DESCRIBING ARCHIVES: A CONTENT STANDARD. Society of American Archivists. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004. xxi, 269 pp. ISBN 1-931666-08-3. $49.00 (members $35.00).

The Society of American Archivists has issued Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS), to replace Steve Hensen’s Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM), advancing the standardization of American archival description. While library catalogers have developed standards and procedures for describing published materials over the past couple centuries, until very recently holders of archival and manuscript material have not. Since every fonds in every institution has no duplicate anywhere else, archivists derived no benefit from an economy of scale which makes centralized bibliographic description so attractive; all fonds description is original.

Fonds come in a bewildering variety of types and sizes, from a single letter to multiple hundreds of cubic feet of materials generated by a person, a family, or an institution. To address the need to describe their fonds, archivists invented “finding aids” that worked at the time and place of invention. The generic term “finding aid” encompasses a great variety of formats—inventories, calendars, card files, lists—for a wide range of levels of description—fonds, all levels of series, files, and items. Researchers learned to use the finding aids presented them, regardless of form. No archivist had to explain why the finding aids in his or her repository differed from everyone else’s.

However, in the 1970s, as online public access catalogs (OPACs) in libraries and bibliographic and full-text databases online became in-
creasingly available to researchers of published material, archivists recognized the value of computer-searchable databases of archival finding aids. Some began to wonder if the archival community could develop standard ways of organizing and expressing finding aid information to make it amenable to automation.

In 1980, Elaine Engst’s literature review and survey for the Society of American Archivists’ (SAA) newly formed National Information Systems Task Force (NISTF) corroborated a growing sense that, while the look and feel and granularity of the finding aids in historical repositories varied widely, the information they included did not; all included the same essential information about the contents of a fonds and the context of its creation. Engst’s report confirmed the feasibility of applying the computerized retrieval technology to archival finding aids that OPACs had brought to library catalogs.

The development of a MARC format for archives and manuscripts (MARC-AMC) made fonds intellectually accessible through libraries’ OPACs, and it forced the issue of content standards—something archivists had not previously considered. In 1983, the SAA published APPM as a content standard for creating MARC-AMC records. In it author Steve Hensen, then a Senior Manuscript Cataloger in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, interpreted AACR2’s principles and rules to address issues archivists face that bibliographic catalogers do not; throughout, he linked the APPM rules very tightly to those in AACR2. Though many archivists expressed deeply-held doubts that their descriptive practices would fit into a prescribed format, MARC-AMC achieved wide acceptance in the archival community in the U.S., demonstrating that standardized archival description was possible.

MARC-AMC had limitations, however. While an archivist could create a number of records for a fonds (one for the fonds as a whole, one for each of the series, sub-series, and files within the fonds, and one for each especially important item), the computer could not easily show the hierarchical relationship that existed among the materials described by the records. Regardless, when MARC-AMC records joined the bibliographic records available through library OPACs, researchers happily started to find fonds they had had no idea existed.

Also in the 1980s, the move to standardize archival description went international. After some discussion over a couple years, in 1990, the Committee on Descriptive Standards (CDS) of the International Council of Archivists (ICA), started to develop a set of general principles for the description of archival materials. The committee published its docu-
ment, the Generalized International Standard for Archival Description, abbreviated as ISAD(G), in 1994. While APPM presented specific rules for creating content for a MARC record, ISAD(G) laid out the theoretical tenets of archival description and a list of 26 data elements central to the practice. The CDS followed ISAD(G) with the International Standard for Archival Authority Files for Corporations, Families and Persons (ISAAR(CPF)) to standardize authority control. The council adopted the second edition of ISAD(G) in 1999; in 2004 it published a revised version of ISAAR(CPF).

The World Wide Web became commonly available about the time that ISAD(G) appeared. Archivists immediately recognized it as a medium for electronically publishing full archival finding aids. By 1997, Daniel Pitti’s project at UC Berkeley to develop a protocol for web publication had evolved into Encoded Archival Description, Version 1 (EAD v.1). Its second iteration, EAD v. 2002, accommodates the standards set by ISAD(G).

