This slide show will provide a basic introduction to archives and primary sources.
All of the information presented here, and a lot more, is covered in the Archival Research Guide on the GC Library’s website.
To find the research guide, start at the library’s home page, library.gc.cuny.edu, and click on Research Guides in the menu to the right of the search box.
This opens a page showing an alphabetical list of more than 70 research guides on a wide range of subjects. These guides are a great place to begin any research project. Scroll down until you see Archival Research and click on the link to open it.
And here we are, back at the Archival Research Guide.
Let’s begin with a definition of archives from the New York Public Library. Simply put, archives are the records created by people and organizations as they lived and worked.

This definition from the Getty highlights the one-of-a-kind nature of archives: An archival collection is a unique body of information, created at a particular time by a particular organization or individual as the result of a particular activity.
Collections usually consist of:

- **Unpublished** materials that accumulate **organically** over the course of time
- Saved for the **enduring value** of the **information** they contain
- And/or for their value as **artifacts**
- And/or as **evidence** of the work or activities of the creator
Serendipity plays a big roll in what ends up in collections.

Unique & Idiosyncratic

- No single repository or collection will contain everything there is on a specific individual, organization, or subject.
- Collections contain only what was saved and what has lasted.
Archives can contain just about anything created or saved by a person or organization, including these items which are examples of what you may find. Starting at the top left, we have:

- A Diary.
- Next we have a financial document, a manuscript Ledger.
- And even though collections usually consist of unpublished items, they may contain printed, published items like this Map.
- Or Official documents like passports, birth certificates, wills, marriage certificates, and other like documents.
- The last item on the top row is a political flyer. That falls into the category of Printed ephemera, things that weren’t meant to last. Printed ephemera can be flyers, menus, greeting cards, train tickets, product advertising and similar items.
- The first item on the second row is a cassette tape, which is standing in for the category of Oral Histories. Oral histories can be the recordings themselves in analog or digital form, or transcripts of interviews. You may also find other types of audio or video recordings in collections.
- Next we have Manuscripts. Manuscripts of all varieties will be found in collections. This is a cookbook, but manuscripts could be any other kinds of documents, or...
drafts of documents.

- Collections may also contain **Artifacts** like these political buttons or other kinds of objects.

- Next we have **Letters**. These could be incoming letters that the person or organization received or copies of letters they sent out. And they could be handwritten, typed, or in electronic form.

- The next item is a photograph of a street corner in New York City, which belongs in the category of **Graphics**. Graphics can be photos, drawings, sketches, cartoons, artwork, posters, or other types of images.

- And finally we have **Clippings**. There are often lots of clippings in archival collections.

But anything you can think of might end up in an archival collection.
The materials in archival collections are often referred to as primary sources.

Here is a standard definition of primary sources: Primary sources are materials that provide direct evidence, first-hand testimony, or an eyewitness account of a topic or event under investigation.

Primary sources can be published or unpublished items in any format, including handwritten letters, images, sound, objects, or the built environment.

Primary sources provide the raw data for your research.
Secondary sources, on the other hand, analyze and interpret primary sources.

The authors used primary sources to write these books.

And you, the researcher, can use secondary sources to find primary sources for your own project by mining the footnotes, bibliographies and acknowledgements to track down those sources yourself.

Secondary and other background sources pave the way for productive archival research.

Use secondary and reference sources to get an overview of your topic, to zero in on the details you need to find primary sources, and to help put archival materials in context.
Arrangement & Description

Archival materials are arranged in *collections*, according to *provenance*, and kept in their *original order* when possible.
Collections can be either the personal, family, and organizational records that accumulate organically over the course of time or they can be artificial collections.

Artificial Collections, which are also sometimes called Synthetic collections, do not accumulate organically. They are collections devoted to a single theme, person, event, or type of document that have been acquired from a variety of sources at different times that have been organized together.

The menu collections at the New-York Historical Society and NYPL are examples of Artificial Collections.
Provenance is a fundamental archival principal that requires materials to be grouped into collections according to their **SOURCE** not their subject.

A search of the NYPL's archival holdings for materials related to the photographer Berenice Abbot, for example, turns up four separate collections from four separate sources that contain material related to Abbot, one of which is a collection of her personal papers.
Original order is simply the arrangement of the materials established by the creator or source of the collection.

When materials are in no discernible order when they arrive at a repository, archivists will sort and arrange them into series that make sense, whether by format or topic, or date, or a combination of the three.
That concludes the overview of archives and primary sources.

You can refer back to the Archival Research Guide on the Library’s website if you would like more information.
And if you need any research assistance, you can contact a Graduate Center librarian for help.

Stop by the reference desk, use the chat service, or make an appointment with your Subject Librarian for one-on-one assistance.
These are the image credits.
Thank you very much for watching this tutorial.