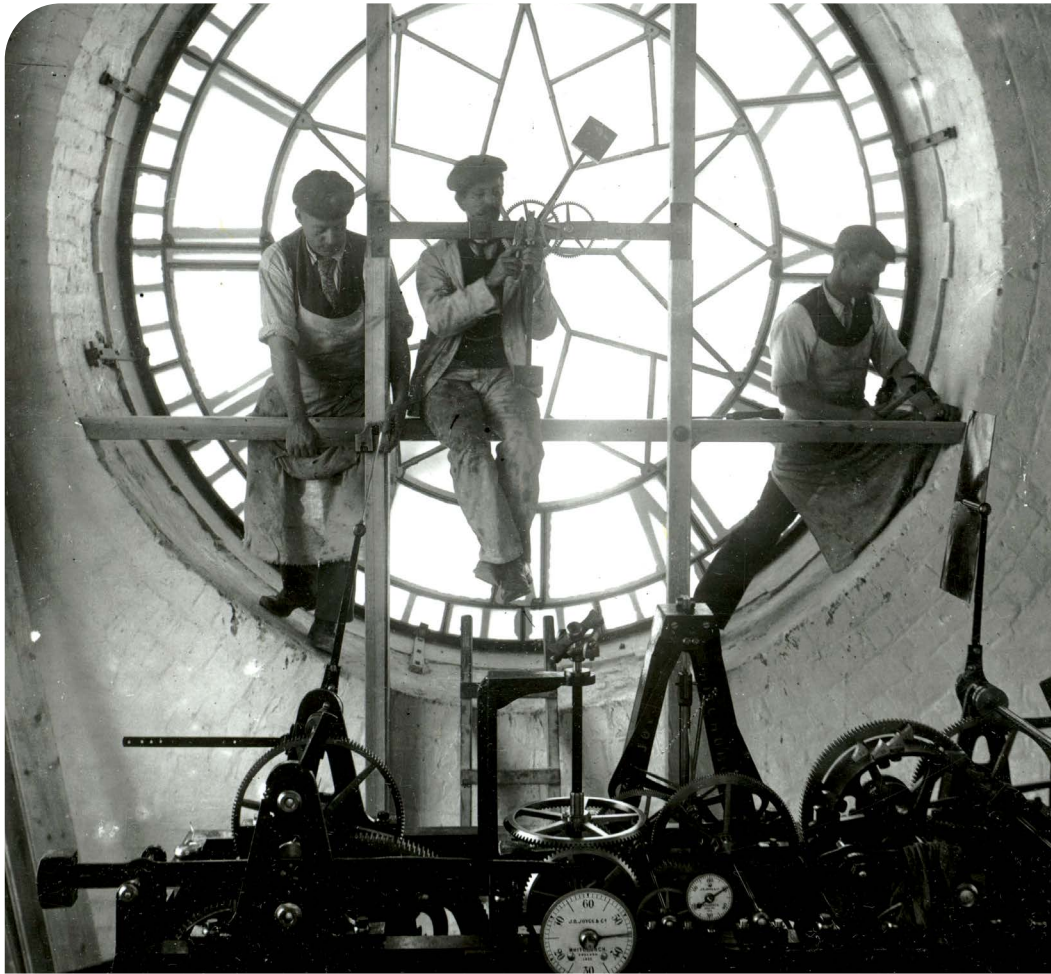




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Department of Cultural Affairs and Sport

What is an archivist? And what do they do?

Western Cape Archives and Records Service

WHAT IS AN ARCHIVIST? AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

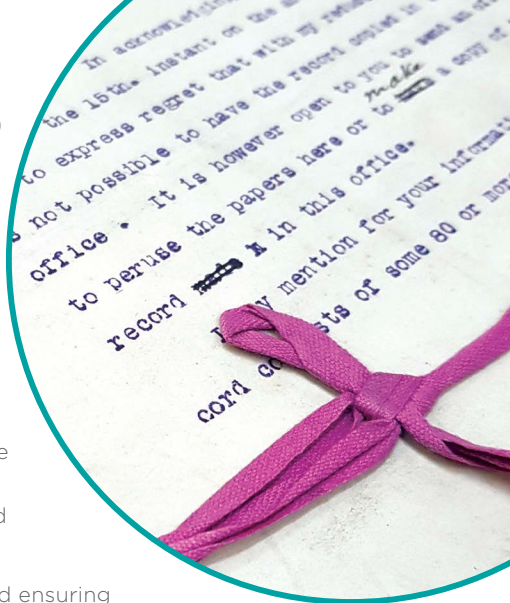
An archivist organises, manages and keeps safe historical documents (called “records” in archival terminology). The archivist ensures that historical records that are seen as valuable or significant for future generations, survive and remain accessible.