With EAD fully on the scene, the need to update APPM became clear. But rather than just tweak the old tool, in 2001, the SAA joined with the Association of Canadian Archivists and got funding for the Canadian-U.S. Task Force on Archival Description (CUSTARD) charged with developing a North American standard for archival description, including a content standard. In 1990, the Canadians had adopted Rules for Archival Description (RAD), and wanted to update its rules. RAD had been strongly modeled on the British Manual for Archival Description (MAD). Both guides laid out much more prescriptive detail about arranging and describing archival holdings than anything American archivists had ever worked with. Not surprisingly then, CUSTARD did not result in a unified standard. However, it did drive major revisions in the basic archival descriptive guidelines used in both countries. Canadians replaced RAD with RAD2. The Americans replaced APPM with DACS.

As with bibliographic description, archival description carries archivists’ efforts to convey the intellectual and physical content of their holdings to users. Unlike books, which authors create with a conscious intent, archival fonds emerge from the processes and events that define and support the life and work of the creators. Therefore, when archivists describe fonds, they must convey the context of creation, the content, and the intellectual relationships that exist among materials. DACS provides guidance for doing all that.

DACS opens with two introductory sections. The first encapsulates eight fundamental principles of archival description drawn from a wide
range of national and international sources. The principles cover the nature of archival material, the nature of archival description, the relationship between the physical arrangement of a fonds and its description, and the necessity of describing the creators as well as the material.

The second section, an overview of archival description, emphasizes that archivists describe fonds as a way of creating access tools for the researcher. Here the authors acknowledge that, to support a robust system of description, an historical repository should have a wide range of descriptive standards at hand to cover what DACS does not. With that point made, they go on to discuss access points.

Traditional library cataloging clearly separates the tools of bibliographic description from the tools of subject cataloging. Archivists have not. While APPM did not include subject cataloging, the authors of DACS have included guidance on developing subject access points. First they list the common types affiliated with archival description: names, topics, places, document forms, occupations, and record functions. Then they organize the section by type of access point and indicate where in DACS the archivist should look for rules that relate to each. They cite the DACS chapter and rule number, and list one or more thesauri for standardized language for each type of access point.

Following the introductory material, the book presents its content in three parts. Part I describes the 25 data elements DACS regards as fundamental to archival description. Part II presents the rules for describing the creators of archival fonds. Part III presents rules for creating names when no authorized version exists. In those three parts, DACS incorporates the principles of both ISAD(G) and ISAAR(CFP).

The book also includes four appendices:

- Appendix A presents a glossary of terms used in the book and in archival description generally.
- Appendix B holds bibliographic information for companion standards in three categories: (1) standards for describing specific types of materials, e.g., published materials, graphic materials, moving images, (2) standard vocabularies contained in a wide variety of thesauri, e.g., occupational titles, geographic names, terminology for use with graphic materials, (3) MARC 21 and EAD data structure standards.
- Appendix C presents seven crosswalks showing how the rules of DACS relate to the rules of APPM, ISAD(G), and ISAAR(CFP), as well as the structure of MARC 21 and EAD.
• Appendix D presents examples of full finding aids encoded in both EAD and MARC 21, showing how to apply the rules of DACS in the two most common data structure standards in use in the archival world today.

The four appendices illustrate DACS’ place in the larger world of cultural resource description and help to define its own particular niche. They provide tools for the seasoned archivist, familiar with APPM, to use in making the transition to DACS. Finally, they provide the novice a set of tools to use as she or he learns the art and discipline of archival description.

Since DACS amounts to the first full archival description standard adopted by the SAA, the language of the document must convey clearly the rules they promulgate. The term “clearly,” in this case carries two meanings. First, the rules must convey no ambiguity to experienced archival processors. Second, they must do so in a way that novices to the language of description standards can readily comprehend them. (Remember the first time you tried to read AACR?) DACS succeeds at walking this fairly difficult path.

