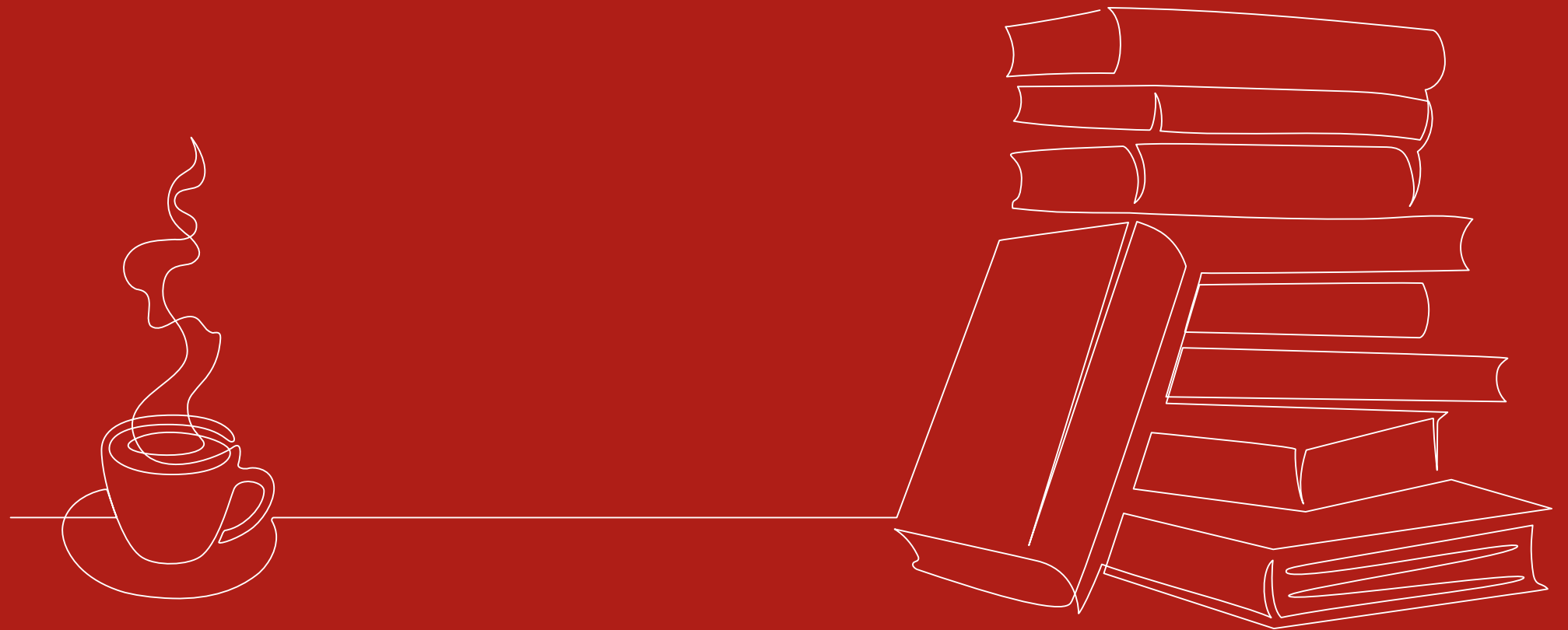


# EMOTIONALLY ENGAGED: A TOOLKIT FOR YOUR ARCHIVE JOURNEY



# What is an archive?

As you prepare to engage with an archive, especially if this is your first experience, it's important to consider not just the practical steps, but also how to care for your emotional wellbeing throughout the process. This guide helps you think through what you can do to feel more confident, informed and supported.

## What is an archive?

An archive is a place where historically, culturally or legally significant records are preserved and protected for the future. These records can include documents, photographs, objects, books, films, maps, audio recordings, and digital files.

Archives are increasingly digitising some of their collections as well as collecting materials created in a digital format, sometimes called “born-digital” materials. Some archives exist entirely as digital collections.

