

## Research Assistant Narratives

*[These narratives were shared as RAs departed their work on the NUWPArc project. Not every RA contributed a narrative with their procedural documentation. We are grateful that they have shared their experiences with us. These narratives highlight joys and challenges in this work.]*

### Avery Blankenship

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*(last edit: February 6, 2020)*

While the memories that I have of riffling through the hundreds of sheets of paper that would eventually take the shape of an archive are numerous, they blend together as one distinct pin point of senses.

In my memory, the room where I will work is dark, because it always is. Annexed off to the side of the Writing Center, the room where our archive was born has two doors. One door is locked from the inside while the other is locked from the outside. If I'm not careful, I can easily find myself locked inside with an endless pile of dusty paper. More often than not, this was the case.

On this particular day, which could really be a stand in for any day I spent with these documents, I arrive just as the Writing Center is closing for the day. I inform the last tutor that I will be in the annex working and that they don't have to worry about locking up. This is the last contact I will have with another human being for roughly three hours. I flick a single lamp on my desk, sit down next to the piles of boxes, and begin sorting.

Before starting this project, I had a distinct image of what I thought an archive was. In the fuzzy spaces where I can recall a long-discarded worldview, I imagine documents teeming with historical significance. I imagine that my role would be to act as an archaeologist or even an explorer. Every document would represent an opportunity for me to know something that had long been forgotten.

In reality, the archive is a pile of seven boxes, all stuffed with hundreds of individual sheets of paper, only some of which will be significant. In reality, I am not an explorer, I am a person who is attempting to piece together long forgotten context out of these pieces of paper that almost everyone has forgotten the significance of. In reality, most of the archive is historical insignificance. This is the truth of many archives. Our particular archive has existed, forgotten, in the decaying ruins of someone's filing cabinet for years. Documents that were never really intended to be catalogued and marked as important outside of a fit of spring cleaning. However, even within that realization, there is the opportunity for realization.

Most of what these boxes contained are emails that were printed out when I was roughly five years old. That, within itself, is a discovery. Sitting in that dark, annexed room, I come into contact with paper older than myself and that contact is a stand in for a series of realizations. Here is an email which is proof that while I was still learning to read, there were students in this institution--perhaps sitting in the same room where I was sitting--trying to navigate academia.

These realizations occur to me in minor jolts of knowledge. I pause for a moment, eyes taking in ink on paper--both of which have lived out a lifetime longer than my own in someone's filing cabinet. I log the information about the document in my spreadsheet. Partially, because that is part of the job of

cataloguing, and partially because creating a record that this document exists ensures that it won't return to the filing cabinet, forgotten for another twenty-four years. I repeat this even for the documents I know will not end up scanned and deposited into our digital archive.

After roughly an hour of sorting, I notice that my fingertips are nearly black with dusty and smudged ink. For a blink of a moment, I am disgusted at the thought that this dust and ink might be covering my keyboard and for an even shorter moment, I am ashamed at my disgust. I awaken from the stupor that the tedium of sorting and cataloging invites and take in my surroundings. There is a single window in this dark room from which I can see the hallway beyond the annex. The hallway is dark, even darker than the room in which I am working. By this point in the evening, almost everyone has gone home already and the motion activated lights in the hallway have not had cause to flicker on in quite some time.

Within that dark room, surrounded by dusty boxes and the light of a single lamp, my eyes meet the darkness of that motionless hallway and I realize that in that daze of an hour in which I have mindlessly been working, I have time traveled. A whole hour of my life that passed without my knowledge while my eyes scanned ink of pages belonging to bygone years. Somewhere, between eras, my fingers become covered in dust and ink and that dust and ink transfers to my keyboard and will be packed up with the rest of my tools when I eventually leave this dark room and enter that dark hallway and the lights flicker on with my movement.

This realization is startling. I rub my fingers together and the dust doesn't budge. I realize that my back is beginning to ache from being held in a hunched position for so long. My wrists are throbbing with arthritis. I crack my neck and wrists, the only sound in the otherwise silent room, and then I return to sorting, cataloguing, and time traveling.