It does so by speaking plainly, by investing a remarkable amount of space—both text and white space—to each element, and by consistently addressing the same items of information for each element in a set order.

First: rule number and element name

“2.3 Title Element.”

Second: Purpose and Scope

“This element provides a word or phrase by which the material being described is known or can be identified. A title may be supplied or formal.” Recognizing the questions that may arise from that statement, a “commentary” follows to explain the concepts of supplied and formal titles. Since relatively few archival fonds have formal titles, the commentary lays out the general structure of a supplied title: “the name of the creator(s) or collector(s)” and “the nature of the materials being described.” At the end of the commentary, the authors acknowledge that today’s processors must deal with error-ridden legacy descriptions by saying, “[t]he archivist must use professional
judgement to determine when it is appropriate to supply a title rather than transcribing a label on a container that may be misleading.”

Third: Source of Information

“2.3.1 When supplying a title take the information from any reliable source, including the internal evidence of the materials... an external source such as a records schedule or communication with the donor, or a title on another copy or version of the material being supplied.”

“2.3.2 When recording a formal title, transcribe the information from the prescribed source as described in the appropriate chapter in AACR2 (which specifies that formal titles are recorded exactly as to wording, order, and spelling, but not necessarily as to punctuation and capitalization) or to specialized standards for various types of material cited in Appendix B. Rules for transcribing formal titles are not provided here.”

So there we have the full story, DACS concentrates on describing archival materials. It fully acknowledges the place of AACR2 and other standards which an archivist may need to consult, but it does not, beyond the most general of interpretations, attempt to include or replace them. Instead, it aids the archivist in finding them through the listings in Appendix B.

Fourth: Rules

The number of rules attached to the elements varies widely, depending on the element in question. The Title Element has one general rule, followed by 14 specific rules for the “name segment” of the title. This set of rules defines which name the archivist should choose when faced with many possibilities. It does not address the actual formation or version of the chosen name. Chapters 12-14 address the formation of names when no previously authorized version exists.

“2.3.4 Record the name(s) of the person(s), family (families), or corporate body predominately responsible for the creation... of the materials.”

“2.3.7 If three or fewer persons are credited with... the creation of the materials as a whole, record their names in direct order.”
“2.3.8 If responsibility for the creation of the materials is dispersed among more than three persons, record the name of the individual whose material predominates . . . .”

Following the rules for choice of names, DACS lays out three rules for describing the “nature of the archival unit.” If the archival unit has a topical focus, DACS includes a rule for indicating the “topic of the archival unit.” Each of the rules comes with examples.

Fifth: Examples of Encoding

At the end of each element, DACS includes examples of the element as it would appear with MARC 21 tagging and again with EAD markup.

All DACS elements may apply at the all levels of description—be it the fonds level or any of the subordinate levels. For that reason, DACS consistently uses the phrase “archival unit” in the statement of the rules. Archivists may repeat elements throughout the various hierarchies within the finding aid, so long as the content of the repeated element does not substantially repeat content supplied at a higher level. For example, the fonds will have a title, each series within the fonds will have a title, each sub-series, file, and individually recorded item will have a title. None will repeat any other, but the DACS rule for creating titles will apply to them all.

Finally, the authors created DACS to be “output neutral.” The rules apply whether the resulting finding aid will appear on paper, as one or more MARC records, or as some other form of electronic output. By default, the examples scattered throughout the text illustrate the rules’ application on paper. Recognizing that MARC 21 and EAD are the two recognized standards for electronic output of archival finding aids, the authors make a point of providing examples which illustrate how archival description created by DACS rules appears in those two data structures.

If DACS has a weakness, it lies in its treatment of access points. The discussion that explains access points starts by explaining that since archival description depends largely on a narrative format, search engines will find “every word in the text.” It then goes on to point out that adding controlled access points will speed searching by including descriptors in specialized electronic indexes which require a standard format. However, it stops there. Beyond saying that “at a minimum, an
access point should be made for every name included in the Name of Creator(s) Element. . .” it assigns all decisions to the local level—from choice of names, terms, and concepts to include in the “index” to the terminology and format to use for that purpose. While it encourages adoption of standard thesauri, the language does not carry the authoritative tone found in the rest of the document.

