
Collection Criteria Guidelines for Tools of History Participants

Collection Selection Criteria: what to digitize from your collection?

Digitization technology provides libraries and cultural organizations the means to improve access to unique collections. But digitization comes with its own limitations, necessitating a well-planned project before any scanning can begin. One of the first and most important components of a good digitization plan involves the selection of materials. The resources in this section will aid in this important phase of the digitization process.

Digitization can serve many functions including cultural and historic resources:

- Digitization can highlight little-used portions of a collection, bringing them to the attention of a larger audience.
- Digitization enhances access to fragile or otherwise restricted collections.
- Digitization when used in a collaborative project unites disparate resources that share a common subject or theme.

When selecting items or collections for digitization, collections managers should ask themselves a few initial questions about subject matter, physical condition, audience and expected use, and the status of the collection inventories:

- **Subject Content:** It is important to compare the proposed digitized collection with the overall purpose of the organization. What is the mission of the organization? How will the digitization support this mission? What items in the collection best document the themes important to the organization?
- **Condition:** What is the condition of the materials? Will the digitizing process further their preservation, or are they too fragile to even be digitized?
- **Intended Audience:** Who is the intended audience for the project? Is there enough of a demand for the materials? Does the organization have the infrastructure to deal with the increased demand on the collections that digitization will inevitably create? Finally, is the collection adequately documented or cataloged, or will such work need to be completed before digitization can begin?

The three sections below provide further reading on these topics. Please consult them before moving ahead with digitization planning and implementation.

Project Types and Models

Most digitization projects serve one of three different purposes:

- **Research-oriented projects** provide information for specialized researchers, whether professional, academic, or other, about access to unique collections. These projects typically consist of a searchable database. They are similar to a library catalog or an archival finding aid. Some digitization projects go further than catalogs and finding aids by providing direct access to digitized collections in addition to information about collections.
- **Education projects** create a resource for schoolteachers and students in the course of curriculum development and document-based questions (DBQ's). These projects typically include a smaller selection of materials than the Research projects. A team of historic record keepers and schoolteachers typically chooses the materials. These projects may provide background information or lessons in addition to digitized images of unique collections.
- **Outreach projects** educate or entertain the public. These can be online exhibits designed to document a specific subject. Similar to the Education projects, Outreach projects are typically smaller in scope than Research-oriented projects. They rely heavily on presentation and background information rather than sophisticated search capabilities. Outreach projects often function in the same manner as interpretive exhibits in museums.

Once you establish the purpose of the project, it is time to create a design that supports it. The following models provide a few approaches to digitizing library and archival materials.

- **Subject (or theme) -oriented online exhibits:** Databases based on this model will include digitized images from collections along with narrative text and other graphic data. These "online exhibits" serve the same purpose as exhibits of physical objects in galleries and historic spaces: to inform, educate, and entertain through visual representation. Two good examples of online exhibits include the "Winning the Vote" concerning the Women's Suffrage Movement on the website of the Rochester Regional Library Council, <http://www.winningthevote.org/> and the "75th Anniversary Celebration of the Bronx River Parkway Reservation 1925-2000" <http://westchesterarchives.com/home.html>

- **Descriptive Bibliographic Information Databases** consist of searchable databases containing exclusively finding aids, inventories, box and container lists, and other cataloging records that provide access to collections of historical materials, whether they are in print, photographic, electronic, or museum object format. This model requires flexibility in order to allow for the variety of cataloging and descriptive practices used throughout the region. A notable project of this type is the Berkley Finding Aid Project, an initiative to collect and integrate archival finding aids from repositories in California into a shared database available via the Internet.
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/FindingAids/EAD/bfap.html>
- **Databases of collections in their entirety** This model requires searchable indexes and appropriate, often sophisticated, metadata for each individual project. There are two variants to this approach:
 - Item-based Collections - Collections of items with similar format such as photographs and postcards, sheet music, paged books, object collections, maps, audio or visual recordings, artificial collections, etc. This is the easier of the two types, since the format of all of the items to digitize is similar, requiring less sophistication and complexity in the compilation of accompanying metadata.
 - Mixed Collections -This model is for collections of personal and family papers, business and organizational records, other collections containing materials of different types and formats. The metadata here often includes complex finding aids with varying degrees of descriptive narrative that is typically more difficult to index than the metadata used with item-based collections. .
 - Database of scanned images selected from specific collections - In this model, collection managers select representative samples from specific collections. Finding aids or other relevant metadata for the collections should be included as well as metadata for the digitized objects.

Digitization Planning Matrix

	Question 1	Question 2	Questions 3	Question 4	Question 5
Assessment	Is there user support? Who will use the digital collection?	What are local collection development policies?	Does this offer a national or international contribution?	Does a similar product exist elsewhere?	Is this conservation or preservation?
Gains	Does digitization reduce wear on the originals or open up access?	Is the intellectual content of the work enhanced?	Is navigation easy?	Are disparate collections unified?	Is the use of the damaged original material enriched?
Standards	Have suitable standards been followed?	Are the digital masters available from a variety of hardware platforms?	Is the software available & easy to use?	Does the metadata conform to agreed standards?	What are the archiving requirements?
Administrative Issues	Do you have enough money?	Have copyright and rights issues been secured?	Does your institution have enough expertise?	Is there a partnership with a commercial provider?	Do the benefits justify the cost?

Credit: Guidance for selecting materials for digitization from the Research Libraries Group (UK and Ireland) <http://www.rlg.org/preserv/joint/ayris.html>

Links

Planning & Selection from North Carolina ECHO (exploring cultural heritage online). Guidelines for planning and selecting digital collections; additional resources, links, and a bibliography are also available. <http://www.ncecho.org/guidelines.asp>

Guidance for selecting materials for digitization from the Research Libraries Group (UK and Ireland). This is a thoughtful article, which provides a series of steps and questions to help define the selection process. Also presents a case study and a bibliography. <http://www.rlg.org/preserv/joint/ayris.html>

Selection of materials for digitization from the National Library of Canada. Emphasis is on selection of materials for federal/national digital projects. It cites the criteria for the concept of the "Public Good" as a basis for federal/national projects, and a set of guidelines for "Digitization Proposals". <http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/8/3/r3-409-e.html>

Selecting Research Collections for Digitization from the Council on Library and Information Resources. This is the online version of the publication *Selecting Research Collections for Digitization* by Dan Hazen, Jeffrey Horrell and Jan Merrill-Oldham. Contents include sections on "The intellectual nature of the source materials", "Current and potential users", and "Relationships to other digital efforts." <http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/hazen/pub74.html>

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