Accessing an archive can feel quite different from visiting a library or museum. You usually can't browse the shelves or take things home. Instead if you are visiting an archive in person, you request items and view them in a supervised reading room. There are usually a set of guidelines users need to follow, to help protect rare, fragile materials.

Archives are often historical collections, established for a variety of reasons and to serve particular audiences. Consequently, they are structured in a way that can privilege certain beliefs and power structures. They may contain discriminatory or difficult materials and language, and this is something that you can also consider before you begin exploring their contents. The history of an archive is sometimes as important as what you might find there.

## Myth Busting



**Myth:** Archives are dark and dusty

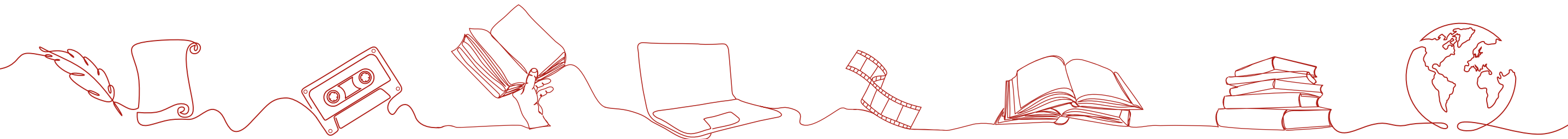
**Fact:** Archives are all different – you could be based in a stately home, an office space, a modern purpose-built building or online. To preserve and protect their collections, archives maintain set temperatures, humidity and cleanliness so items should never come out dusty.

**Myth:** No talking please

**Fact:** There may be silent study spaces but there may also be group study areas too where talking is encouraged.

**Myth:** Archives are only for some people who know the rules already!

**Fact:** Archives are for everyone and there are many different types of archive collections with different sets of rules depending on the materials they hold. Knowing the rationale for what can seem like peculiar rules, and how to navigate them, can give you the confidence needed to approach archives for your own research.



# Before the Archive

## Emotional Preparedness

Whether you visit a digital archive from the comfort of your home or make a special visit to view a collection held at a physical site, archival research can involve exploring sensitive material and prompt strong emotions.

Things that can help you prepare include:

- Familiarising yourself with the archive you're going to use. Will you be working with text, photographs, sound, or material objects? Is there a collection guide or glossary you can consult to demystify unfamiliar subjects or terminology? Does the archive offer a digitisation service that might enable you to consult documents remotely? If the archive's website hasn't answered your questions, try getting in touch through the archive's 'contact us' webpages or request an online chat before you visit to help you prepare.

- Checking to see if the catalogue includes content notes or warnings that signal distressing or sensitive material. Archives vary in how they approach this, so be prepared to set your own boundaries. You may be bringing personal experiences, family history, or trauma into the research so acknowledging this in advance can help you navigate the space with care.
- Thinking about what kinds of emotional support you might need, when and how best to access it. Formal support might be available if you are conducting research as part of a job and you might explore this with a line manager, supervisor or colleague. Sometimes the institutions through which you access an archive signpost resources and they may have trained staff available. At other times you might prefer to draw on your informal support networks or on strategies that you know work for you. You might set up check-in meetings to discuss your first encounters or create group chats to share your experiences with your networks.

- Developing a well-being plan: A wellbeing plan could be as simple as scheduling regular breaks and knowing where the nearest café is, to gathering a list of resources for support. Check out this **template** designed by the University of Bath's Researcher Wellbeing Project.



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# What to know before you visit

Archives may have different rules depending on where they are situated and what they collect. It's a good idea to check their website in advance as most will list their rules and guidelines clearly. Here are some of the most common:

## Notetaking

- **Rule:** use pencil rather than pen to take notes. Most archives also allow the use of laptops and small electronic devices such as phones for notetaking.
- **Why:** using pen could lead to ink getting on and permanently changing archive material.

