This tutorial will provide a basic introduction to archival description.
Finding Aids

• Collections are described in documents called Finding Aids or Collection Guides.
• Finding Aids are written to give a repository physical and intellectual control over their holdings and to help researchers find what they are looking for within collections.
• They may be in paper format or electronic format or both.
• Collections might also be cataloged in a library’s regular catalog in addition to – or instead of – being described in an archival finding aid.
Here is a typical electronic finding aid. It is for the Florence Kelley Papers held in the Archives & Manuscripts Division of the New York Public Library.

**Finding aids** can take many forms and range in detail from a brief summary of a collection to an itemized list of its contents, but most finding aids will fall somewhere in between. The level of detail and description depend on the resources of the repository and on the collection itself.

Although each repository does things a little differently, archivists follow standards established through the Society of American Archivists when they are arranging and describing collections. That means there will be uniformity in how collections are described across repositories.

Most comprehensive electronic finding aids contain the elements included in this finding aid for the Florence Kelley papers.

At the most basic level, a finding aid will tell you Who created the collection, the Date Range, and the Quantity of material.

You can see that information here in the Collection Overview.
The overview contains the basic bibliographical details you would find in a library catalog record, including **Title of the collection**, **Date range**, **Creator**, **Call Number** assigned by the repository, **Quantity of material**, **Preferred Citation**, **Name of the repository**, Information about Accessing the Materials, and an **Abstract** describing the subject matter of the collection.
The next element is the Biographical / Historical Information section where you will find information on the creator of the collection, including historical details that will provide context for the materials.
Next we have the **Scope and Arrangement**.

The **Scope** provides a brief description of what’s contained in the collection, including the types of materials you will find and the subject focus of the collection. Highlights are sometimes also mentioned.

The **Arrangement** section lists the series into which the collection is organized. This section sometimes includes sub-series and a brief description of the contents of each series.
The **Administrative Information** section may give the provenance of the collection, access and use restrictions, copyright notices, preferred citation, and related materials in the repository.

The Administrative Information in this NYPL finding aid lists the custodial history, the source of the acquisition, and processing details.
**Key terms** are the subjects under which the collection is indexed. They are just like the subject indexing you see in catalog records for books, but there are usually many more subjects listed in finding aids for archival collections than you typically see in catalog records for books.

The key terms here are divided into categories for names of people and organizations, subjects, places, as well as occupations, and material types, which are further down on the screen.

And notice that the key terms in this NYPL finding aid are hyperlinked. You could click on any one of the subject terms to see other finding aids that share that subject.

Not all libraries with electronic finding aids have hyperlinked subject indexing, but it is very helpful when this feature is available.
Here we are, back on the home page of the finding aid.

To see what’s in the collection, click on “Detailed Description.” Some repositories call this section the Container List.
You will see a list of boxes, folders, and volumes in the collection.

You’ll need this information to request materials at the repository.

And note that while a container list will tell you the types of material you’ll find in a box or folder, it usually won’t give you the specific details about the items in that container.

Most of the folder titles in this container list, for example, consist of a date range only. To find out who is writing to whom and what is being said, you’ll have to request the box open the folder to read the letters yourself.
In many repositories, electronic finding aids will have a link near the top of the page somewhere that allows you to view the full finding aid at once.

At the NYPL they call this the Printable (PDF) Version of the finding aid.
When you click on that link the full document will open.

This is helpful for printing, of course, but it is also useful because you can do a “Control F” search on specific words and bounce through the full finding aid to find specific names and other key terms you are researching.
At this repository, when you would like to use a collection you can click on a link directly from the finding aid to request access.
That brings up this form. Users fill out their personal details, provide a professional reference, state the purpose of their research – whether a book, article, personal interest – list the materials they would like to use, state the dates they would like to visit the library, and read and agree to the rules for visiting the repository and using the collections.

Some libraries have paper request forms that are filled out on site.

Other libraries, many of which are large special collections departments at university libraries or big research libraries like the New-York Historical Society, have automated electronic request systems that allow you to register to use collections remotely and request materials ahead of your visit.

These automated systems save time and facilitate record keeping for both researchers and repositories.
Here are a few things to keep in mind when doing archival research:

Some collections may be fully processed and described in electronic finding aids, perhaps even with links to digitized images, audio, or video from the collection, while other collections sitting next to them on the shelf may be described only in very broad terms in paper finding aids.

As a way of dealing with backlogs of unprocessed collections, many archival repositories have begun in recent years to follow an arrangement and description methodology called MPLP, or "More Product, Less Process," especially for large contemporary collections.

This trend in processing means that archivists spend less time arranging and describing materials in order to provide access to more materials sooner. For researchers, this means they may have to spend more time looking through boxes of materials because collections may only be described in broad strokes in finding aids that lack sufficient detail.

But when a collection you are interested in has a finding aid, spend time reading the doc to learn as much about the collection as possible.

Collection descriptions are always evolving.
Libraries are continually processing new acquisitions and improving the descriptions of existing holdings as their resources permit.

Look for finding aid search tools on library websites. They will be very helpful for discovering materials.
For more information about finding and using archival collections, see the archival research guide on our website.
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.