

Archival Terms for the Teacher

The following terms are often heard around archives and museums; each represents a key concept in the preservation of historical objects.

- The terms **form** or **format** refer to the materials and structure of a document or object. The form is the overall appearance and structure of the object, which can convey information to the person examining the item. The form might be a document type (a letter or memorandum), while format is more often used to refer to the physical materials (a document available in paper or in microfilm format, for example).
- The record of an object's **provenance** documents its origin and chain of custody. The provenance gives information about the circumstances that led to the creation of the item and the people and institutions that have held the object since its date of creation. An object's provenance gives context which modern viewers can use to better understand the object.
- If an object is **authentic**, it is of undisputed origin or authorship; this is the term used to refer to an object that is genuine or original. An archivist will use many clues, including provenance information and information about the object's physical form, to determine authenticity. For instance, if the provenance of a typed document claims to be from a date prior to the invention of the typewriter, archivists know the record is inauthentic.
- Colloquially, the term **reliability** is used to refer to a document or object that is able to be trusted, because it is authentic, accurate, and complete. This document or object may be accepted as a source of information.
- Consider a **forgery**. Although the document may have been created during the same time period as an original document of the same type, a forgery is not authentic because its authorship is open to question. It is also not reliable, because it may not be accurate or complete. Documents can be authentic but not reliable – a journal of a Civil War soldier may be authentic because it has a known author and can be dated back to 1863, but if it is missing pages and not complete, the reader may not have the full story.

