

Finding and using Archives for Creative Writing

Archives are the remnants of people's personal and professional lives. They include correspondence, diaries, photographs and drawings, as well as printed ephemera and objects. They provide us with snapshots of history and fragments of stories. Archives can be a great place to find inspiration or characters for your writing, but they can also be quite daunting. This guide aims to show you how to get started with your archival research.

Which Archives might I want to use?

Local record offices hold records for the local council, but also collect archives related to their geographical area. These can be the records of local businesses, clubs and societies, or private individuals (including letters and diaries). They are also likely to have large collections of photographs, maps and printed ephemera. They can be a great place to start if you know you want to set your story in a particular locality. Examples near the University are the **City of Westminster Archives** and the **London Metropolitan Archives**.

Specialist repositories are archives which collect on a particular subject area. Many of these are housed in museums. Some examples in London include: the papers of British artists at the **Tate Archive**; records relating to medicine and disease at the **Wellcome Library**; personal memories of the two World Wars at the **Imperial War Museum**; Navy and piracy records at the **National Maritime Museum**; and records of missionaries and colonialism at **SOAS Library**. These types of collections are useful if you want to write about someone who worked in a particular profession or industry and want to be sure that you get the historical details correct, even if you're not writing about a real person.

Business and organisational archives will hold the papers of the institution that they serve. As well as minutes and financial papers, these can include advertising materials, photographs and sometimes samples of products. In the 19th and early 20th century, people worked for one business for a long time and so the records can contain a lot of detail about their personal lives. Examples in London includes the HSBC archives, which includes records of staff working in India and China.

The National Archives holds the records of central government and large scale projects, such as the Festival of Britain. These include records relating to individuals such as wills, army records, immigration documents and trial proceedings, as well as broader social documentation of LGBT history, teenage delinquency and religious upheaval. We recommend starting with their Research Guides to get a broad overview of the types of records they hold <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/#find-a-research-guide>

The portal website www.aim25.ac.uk allows you to search across collections held by Universities within the M25 region by theme – this is a great place to start if you want to use some archive material but aren't exactly sure what.

Search tips for archive catalogues

In order to find information in archives, you need to think about how that information is stored.

Are you looking for **images**? Then search for **photographs** but also try words like **sketch, painting, engraving, doodle, drawing, print, illustration**.

Are you looking for an **individual**? Personal information will usually be in a larger volumes that records details of **members, staff, students, inmates, patients**. Try searching for these words [N.B. personal information is covered by the Data Protection Act and so these records may be closed for 100 years]

Are you looking for descriptions of **everyday life**? Try searching for **correspondence** or **diaries**. You can also look at newsletters such as **student magazines**, which document changing **social attitudes**.

Remember! The search function on an archive catalogue is not like google. If you search for the word 'diaries' it will only find that exact word – it will not find 'diary'. You need to search for singulars and plurals and build up a list of related terms e.g. for women, try searching for woman, ladies, lady, female, girls, girl, feminine, sex.

At the Archive

Archives can seem like quite intimidating places as they have a lot of rules. These are to ensure the **preservation and security** of the archive. Archive documents are **delicate and unique** and archivists are committed to ensuring they are available to use both now and by future generations.

Most archives will ask you to **make an appointment in advance**; this is because they are usually staffed by quite small teams and they do not want you to have a wasted journey. The London Metropolitan Archives and the National Archives both allow you to turn up without an appointment as they are much larger. Emailing to request an appointment is a good time to **tell the staff about your research** and the type of material you are hoping to find. They can let you know whether the material you have selected is appropriate or whether there might be other, better, resources.

When you arrive you will **need to register** so always check in advance what types of ID you need to take with you, and whether you need to supply a photograph. A few archives will ask for a letter of reference - a letter from your tutor on headed paper should suffice.

Most archive reading rooms have roughly the same rules – **no food or drink, no bags or coats, pencils only**. This is to ensure the safety and long-term preservation of the documents. If you want to use your laptop, check in advance if you will be able to plug it in to charge it. If any of the documents you are using are particularly awkward – like folded maps or tied bundles of documents – the archive will usually give you special advice on how to handle them, but always feel free to ask. Most archives will allow you to take photographs on your smartphone or tablet, but do check first.

About the University of Westminster Archives

The Archives Service here at the University holds and collects papers relating to the University and its predecessor bodies. Those predecessor bodies are rather unusual so there are records here that you might not expect!

The 309 Regent Street building originally housed the Royal Polytechnic Institution [1838-1881], which was founded by Sir George Cayley to promote science and technology to the masses. It hosted scientific displays and performances, including the illusion known as Pepper's Ghost and lectures illustrated with lantern slides. Our collections include a small number of catalogues, programmes and flyers for the institution, as well as press-cuttings and publications written by its staff.

In the 1860s, Quintin Hogg founded a ragged school and home for poor boys in Covent Garden, and then later the Youths' Christian Institute [1871-1891]. The YCI was a philanthropic institute providing for the athletic, intellectual, social and religious needs of young men. Membership fees paid for free use of a library, social rooms, gymnasium and entertainments, with a small additional fee for technical classes. The YCI eventually outgrew its premises in Long Acre and Hogg purchased 309 Regent Street in 1882 after the Royal Polytechnic Institution folded.

The records we hold relating to these early years include a journal kept by the manager of the Castle Street Working Boys Home which Hogg founded, with photographs of the boys in his care, descriptions of their circumstances and reports on what happened to them afterwards. In these early years, Hogg also started a magazine for the members called "Home Tidings" (later "Polytechnic Magazine"). It includes reports on all aspects of the Institute and its members and includes line drawings and, later, photographs. The magazine continued up to 1970 and includes a wealth of information about the institute, London and national affairs.

The YCI gradually took on the name over the door at 309 Regent Street and became known as The Polytechnic [later Regent Street Polytechnic, 1891-1970], the first of its kind in the UK and the model for all the other polytechnics. The number of educational classes increased hugely and the sports clubs also become very important, helping to organise the 1908 Olympics and the first marathon. The Archive holds a great number of records relating to clubs (which also include other leisure activities such as rambling) including photographs, publications and memorabilia.

Until World War II, the Polytechnic largely catered for evening students, with only a few technical classes held during the day. This all changed in the 1950s and 1960s and we start to see the emergence of a defined student body, seeking political representation within the Institute. The Archive holds a variety of student publications from this era, before the creation of a formal Students' Union. During the Polytechnic of Central London period [PCL, 1970-1992] the student body was very political and the Archive holds a nearly complete set of the Union's magazine (McGarel) as well as assorted flyers and posters relating to occupations and protests.

Another unexpected aspect of the Polytechnic is its travel bureau, the Polytechnic Touring Association, which later became a part of Lunn Poly. The Archive holds records for the organisation from the 1890s to the 1950s including brochures, guidebooks and postcards, as well as collecting diaries and photographs created by people who went on the tours.

Please see www.westminster.ac.uk/archives for information on our collections, our online catalogue and digitised resources, and arrangements for using the Archive.