## Photography

- **Rule:** archives usually have rules about taking photographs which can vary between individual collections. You may be asked not to use flash. Check if there are any restrictions on sharing photographs, for example on social media.
- **Why:** some materials might have restrictions due to copyright, data protection or conditions set by the donor which mean you can't photograph or share them. Light from camera flashes can damage coloured documents such as illuminated manuscripts or watercoloured plans.

## Lockers

- **Rule:** store your belongings including coats, scarves, hats, bags, laptop cases and any food, in a locker, usually located in or near the archive.
- **Why:** this helps with security but also allows you to just take in essentials and keep your other belongings safe.

## Security checks

- **Rule:** you may be asked to provide your name and email, show a form of ID, or maybe register for a reader's pass in advance. Some archives may carry out a bag check before and after you visit.
- **Why:** archives need to know who is on site, often as part of their institution's health and safety policy. Bag checks are in place to prevent collection items being removed.

## Food and Drink

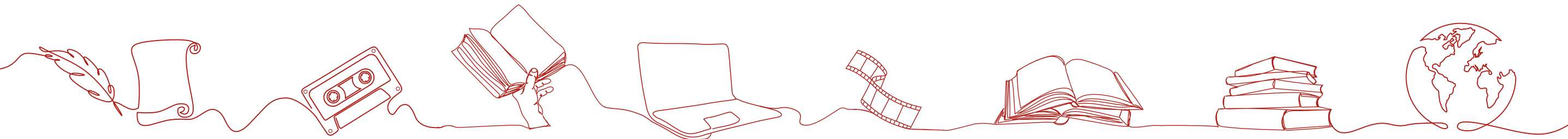
- **Rule:** keep food and drink away from the archive space.
- **Why:** food and drink could damage material with spills, leave residue on your hands and bring in substances that introduce mould and pests.

## Handling the material

- **Rule:** handle one item at a time.
- **Why:** reduces the risk of material getting mixed up and helps users keep track of what they've seen.



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# Practical Preparation for Visiting an Archive

## Practical steps you can take before you access an archive in person

- Explore the online catalogue – these can vary from archive to archive. There will sometimes be a guide to help you get to grips with searching and discovering the material you need. Give yourself time and explore different ways of searching to see what you can find. Some collections will have detailed online catalogues; others will have a basic description of the collection only accessible on site. This is down to cataloguing backlogs and the resources an archive has available to them. Build in extra time for your visit if you need to consult paper catalogues in person rather than ahead of time.
- Pre-book material – many archives ask you to request the material you want to see in advance. Depending on whether the material is stored off site or needs to be checked by the archive team, you might be asked to request material several days or even weeks before your visit. This involves knowing what days you want to visit the archive in advance and factoring this into your schedule. Other archives welcome drop-ins and some have open days. It's always worth checking opening hours and holiday closures.
- Find out if you need to register for a reader's pass and whether you need to bring any form of I.D. with you. If you need to register in advance, apply early so you feel ready when you arrive.
- Look up directions to key spaces in the archive – reading rooms, bathrooms, breakout spaces. Some archives send out welcome emails with information about visitor numbers, accessible toilets, and how to prepare. If not, don't hesitate to ask.
- Check out access routes if you have mobility challenges. Often archives are not on the ground floor.
- Pack anything you'll need: pencils, notebooks, chargers for electronic equipment, I.D., any documents required for registration. Being well-equipped can help combat feelings of not knowing what you're doing.
- Consider bringing snacks, water and lunch with you to keep your energy levels up when you take breaks. You'll be able to store these in a locker while you are in the reading room.
- Check out the local area. If the archive is out of town ask for advice on the nearest shops, cafes and transport links.
- Ask if there are staff available to talk to on the day with knowledge of the collection.



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# Preparing for Digital Archival Encounters

## Practical steps for accessing digital archives

Digital archives are usually accessible virtually anywhere, at any time, and don't require you to travel or navigate an unfamiliar physical space. For some this makes for a more comfortable experience, but it can also increase the solitariness of the research process.

