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Accessing the Archives Series: Your Wish has Been Granted (Part 1)

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Accessing the Archives: Stages and Pitfalls of Reaching Primary Sources

Successfully entering an archive at any stage of your research can be very easy^[1] or very terrible. I've even heard of people traveling all the way to a distant archive, only to be turned back at the door. Though you cannot control everything in your pursuit of primary sources for a dissertation

or a thesis report, failing to reach your dream archive does not have to be one of them.

I. Your Wish Has Been Granted

The first step is to get a grant so that you can travel if required. There are at least three strategies for getting a travel grant. The first option is to apply within your department for a “summer travel grant.” Emails advertising these options will begin in the early spring and run through until about April. Though the stipend might not float decadent expenses straight through the summer (or even just your rent), it is usually enough to get you to an archive, house you, and feed you for about two weeks to a month, with some careful budgeting.

The second option is that you contact the archive directly. For example, the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp, Belgium offers grants for a scholar to come to them.^[2] Like many archives and other non-profit organizations, having a scholar complete research, publish their works citing the archive, and even give a talk while visiting as a “Guest Speaker” is *excellent* advertising both for them and for you, and shows their engagement with the academic community at large and with the institution that you represent. These travel stipends are less well-advertised than travel grants from your home department, so you need to peruse your target archive’s resources very carefully. It may even be worth it to send them an inquiring email, as it never hurts to ask what they can support.

The third option is outside funding. This could be funding from another department within your university or from an external organization all together, like another university. As an example: if you were a History Department graduate student focusing on colonial Latin America and you wanted to go to the British Library to examine primary sources related to Latin America but also related to Britain and Richard Hakluyt (who has multiple, compendious “New World” publications)—you should try applying to the English Department’s travel grants. This approach might require developing some contacts within the English Department, either through taking classes, joining a specialized English Department group like E3W,^[3] or meeting with faculty, but it is well worth the effort. Some years, depending on their student body, departments will have no one to give the funding to in certain areas, and you might be just the person.

Other types of outside funding get substantially more high-stakes (read: demanding) in the application process. These include the Social Science Research Council fellowships (SSRC), the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council fellowships (SSHRC, for Canadians), the Ford pre- and post-dissertation fellowships, different types of Mellon fellowship (one example is the

Council on Library and Information Resources fellowship (CLIR)), and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) dissertation fellowships, among many, many others that depend on the scope and areas that your research touches.

To know about any of these opportunities, you need to be the master of your listserv access. Pinpoint which departments are interdisciplinarily linked to your own project or interests and get on their listservs. If you like Digital Humanities and you want to apply savvy software work to your project, you should absolutely be connected to digitalhumanities@utlists.utexas.edu (<mailto:digitalhumanities@utlists.utexas.edu>) or the [lilas-benson-digital-initiatives](https://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa/info/lilas-benson-digital-initiatives) (<https://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa/info/lilas-benson-digital-initiatives>) listserv. For “big” or high stakes grants, you could be receiving a weekly email from [cola_grants_alert](https://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa/info/cola_grants_alert) (https://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa/info/cola_grants_alert), another listserv. Don’t know what listservs you are on? UT students can check here: <http://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa> (<http://utlists.utexas.edu/sympa>).

The next step is to apply. As soon as you decide to proceed, let the professors that have agreed to write letters of recommendation for you know *immediately*. Warn them at the very least *one month* in advance. As soon as you do that, let the writing begin!

Travel Grant/Fellowship/Stipend applications should contain the following sections, though the word count can vary depending on the specific requirements that each institution has:

1. A succinct description of your project, including at the end a demonstration of how important your project is to future research and human knowledge (250-500 words)
2. A working list of the primary texts that you want to examine, with their authors and dates of publication. These can be organized into subsections according to big themes. *This is your opportunity to show that you need the archive and what they have in their holdings.* This is also your opportunity to show that you genuinely researched them and that they are indispensable. (500-1000 words)
3. A timeline of how you will spend your time in the archive, broken into either weeks or months. This section could also include how you intend to contribute *back* to the archive, including offering a talk, hosting a round table, or supporting their community visibility in other ways. (250-500 words)
4. A curriculum vitae.

I recommend that these sections are organized with titles or section headings to help sign-post your work for your readers.

To conclude, the very first step to visiting your target archive starts long before you even get there. With careful planning, communicating with your department(s), and pre-selecting the documents you’d like to look at, you can begin to compose a very strong grant or fellowship

application to fund your journey. This is only the first step, however, and there is much to anticipate in preparation for your first archive visit.

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Archives that have contributed to the sum of my experiences include the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, the Archivo Capítular of the Cathedral of Toledo, the Widener Library at Harvard, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Biblioteca Nacional de España in Madrid, the Benson Library at the University of Texas, the Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, and the Archivo General de las Indias in Seville.

[1] I was once told about someone “stumbling” into the Archivo General de las Indias and being given access to physical copies of everything they asked for without a *carta de presentación*. I believe that this was a lie, said in a desperate attempt to not be haunted by impostor syndrome. The *Archivo General de las Indias* in my experience and by all other accounts has been moderately tough to get into and has an interview component.

[2] Other like-minded archives include the John Carter Brown Library, the Huntington Library, and the Newberry Library.

[3] Ethnic and Third World Literature, more information here: <https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/e3w/>

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Deja una respuesta

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