At some point, I cut my finger on the edge of a page. Just as the dust covering my keyboard has transferred some of the archive to me, a part of me will now live in the archive. In medieval times, some might have called this kind of chemical exchange alchemy.

I take a breath in this silent, dark room and I am the archive and the archive is me. At some, minute points, we have become one and the same and pieces of each of us cling to the other.

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During my time working on the WPDPA project, I completed different tasks that varied in volume, length and time consumption. Although my work hours were settled at 10 hours per week, there were some weeks in which I spent less time on a particular task and some other weeks in which I spent more, depending on the stage of the project that I was on. At the beginning of the year, the bulk of my time was spent searching through the internet for digital archives to include in my research spreadsheet, since once I selected archives I found useful, the categorizing of features and actual information logging was quicker in comparison. Since there was no structure or formula to use for searching the internet for these sites, the process was not linear but very wide-ranging and zigzaggy, as it involved Google searches for terms like "digital archives", "writing digital archives" and such, as well as searches through individual institutions' libraries and through compiled lists of archives I found online.

Once I found specific archives I wanted to capture in my research (some writing-related and others on different topics), I listed them in my spreadsheet and got to work on the criteria through which I wanted

to categorize them to highlight their features and outline the differences among them. I did not, however, wait until I had all the archives listed before I started thinking about and writing in the categories, but after I had about 5-10 archives listed, I had a few meetings with Neal and Kyle and we discussed what we wanted to be captured in the spreadsheet before I found the rest of the archives.

In the beginning of the defining process for the criteria in the spreadsheet, it was hard to try and reduce the whole essence of these sites down to a few binary categories, and in the end some columns were left with binary criteria (e.g. Search or Browse?) while others were left open-ended (e.g. Search By). The main goal with these categories was to capture the general “feel” and experience of each site for the user as well as the way in which it presented/framed information for the user, and interpret what the underlying intention behind these small decisions was. In this way, I finally settled on categories ranging from the actual experience of the homepage, the search options, and the access to actual archive materials, to the intended focus of navigation for the user, the visibility of ownership and a distinctive feature of interest that differentiated each website from the next. Thus, these finalized categories effectively sorted the information to be gathered from these websites and provided a useful glance over the main aspects of these digital archives.

After the criteria themselves were defined, the next step was to fill in the information for each website as effectively as possible. While my intention at first was to make the whole spreadsheet as concise and binary as possible, it became clear very quickly that more descriptive/extended notes were beneficial in each field to capture the extent of individuality of each archive. Because of this, short notes were included even in the categories that were binary, so as to explain my decisions as these were somewhat subjective to an extent.

For example, one of the categories into which the digital archives were sorted was based on the dominance of Search or Browse features. Archives that qualified as Search were ones in which this feature was predominant to the user from the first page of the website (e.g. a big search bar in the middle of the main page). On the other hand, archives that qualified as Browse were ones that immediately invited the user to see what is in the archive by themselves, emphasizing certain materials upfront and providing easy access to expositions (e.g. featuring some of the contained collections in the main page with short descriptions and pictures, inviting the user in). However, there were a few archives that seemed to fall right in the middle of these binary categories (or very close to it), and did not primarily lean either way, with situations like a search bar next to a “browse” feature, or a “browse” feature that led the user to an advanced search page.

A general observation about these categories is that large universities/institutions hosting digital archives tend to lean towards Browse rather than Search, which is reasonably explained by their large amounts of materials and wide variety of covered topics. This is an example of a seemingly simple binary category that cloaks intricate decisions and judgment calls in their categorization, which is why a short explanation of my reasons for choosing Search over Browse or vice versa seemed warranted.

This first part of my contribution to the project took up about half or a little over half of my first semester at Northeastern, and for the remainder of the term I turned my attention to physical archives. While I initially expected the physical archives research process to be quite similar to the digital archives one, it quickly became clear to me that this was a whole other world of its own. To start researching these archives online, I followed the leads that Neal provided me with (a list of links and resources) and started from there. The paradox in my research was that I was researching and hoping to find out about physical archives while only being able to search for them online (given the pandemic!), so this very fact altered the process from that of the digital archives since I never had full access to the archives I found. These archives were mostly boxes of materials generally described online but never fully grasped

through a screen since I was unable to actually engage with and look through what these boxes actually contained, and this intrinsically made the criteria for sorting these archives in my spreadsheet very different. Instead of categories about navigation, aesthetic and curated purpose, this spreadsheet contains categories about objective location and repository details, contact information and date ranges covered. The criteria in the physical archives spreadsheet were much more objective since they were mostly facts about quantifying the available data rather than qualifying it.