Digital archival encounters are both virtual and physical: encountering collections via a screen while inhabiting our own, often domestic, material environments, can shape the ways we might respond.

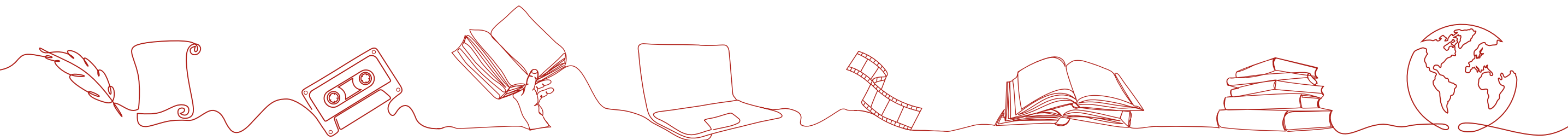
Experiences with paper and object textures in the physical archive are replaced by encounters with the keyboard or device we are using and we need to prepare accordingly.

Many of the principles that underpin healthy engagement with physical archives and archival spaces are transferable to the digital context, but there are also additional considerations and practices which will ensure a better and more supported experience:

- Spend time looking at the web interface you are going to be working through. Think about how it presents information and how the catalogue works. Practice searching the catalogue and building a list of possible search terms. Make a note of pathways or any quirks or anomalies you encounter – you can feed these back to the organisation and this will support future users.
- Look at the online guides that are often available to help you access collections remotely and see if there are people you can contact for support and to answer questions. This will save you time in the long run and should reassure you that the site is usable and that you can navigate it. This will build confidence and allow you to develop a workflow which suits the website.
- Consider visiting the collection if you find a digitised item that you are really interested in and would like to view in person. Virtual consultations of archive material can sometimes be an option.
- Be aware of the tendency to over-work online. Take regular breaks and try setting time limits on your work sessions. For example, you might set an hourly alarm. Think about what a healthy and practical workload looks like for you and remember that you are not subject to the usual opening hours of an archive that normally frame the working day.
- If you use accessibility tools such as a screen reader, test that the site is compatible and the particular software you use works.
- Set up your workspace properly to ensure that you are comfortable and where possible follow good practice with screen use, thinking about posture, light levels and keyboard and screen positions. If you are using other types of devices then similarly consider your working setup. This Guide to **Healthy Laptop Use** is helpful.



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# At the Archive

## On Arrival

Build in orientation and familiarisation time. Physical spaces and signage may not be immediately clear so ask staff if you're unsure.

You may have to introduce yourself at the reception desk so the archive team can access your booking and help you get started. They may explain how the process of viewing archive material works, but if not please ask and share that this is your first visit.

Ask questions and tell staff what you're looking for. This can help you get a lot more out of your research visit.

Once you've received your material look at what equipment might be available to help you engage with it. Archives often provide some or all of the following. If you can't see it, ask:

1. **Book cradles and foam supports** – help support the spines and binding of books and also hold them at a good angle for reading.
2. **Magnifying glasses** – for help with small print, detailed illustrations or to zoom in on photographs.
3. **Snakes and weights** – help keep the pages of a book open and are often used along with the book cradles. Weights can be used to hold down flat material like maps and posters.
4. **Nitrile gloves** – when viewing certain archive formats you will be asked to use plastic gloves. This is the case for photographs, film and slides. This is because the oils on your skin can affect the chemicals on photography formats.
5. **Specialist equipment like a light box or camera stand** – this may depend on the archive you're visiting. Light boxes are useful when viewing slides, and camera stands work well for taking numerous photographs.



Images 1-4 courtesy of Cultural Collections. Image 5 produced by MS secure co-pilot





# At the Archive

## While there

Be prepared for serendipity, the joy of discovery, frustration at not finding anything, or shock and anger at the injustices of both the far and recent past. Archival research is a journey, and you may encounter material that stirs up a wide range of emotions or something that may even be triggering.