Archivists use specialised techniques to evaluate, organise, index, describe and preserve records – ensuring that they remain in good condition and are accessible to researchers and other users.

They are important in preserving cultural heritage and ensuring that future generations can access important historical documents and artefacts. They are also vital in providing information and guidance to professional researchers, scholars and the public who want to access historical records.

Archivists work in a wide field, ranging from libraries, museums, historical societies, government departments, municipalities and universities. They are also active in the private sector, working in companies that range from legal firms, to engineering, to construction businesses. They also work in academic institutions, archives, and research centres that specialise in specific subject areas, such as science or medicine.

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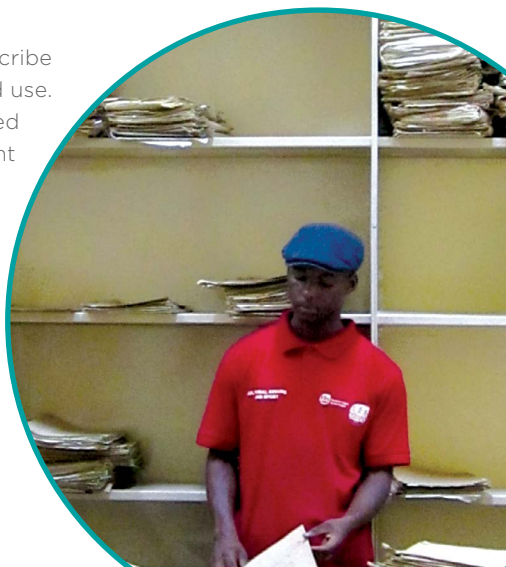
DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ARCHIVIST: **MANAGING AND GROWING COLLECTIONS**

To grow and develop collections, archivists must have a good understanding of the history and context of the records in their collection and how they relate to the larger collection.

Possible additions are assessed according to the collection's mission and goals, and factors like historical importance, uniqueness and the state of the materials. They are guided by the archive's subject areas and research interests to identify materials that will be of long-term value. Records may be received as part of scheduled transfers of records from government departments. Archivists may also negotiate with potential donors to acquire records for the collection.

Processing archivists physically sort, arrange and describe archival materials to help researchers with access and use. Records and documents in the collection are organised in logical groupings to make a clear division of content and context. Records are boxed and labelled during this process, to prepare them for storage in the archive.

Archivists also create finding aids and other descriptive tools that help users navigate collections and find relevant materials. They also rehouse materials in more appropriate protective containers and perform basic conservation tasks to ensure that the collections are preserved.



DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ARCHIVIST: ACCESSING RECORDS, RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Archivists make the records and documents in their collection available to researchers, scholars, and the public. To make it easier to search through the records, archivists develop finding aids, and create indexes and catalogues that describe the content of the collection. To help researchers find and use materials, archivists also provide reference services.

Archivists do research in their areas of expertise and may publish articles, books or other materials based on this. They can also work with other researchers to develop new approaches to managing and preserving historical materials.

Reference archivists assist researchers in using archival collections, providing reference services and helping researchers locate materials. They may also provide instruction on how to use archival materials and offer guidance on research strategies and methodologies.



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Preservation archivists focus on the **preservation** of archival materials. They develop and implement preservation strategies to **protect** collections from **deterioration**.

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ARCHIVIST: **PRESERVING RECORDS FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS**

Archivists are responsible for preserving the physical integrity of the records and documents in their collection. They assess its physical condition, identify preservation issues, and develop strategies to prevent damage or deterioration. These strategies may include environmental controls, proper storage and handling, and conservation treatments.

Archivists may digitise records to make them more accessible. Digitised versions of records are regarded as substitutes – copies of records that can be consulted and so spare the original damage from repeated use. Archivists working with digital records also develop strategies for the long-term preservation of digital materials, which include creating backups, migrating data, monitoring file formats and storage media.