Some of the archives I found through my research were boxes of personal papers belonging to English or Writing instructors at different institutions which promised to contain student essays, manuscripts or materials of the like that seemed to plausibly be valuable archive materials, but then again, this was based on guesswork and educated “hunches” on my part. Others were boxes of materials pulled from specific departments at an institution, that contained coursework and syllabi from, for example, the English department, which contained similar archive-like materials. Looking through the finding aids on each library website was how I determined the types of materials contained in the boxes of each archive, and I gravitated towards including archives in my research that seemed to contain a fair amount of these materials rather than those that only mentioned a single student essay or random syllabus.

After talking with Neal about the research process for physical archives, we determined that the information to be captured in the spreadsheet was mostly objective location and access information, as I mentioned above, but the only category that seems out of place but I decided to include anyways and deserves an explanation is the “Digital or Physical?” one. It seems obvious that the physical archives page of the spreadsheet should only contain physical archives, and it mostly does, but there was one specific archive, the University of Washington’s Expository Writing Program Archive, that was based digitally but I determined counted as a physical archive for the following reasons: while private, this is an online cloud to which instructors of that institution can upload their course materials constantly and help build the records of these courses live. Reading and looking through its description, this one seemed to me like an evident digitized version of what the rest of the physical archives I found were, only it was a virtual box instead of a cardboard one. I did not consider it belonging to the digital archives spreadsheet since those are curated or organized into categories and exhibitions and collections and they are presented for the general public as specific projects, while this archive seems to be a virtual box into which instructors can just “throw” their materials to collect them with no immediate expository purpose. For these reasons, I determined that this archive should be classified as a “physical archive housed digitally” and therefore warrants the use of this category.

These were the main tasks I worked on during the Fall semester of 2020, and during the Spring semester of 2021 I focused mostly on building the Archives of Interest page in the Wordpress site. This page in the Wordpress site was created with the purpose of giving a space to showcase the archives that I found in my research in the Fall. It was conceived as a way to invite the user into the larger world of digital and physical archive projects and sites other than our own and point out some of the points of interest that caught our attention about them.

The first discussion that Kyle and I had regarding this page was about what to call it. The initial instinct was to call it something like “Resources” or “Other Resources” or something around that idea, but we decided that the terminology didn’t quite fit what we wanted to convey through the page’s name. “Resource” carried a connotation of generality and seemed to speak of a pile of things to be rummaged through in order to rescue something useful, which didn’t exactly match the careful consideration and grooming of each archive site included in this research process. Thus, “Archives of Interest” was settled on as a better-fitting title, which works but could be changed in the future as the site evolves if need be.

The next big question in the process of creating this page was whether to include and describe every single archive that I recorded in my spreadsheets or to include just an overview of the kinds of materials found and a focused description of only a handful. The reason for moving away from immediately showcasing every single archive was to avoid creating a page that was too long and text-dense that would distract the user and become an obstacle. On the other hand, choosing a few archives to showcase and others not to showcase presented an uncomfortable selection decision that would unavoidably convey preference and create an arbitrary “hierarchy” of archive sites. Because of this, we chose to showcase four archives of each main type (digital and physical) with a disclaimer note about selection and the intention to create a rotating spread that could change at any given frequency (weekly? monthly?) in the future when the site goes live, and therefore present a chewable amount of information to the user while not giving preference to any archives over others, just giving them a little taste of the spreadsheet.