- **Keep an open mind:** not being narrowly focused on your topic can take you down interesting paths you didn't know were there.
- **Engage with other archive users** if you find it helpful to share ideas while researching. There are often opportunities to find out what others are working on and to share experiences: archives may have both silent study and group study areas, so you can pick and choose which would suit you best. Some archive users are eager to share their exciting finds while others work intensely and keep their head down or may not wish to discuss their research while they are working through collections.
- **Keep a record of your work.** In-person archive trips can be resource-intensive, and it can be tempting to gather as much information as possible whilst you're there. Researchers often find it useful to take photographs of material that they can consult later on. Make sure you're being strategic about your photographs and notes.
- **Check your images** to make sure they are focused and everything you want to capture is in shot. Remember to take notes so that you know which collections and boxes your images are from and take down any reference details such as box and folder numbers. Think about what it might feel like to process this material away from the archive in a different environment and what support you might need.
- **Check in** at the end of each visit with a friend or colleague or member of the archive's staff. Consider sharing what you found, particularly if you found anything difficult or triggering. What / how / why did that happen?" are entirely human, natural and justified reactions to what you might find. Take some time to talk or process the experience in a way that's helpful to you, whether that's writing up some notes in response, something creative like a poem, or a stream of consciousness screed.



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# After the Archive

Archives can be experienced as intense environments that demand focus and emotional engagement, which can linger after leaving. Many people find they need to decompress after engaging with archival materials, even when the content isn't overtly sensitive. The mind continues to process what was seen. Archival work can trigger personal memories or associations, making the experience emotionally layered.

## Practical Steps

- Immediate Needs: simple actions like rehydrating, eating, stretching or taking a walk can help transition out of the archive mindset.

- Physical Space: the idea of a “decompression space”, whether that be a nearby bench, café or park, can be a helpful buffer between the archive and the outside world.
- Symbolic Transitions: practices like putting on or removing those extra layers of clothing sometimes required in climate-controlled reading rooms or passing through lockers and rules can help your transition into and out of the archival mindset.

## Organise before you forget

It's easy to lose your way in the mass of information and sources you have collected. Taking time to organise soon after your visit can save a lot of time and trouble later in the research process. Have a plan for getting your notes organised, images downloaded, sorted and backed up, and references recorded. You may want to explore software packages that can help you organise your archive images, such as **Tropy**.

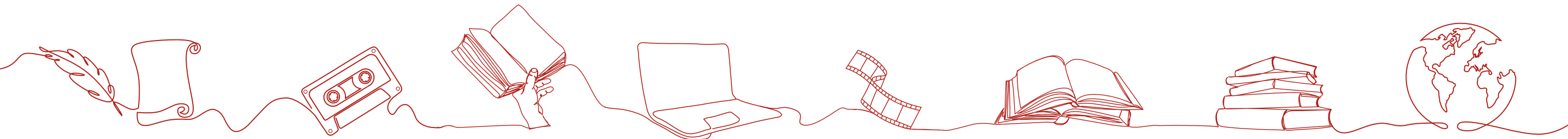
## Reflective Practices

Reflective practices can help you harness, understand and process some of the emotions people experience as part of an archival encounter.

- Journaling and note-taking: writing down thoughts or project ideas after a session can help you process the experience and can lead to new research directions. Journaling can be especially useful if your research isn't tied into a particular output or outcome, or if you are conducting research on behalf of someone else.
- Sharing and dialogue: in the days and weeks that follow, talking with others — colleagues, friends, or through social media — can be a valuable way to reflect and connect.
- Creative responses: producing something, such as writing or artwork, in response to what you have encountered can provide an outlet for helping you think through what you have experienced.



