



Roulston, K., & deMarrais, K. (2021). Exploring the archives: A beginner's guide for qualitative researchers. Myers Education Press.

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Fifty years ago, when an undergraduate on a creative writing course, I took my first plunge into the archives. The reward was immediate – and ultimately so encouraging that it set me on track to becoming a scholar and published author. More about that day of illumination, and its benefits, later. Let us first reflect on contemporary scholarly research practice, and the seismic shift it has experienced in recent times.

Archives today have become unfashionable within a society that seeks instant gratification, ease of application, and immediate results. I have found, in delivering classes throughout the Asia-Pacific region, that students' reference lists are almost exclusively composed of online sources. There is widespread reluctance to seek out books, microfilm, microfiche, dissertations, journals, serials, correspondence, mementoes, recordings, and manuscripts. This pattern is understandable. Why not roam effortlessly through the internet, instead of actually going to a library?

I'll tell them why not. Because online links give you only a fraction of the story. As this excellent textbook informs us in one of its many instructive passages:

Many people assume you can find everything on the internet. You might presume that with the right combination of search terms, the history of recorded knowledge will be at your fingertips. However, the truth is more complicated ... search engines are limited when it comes to unpacking complex phenomena or locating details about obscure topics. Furthermore, search engines favor the most recent, the most popular, and the interests of companies that can pay for advertising (p. 91).

Those are the words of Brigette Adair Herron and Scott Creney, two contributors whose reflections grace the pages of *Exploring the Archives*. And they are right words. Online inquiry alone makes no allowance for serendipitous revelation and tangential temptation. It is driven by algorithms that, as Adair Herron and Creney warn us, are too often subjective in their nature.

Back, then, to the day that I lost my research virginity in the archives. The university assignment required the composition of a magazine-style article on a topic found through random investigation within an archive – any archive, anywhere. I was living in Canberra, Australia's capital city, at the time and chose as an inquiry site the Australian Institute of Anatomy. There, in response to my request for a look at something not on public display, a helpful curator suggested examination of a holding in the institute's collection of death masks.

He opened a cardboard box and revealed the posthumous visage of Ned Kelly, Australia's most notorious bushranger (or highwayman, as they would put it in the UK) of the 19th century. Following his execution in 1880, for murdering a policeman, an impression of his shaved skull and neck was created in plaster. This was common practice in those times, when it was believed that behavioural inclination – especially of the criminal kind – could be determined through examining the shape and the features of the head.

I took a photograph and wrote up my minor triumph, winning myself a High Distinction grade. Next, I submitted an edited version to *The Age*, a Melbourne daily newspaper. This brought further reward: a publication debut as a freelance contributor and a cheque, from the paper, for \$30. I've been writing for money ever since.

Accordingly, I warmly endorse the manner in which the authors of this text encourage students (undergraduate and postgraduate alike) to wallow in the riches of the archives. As Kathryn Roulston and Kathleen deMarrais put it:

This book offers qualitative researchers an entrée into the world of working with archival repositories and special collections. It serves as a primer for students and researchers who might not be familiar with these sorts of collections. ... Suited to novice researchers seeking a general introduction into how special collections are created and how they can be used, the book offers useful, clear guidance on using different types of archives, developing topics for research within the archives, assessing materials available, how to work with archivists and curators, documenting the research process, and writing up an archival study. Archival records and material culture (including manuscripts, documents, audio- and video-recordings, and visual and material culture) housed in special collections provide a wealth of resources for qualitative researchers seeking to conduct research in the social sciences (n.p.).

To that, I must add that explorers of the archives can experience the thrill of unpredicted enlightenment. I recall one such occasion at the National Library of Australia when I found a letter written on notepaper made from grass by prisoners of war held in Changi jail, Singapore. And then there was the book that I plucked (gently) from the shelves of the Grolier Club Library in New York; it was bound in human flesh. Digitised records surely lack that degree of dramatic discovery.

Encourage students to read the advice proffered by Roulston and deMarrais – and to use it as a guide towards exploring the archives. The material they find there will enrich our collective body of knowledge.