

How often have you been asked, “What is an archivist?” Many outside the profession have little idea what archivists do. As often as not, the public thinks that we are conservators. How often have I been asked for advice on preserving or restoring a document? How seldom have I been asked for my thoughts on the organization of historical records, the preservation of context, or appraisal?

The question surfaced on the Archives and Archivists List in the late 1990s. In one exchange, Holly Hodges answered, “It’s what you get when you cross a librarian with a historian.” She noted that the answer does not apply to all archivists, “But it works for me in those situations that imply a one sentence response.”¹

I’m not much for sound bites; it’s impossible to reduce complex topics to a sentence. But we must be able to give a simple, concise answer if we want the general public to have a good idea about what we do. We archivists can (and do!) wax eloquently about our profession when speaking to each other. But when others ask the question of us, they often want something less. We must be able to tell others who we are and what we do in terms that they understand and – if we want their support – in terms that they find compelling.

The discussion on the A&A List was often couched in terms of who is *not* an archivist. Participants debated whether it is necessary for archivists to have specific education, and whether that education must be in archival science, history, library science, or some combination. Participants also discussed whether it is necessary to be certified to be considered an archivist. As a result, many who considered themselves archivists felt alienated. Saying that a library degree does not make one an archivist diminished those who came to the field from a library school; arguments that experience is not enough discounted those who had been in the field for years. Although the argument has grown tired, we are left without a positive answer to the question, “What is an archivist?”

There is some irony in that, while the arguments were mediated by technology, the participants often did not recognize how that very technology was affecting the profession. As one of those who was active on the list at the time, that’s certainly true for me. As we worried about who could call themselves archivists, technologists were doing many of the things that archivists did without a thought to our profession. They began to worry about which records to keep, how to store and find records, and how to ensure that the records remained reliable over time.

As more and more records remain in digital formats throughout their life cycle, I wonder again “What is an archivist?” What is my own simple, concise answer?

Each time I try to compose the answer, I begin with “Archivists preserve . . . ,” and then I stop. “Preserve” reinforces the confusion between conservators and archivists. Conservators are essential allies in our work, and perpetuating that confusion is a disservice to both professions. So I begin again with “Archivists keep”

What do we keep? Records, of course. But if the definition of any term is more hotly contested than “archivist,” surely it is “record.” More important, for purposes of a simple, concise answer for the general public, the term is not particularly clear. When confronted with a blank look by a non-archivist, I find myself adding, “like at the county courthouse . . . deeds, birth certificates, and the like.” The expansion is insufficient because archivists keep more than government records. And the example focuses on documents, whereas archivists keep records in all formats. “Records” and my examples lack emotional impact; few people get excited about the dusty papers of bureaucracy.

In fact, we don’t just keep “records.” We select records, and we often decide *not* to keep records. Archivists keep documents, photographs, sound recordings, and other records that are valuable as reliable evidence of the past. We used to say “permanently valuable.” As it seems “permanently” has been devalued to mean something around 10 years in the vernacular, I tend to say “enduring value.” (In the context of my own job, the phrase “As long as Arizona is a state” is much more effective than “permanent.”)

We also arrange and describe the records, we help people find the records they need, and we – in the narrower sense – preserve them. For something simple and concise, “arrange,” “describe,” and “preserve” can be subordinated under “keep.” However, reference and outreach point to an essential concept that’s not yet addressed – the people who are the beneficiaries of our work, very often the public who doesn’t know what we do. Adding that in, I offer my own answer to the question:

Archivists select and keep documents, photographs, sound recordings, and other records that have enduring value as reliable memories of the past, and they help people find and understand the information they need in those records.

That’s a sweeping statement, and reasonable archivists could contest every phrase within it. (In fact, I could lead the parade.) I thought about restricting the answer to “historical documents . . . ,” but it’s important to capture electronic records soon after their creation, before they are of an age generally associated with “historical.” Some would argue for including “authentic,” but archives sometimes keep forgeries. Maybe I should not include “reliable,” but it seems important to stress that the records have a special authority that makes them more trustworthy than something found on the street. Most archivists would probably use “evidence” where I have used “memories,” but I hope that the latter may be more compelling to the non-archivist.

The statement describes archivists in terms of what we do rather than what we know. Archival theory is founded on the principles of respect for provenance and original order, and the professional literature is filled with ideas that inform how we do our jobs. But those concepts won’t help the general public understand who we are.

Putting aside those objections for a moment, I find this answer useful because it is inclusive. Many fall within its boundaries and can feel a part of the archival profession. That inclusiveness challenges our identity because it does not reference some of the traditional characteristics that we've used to distinguish those who can call themselves an archivist. There's no requirement for professional or graduate training, for any minimum of experience, for a background in history, for respect for provenance or original order.

Allowing such diverse groups to use the label may seem to some to dilute the word. I disagree because I believe that the archives profession has necessarily brought together individuals from many different backgrounds because of the diverse nature of the records in our care. Rather than limit "archivist" to a few, let's use that term to welcome all who keep records and help the public use them. At the same time, we can recognize that there are many different kinds of archivists, and we should respect those differences by naming them: practicing archivists, experienced archivists, graduate-level-educated archivists, certified archivists, teacher-archivists, and manager-archivists. There is strength in numbers, and all are archivists.

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My simple, concise answer is mine alone. It is not endorsed by SAA. No doubt there are other (and better) answers. I would very much enjoy hearing how you would answer the question, "What is an archivist?" Please send your thoughts to me at president@archivists.org.