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# Conclusion

There is no such thing as a typical archive or archive user. Whatever brings you into an archive in the first place, a crucial part of the existence of an archive is the meaning you make of it. A growing number of resources, some of which are listed below, reflect this understanding and offer a good starting point for learning more about archives and emotions, and how to support yourself and others on their archive journey. Each item links to an online resource.

## List of Resources

**Archives and Records Association Resources.**

**Archiving While Black.** Farmer, A. (2018). 18 June. Black Perspectives.

**Challenging Research Network.**

**The Emotionally Demanding Research Network (Scotland).**

**‘Emotional responses in archival work.’** Regehr, C., Duff, W., Ho, J., et al. (2023). *Archival Science*, 23, 545– 568.

**‘Exploring Archives and Emotions through Applied Psychology and Arts Practice.’** Singh, I., Balick, A., and Lu, K., (2022). 13 December. The National Archives Blog.

**GW4 R WELL: Researcher Wellbeing Evidence and Learning Lab.**

**“Humans and records are entangled”: empathic engagement and emotional response in archivists.’** Regehr, C., Duff, W., Aton, H., et al. (2023). *Archival Science*, 22, 563–583.

**MIRRA: Memory – Identity – Rights in Records – Access** (University College London).

**MIRRA Research Leaflet: Description and Actions.** Hoyle, V., Shepherd, E., Lomas, E., Flinn, A. (2019).

**The National Archives: Rapid response collecting guidance.** Arvantis, K., Jones, H., Morris, D., Rogers, M., Stevens, V., Walker, W., Wickham, S. (2025).

**Providing Emotional Support for Archive Volunteers: Methods Used on the Manchester Together Archive Project.** Marsden, J. (2020).

**Relational practice and welfare and wellbeing in research settings** (University of Bath).

**Researcher Wellbeing: Guidelines for History Researchers.** Hammett, J., Arnold-Forster, A., Barke, J., Dawkins, J., Elizabeth, H., Gray, A., Holley, S., Mahoney, K., Nunan, C., Okuleye, Y. (2021).

**The Researcher Wellbeing Project** (University of Bath).

**The Researcher Wellbeing Project Report.** Skinner, T., Brance, K., Halligan, S., Girling, H., Chadwick, P., Tsang, E. (2023).

**Res-Well: A Toolkit to support Researcher Wellbeing.** Zschomler, S., McQuaid, K., Bridger, E., Mannell, J. (2024).

**‘Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice’** *Archivaria* 91, 38-73. Wright, K., and Laurent, N., (2021).

**‘Supporting Emotionally Demanding Research: Developing Guidance for a University Research Centre’** in Clift, B.C., et al. (ed.) *Qualitative Researcher Vulnerability: Negotiating, Experiencing and Embracing*. Smillie, S., Riddell, J. (2023). London: Routledge, pp. 77-93.

**UCLA Community Archives Lab.** The project toolkit is also available: *Assessing the Affective Impact of Community Archives*. Caswell, M., et al (2018).





# Acknowledgments

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## Methods

This toolkit is the product of many conversations that took place between 47 artists, archivists, curators, researchers and research enablers from across the U.K. as part of the **Developing Healthy Engagement** project at the University of Leeds (2025). Looking at archival materials together in a “chatty reading room,” or digitally, on screens in seminar rooms and over many lunches and coffees, these in-person meetings created time and space for listening, learning and building connections and trust between participants.

We wanted to find a useful and collaborative way to record and share participants’ experiences and expertise as users, creators and guardians of archives. So we also ran a series of online collaborative writing workshops to develop this toolkit. This involved recording our online writing workshops and producing an automatically

generated transcription which we ran through MS Secure Co-Pilot to see if it pulled out the same key themes we identified in the sessions. Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn’t. The version you are reading reflects the very human emotions — the joy, fear, excitement and frustration of those who participated in the project and contributed to the toolkit. It includes the sort of information many of us wish we had known as we began our archival journeys.

## Contributors

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