Preservation archivists focus on the preservation of archival materials. They develop and implement preservation strategies to protect collections from deterioration. They may work to lower risks such as environmental hazards or pests, or they may focus on preventive measures such as proper storage and handling techniques.



DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ARCHIVIST: **COMMUNITY OUTREACH**, PUBLIC PROGRAMMING AND EDUCATION



Outreach archivists use a number of activities to promote the collection and its resources to the public. They create exhibits, offer tours of the collection, arrange talks by researchers or give presentations themselves, and develop educational programmes for specific audiences. This raises awareness of archives and the collection and encourages people to use its resources. They also sometimes interpret collections to make them more accessible.

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DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ARCHIVIST: RECORDS MANAGEMENT

Sometimes archivists are in charge of managing records before they reach the archives. Records have to be managed because they have a lifespan: after they are created, they are used for a certain period, and then discarded and destroyed – or they find a home in the archive.

While the records are still in the office where they were created, records managers develop policies and procedures to manage these records and ensure compliance with legal and regulatory requirements.

When records are no longer useful, records managers are also in charge of identifying those which need to be discarded or transferred, and process their transfer to the archive.



WORKING IN OTHER ENVIRONMENTS AS AN ARCHIVIST: INSTITUTIONS, THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND **COMMUNITIES**

Institutional archivists manage the archival collections of a particular organisation or institution, such as a university, government agency, or museum. They organise and manage archival materials and may also acquire new collections that are relevant to the institution's mission and goals.

Community archivists work with communities and organisations to record and preserve their history and culture, and to make their archival materials accessible. They may focus on

overlooked groups or communities to ensure that their stories and experiences are recorded and preserved for future generations. Community archivists can be an important link between institutions and underserved and underrepresented communities.



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THINKING ABOUT A CAREER AS AN ARCHIVIST?

To be an archivist, you must have a university degree from a recognised university. Archival Science – the specialised study programme for archivists – is part of the broader field of Information Science, which also includes librarianship studies.

You can study for a dedicated Information Science degree, specialising in archival studies at university. You can also study for a more general BA degree in subjects like History, Political Science, Library and Information Science, or Public Administration – before taking a Postgraduate Diploma in Archival Studies. Alternatively, you can study for a post-graduate degree (for example an Honours or Masters) specialising in Archival Science.



WHERE TO STUDY

The Universities of Fort Hare, South Africa (Unisa) and Cape Town (UCT) offer a Postgraduate Diploma in Archives and Records Management.

Unisa also offers an undergraduate degree Bachelor of Arts in Archives and Records Management.

FUNDING YOUR STUDIES

In addition to NFSAS funding, the National Department of Sports, Arts and Culture offers an annual bursary for heritage-related study, including for archives: www.dsac.gov.za/DSAC-Bursaries-for-2025-Heritage-Related-Studies

THE EXPANDED PUBLIC WORKS PROGRAM (EPWP) AND WORKING FOR THE ARCHIVES

The Western Cape Archives and Records Service participates in the EPWP programme. It is a national programme aimed at giving recent matriculants and graduates experience in the workplace.

It is a 12-month internship, running from 1 April to 31 March the following year. Applications are advertised on the Western Cape Government website. About 20 positions are available at the Archives per year.

EPWP beneficiaries receive a monthly stipend, calculated based on your existing qualifications.

INTERNSHIPS AND WORKPLACE EXPERIENCE

University students studying dedicated Archival Science degrees or heritage preservation programmes that require a period of workplace experience, can apply through their respective universities for an internship or workplace placement. These placements will need to be self-funded, as the Archives and Records Service is not able to contribute financially to travel or accommodation costs associated with such a placement.



LEARN MORE ABOUT ARCHIVING PRINCIPLES AND CONCEPTS

The Western Cape Archives and Records Service created a guide to archiving for community organisations. It will introduce you to the concepts and ideas behind archiving work, as well as how to approach the different kinds of materials in a collection. It is intended to provide a broad overview of how to get started in organising, managing and caring for an archive.

Download a copy of the manual from: www.westerncape.gov.za/cas/service/western-cape-archives

Contact us for visits or more information

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