While it’s true that a full-text search engine will find every word in the text, it will depend on the words it finds to match the query of the searcher. Indexers developed controlled vocabularies out of necessity; the flexibility of language that supports great poetry supports great chaos in search engines. Unless writers of archival finding aids consciously use the language of the common controlled vocabularies, full-text searching cannot assure either good precision or good recall in its results.

All new media always imitates the old media from which it evolves. Only after working with a new media do users come to understand its inherent possibilities the old media lacked. APPM imitated AACR2, the only model available. In the two decades since APPM’s appearance, however, the international discussion of the essential nature of archival description, has resulted in a much fuller model. SAA has embraced it. Perhaps the very little space given the issue of access points reflects the archival community’s limited discussion of the role of controlled vocabulary. If so, perhaps the time has come for it to turn its attention to a fuller consideration of the use of controlled access points in a narrative descriptive form.

DACS has emerged as a highly useable tool. Its generous 8 ½” × 11” format makes it visually appealing. It opens easily and lies open on a desk. Its language makes the process and rules it describes readily understandable. However, DACS is not a manual. Within its covers lie the essential principles of archival arrangement and description, but the authors do not make a point of connecting the rules in the body of the text with the principles at the front. It does not match either MAD3 or RAD2 in level of detail and prescriptive guidance.

We do not know if DACS will work perfectly; few things do, and one can expect weaknesses to emerge as it comes into general use, but none appears obvious now. DACS treats archival description in the United States as a discipline in its own right, rather than a modification of bibliographic description. At the same time, it incorporates two international content standards into its rules and principles. It incorporates by example and reference a great many other standards which archivists
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will want to comply with so their descriptions will play well with descriptions of other forms of cultural resources, thus assuring the integration of archival resources into the larger world of information retrieval. As such, *DACS* stands as a well-carved milestone.

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NOTES

1. The term “collection” has many meanings in the English-speaking world of archives: the holdings of an institution, an institution itself, or the content of a set of papers or records. In English, “fonds” does not (although a colleague informs me that in some European languages, fonds has as many meanings as “collection” does in English). As English-speaking archivists have come to use it, “fonds” refers to “the whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular person, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator’s activities and functions.” *DACS*, p. 204.

2. Elaine Engst, “Standard elements for the description of archives and manuscript collections: a report to the Society of American Archivists task force on National Information Systems.” Unpublished, [September 1980].

3. It has since been incorporated into MARC 21.

4. The professional organization for the world archival community. It includes representatives from national, regional, and local professional associations of archivists as well as individual archivists and addresses issues common to historical repositories throughout the world. [http://www.ica.org/](http://www.ica.org/).

5. [http://www.ica.org/biblio.php?docid=1](http://www.ica.org/biblio.php?docid=1).

6. [http://www.ica.org/biblio.php?docid=144](http://www.ica.org/biblio.php?docid=144).

7. An SGML document type definition.

8. An XML document type definition. [http://www.loc.gov/ead/](http://www.loc.gov/ead/).

9. *Rules for Archival Description*. Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990. Revised in 2004 (*RAD2*).

10. Michael Cook and Kristina Grant. *Manual of Archival Description*. London: Society of Archivists, 1986. Revised, with Margaret Procter, in 1989 (*MAD2*) and again in 2000 (*MAD3*).

11. MARC 21 fields 600, 610, 611, 650, 651, 655, 656, and 657.

12. One less than *ISAD(G)*. While *ISAD(G)* regards “level of arrangement” as a distinct element, *DACS* incorporates its concept into the application of other elements. EAD treats “level” as an attribute rather than a tag.

13. Unlike published materials, archival materials usually have no title. Providing a newly acquired fonds with a title may be the first thing an archivist does with it. The examples above come from *DACS* pp. 17-23.

14. *DACS*, p. xvii.

15. *DACS*, p. xviii.

16. *DACS*, p. xix.