a historian therefore is much like that of a police officer investigating a
street fight. A historian must question whether the perspective offered by the docu-
ment’s author is an accurate (or truthful) record of the event. Not all misrepresenta-
 tion of information is intentional, but we must work to unpack the truth from the fallacy—
to reveal the event as it actually happened.

Historians of higher education often encounter issues of authorial authority because
of the many individuals who find themselves within the walls of the ivory tower. Was
the document written by a student? A faculty member? A senior administrator? Is the
account of the student protest over the institution’s chapel requirement as recorded
within the president’s memoir an accurate representation of the protest? Is a student
letter to home that recounts the protest a more reliable account of the event?

Accounts of the desegregation attempts at Ole Miss (the University of Mississippi)
serve as an example of the divergent perspectives that we, as historians, must question.
One must ask how James Meredith’s account of his days at Ole Miss differ from that of
the student who tried to keep Meredith awake by bouncing a basketball in the room
above Meredith’s. Does Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett’s account of the riots on
campus and subsequent federal troop invasion differ from that of the University pres-
dent? From that of the rioting students? If either differs, then why? Which version is a
more accurate account of what actually transpired? Our goal then is to tell history as it
was observed by the winner, the loser, and the spectator from across the street.

4. Interpretation of the Document

Once you have determined the originality, genesis, and authorial authority of your
sources, the art of piecing together your story follows. I use the word “art” intentionally.
Your goal as a historian is to use your archived sources to create an objective rendering
of the past. Assembling and ordering the facts of that argument or story to recreate the
past requires a blend of both art and science. Just like the puzzles we all enjoyed as
children, piecing together the past requires strategy, experience, a little luck, and even
some finesse. We must first organize all the pieces of our puzzle and then find a starting
and ending place for our story. Sometimes the pieces do not easily fit together, however,
and you can struggle to tell a complete story. Often this is of no fault on your part, but
rather just the consequence of historians’ reliance on available primary and secondary
sources. It then becomes a case of telling the story in the best way that you can; the story
may be incomplete or lack causality. It happens.

I offer the research that I did on enrollment trends at Pennsylvania State College
(now Penn State University) from 1890 to 1915 as a case in point. My intent was to use
the enrollment data available from the university’s archives to recreate the student body
for each of the years of the study to test my hypothesis about enrollment trends at the
college. I encountered a number of stumbling blocks during the course of my research,
however. The first was due to the incomplete nature of the records that I used. The
enrollment records from 1890 to 1905 included the names and hometowns of each
student enrolled at Penn State, with names separated by class—freshmen, sophomores,
juniors, and seniors. That was it. So I recorded each name and hometown and then
identified the county in which each hometown was located. Using GIS software, I then
plotted the enrollment density per county to create a map of Pennsylvania that showed
the dispersion of enrollment throughout the Commonwealth. “Now, what?” I asked myself. I quickly realized I was stuck because I could not locate the census data that I needed to continue with the next step in my research. (The 1890 census data were lost in a fire.) I was then left with a decision—do I try to tell the story with the limited data I have or do I return to both my research questions and the archives? I chose the latter. Returning to the archives, I decided to explore another development at the college during this period—the adoption of intercollegiate football. My project then evolved into an exploration of the influence of football and the media on enrollment at Pennsylvania State College from 1890 to 1905. This was a much different story than I had previously intended to write, but the new story was significant nonetheless.

This example from my own research reflects the trials and tribulations that can result from historians' reliance upon the availability of primary sources to recreate the past. The paper that I produced lacked causality, but instead put forth a hypothesis about the influence of the emergence of intercollegiate football on enrollment trends at the College. My limited resources allowed me to go no further with my argumentation; I could only begin to tell the story of the changing enrollment at the College, and I had to accept that fact.

The primary sources I have uncovered in the course of my dissertation research have produced a very different result. At all four institutions, I have located an abundance of documentation on each institution during the war period. It has, therefore, proven much easier for me to recreate this time in history and to put the pieces of the puzzle together to tell the story of how these four institutions managed the strains produced by the nation’s involvement in World War II.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Archival research can be an investment of time, money, and sanity. Archival research can also be fun, exhilarating, and addictive. Perhaps all historians are a little like Sherlock Holmes or Indiana Jones. Re-creating the past requires the skills of a detective, the patience of a teacher, and the tenacity of an Olympian. Yet we are often rewarded for our efforts by the archival treasure we uncover and the stories we reveal. And every archival experience is different, thus making any standardized checklist imperfect. Developing your own checklists for your archival research allows you to feel confident about your experience and the work you produce from it.

The letters to home that extol the merriment of the 1766 Great Butter Rebellion at Harvard and the 1894 diary that recounts the previous night’s fraternity initiation help re-create a time in the past that may never be replicated on campuses today. Archival research is just one step in the re-creation of history, but this research provides the building blocks needed to construct the foundation upon which each story and each argument is built.

Adequate planning before one even begins to conduct archival research can help maximize the efficiency of any scholar during their time in the archives. In addition, developing a strategy or plan of attack for your archival research can help ensure your research success. The analysis of your archival materials is then where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Interrogating the originality, genesis, and authorial authority of your documents as well as interpreting your documents helps guarantee that the story you tell is an accurate representation of the events as they occurred.
Therefore, employing a few select strategies during the preparation, implementation, and interrogation stages of your research ensures that your time conducting archival research will be successful and enjoyable. Once these strategies and checklists become routine, the fear and anxiety some can feel about archival research will dissipate. So, make checklists and then let your hunt for archival treasure begin!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the benefits and limitations of archival research as a methodology?
2. What is the relationship between archival research, qualitative research, and quantitative research?
3. Given the research strategies proposed above, how would you tackle collaborative research that uses archival methods with fellow students or faculty members?
4. How do you think technology will change or has changed the field of archival research?
5. What lingering concerns do you have about archival research?

NOTES

2. AHA Committee for Graduate Students, “Some Trips and Suggestions for your Research Trips.”
3. Ibid.