Lastly, the idea of linking the spreadsheets with the information was discussed so all archive details could be available at any given moment even if not currently showcased. The versions that I linked in the Wordpress page, however, were not exactly the same ones that I originally created but they were “cleaned up versions”. For the digital archives spreadsheet, that meant deleting the color coding so as to make all the text black font, and also deleting a few of the columns that seemed more useful for us in analyzing other archives rather than for the user who can easily experience the site themselves through the links provided. I also alphabetized the archives listed in this version of the spreadsheet in order to reflect the true sentiment that no archives are regarded as “better” than any others and there is no hierarchy (intentional or otherwise) in their listing and presentation. For the physical archives spreadsheet I made the same color coding changes and alphabetizing, but since all the information on that spreadsheet was objective and useful to any user, I didn’t feel the need to delete any of the original columns.

Throughout the time I spent on this project, we initially had very few whole-team meetings but I had more frequent individual meetings with Kyle and Neal as needed. I found these meetings very useful since, as I mentioned, there were different points in different tasks in which I needed more guidance or had more questions than others, and it was very useful to talk with them through the process. Something I enjoyed more in the Spring semester than in the Fall was having stable, scheduled meetings (Tuesday mornings biweekly for the whole team and Fridays at noon for individual meetings with Kyle). As a planner myself, I enjoyed the structure of knowing when these meetings would happen on a settled frequency rather than the more “meeting as we go” nature of the Fall semester, but that’s just my personal preference! In general, I really enjoyed all the meetings and check ins we had since it was nice to meet and feel like part of a team rather than someone doing isolated solo work, and it was very helpful for me to talk through what I was working on at any given time and also learn about what my colleagues were working on for the project. I really enjoyed being a part of this project and contributing my research to it!

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Sofia Noorouzi

BA Journalism, Minor Business Administration ‘22

(last edit: April 27, 2021)

*[Sofia worked on transcribing the AWD Oral Histories and learned some qualitative coding skills by practicing on the transcribed histories.]*

### Transcription Process:

Initially I tried using Screen-Cast-O'Matic but the free subscription only let me upload videos in 15 minute increments, and since most of the AWD Oral History interviews are around 45 minutes this did not seem feasible. I also like using Trint for transcribing, but once you use up the free trials it charges you around \$40 a month and that is way too expensive. I got an Otter.ai student subscription, which is \$4/month because my classmate recommended it and I needed a transcription tool for my other journalism projects for class.

#### *Otter.ai process:*

I downloaded the Oral History video onto my computer using QuickTimePlayer. Then I uploaded it to Otter.ai. I played the QuickTime video while I edited the rough transcription that was produced by Otter.ai. I found this method a lot easier than playing the audio directly off the Otter.ai website because it tends to lag and glitch.

Then I uploaded those first cuts to a folder titled, "Rough Transcriptions," before I went into the Otter.ai browser again and fine-tuned the transcription even more. Since the first run-through is a lot of work staring at your computer for roughly two hours for each interview, I did this first step and then did the final edits on another day/after a break.

After going through the transcription once and editing the obvious mistakes, I read through it again, this time changing the syntax to be more readable. I removed "Um" and repetition. Some parts where the two people were talking over each other were indecipherable so I did the best I could to make those parts coherent. I uploaded this version to a folder called, "Edited and Condensed Transcriptions." I condensed one or two of the transcriptions by removing irrelevant information (like when the subjects are catching up about their lives/families) and including brackets to account for this deletion.

For names and spellings, I looked up their job titles with their institution, if I knew that information, as well as what I thought the name sounded like. Usually, this cleared up any name spelling confusion, but some needed to be run by Neal/Kyle.

The documents I exported to the folder "Edited and Condensed Transcripts" were not done until I added parentheses around time stamps and colons after Speaker titles.

### Qualitative Data Analysis on Dedoose:

This was my first time doing qualitative data analysis so while I am not an expert these are some steps that helped me:

- Save your password somewhere because Dedoose logs you out every time after you are inactive for a little while
- There is a refresh button on the upper right corner -- don't make the same mistake as me by logging out and signing back in every time to refresh when two people are working at the same time
- Double click before highlighting the section you want to code, otherwise it won't catch all the text you want highlighted
- In order to brainstorm ideas for code descriptors look for themes or recurring words in the interviews, which is not too difficult because the interviewer is asking similar questions in each interview

- Set up categories like the ones Kyle created: Program-specific, Administration-specific, Field-specific, Position-specific. Since the project is about this one course model within Northeastern's Writing Program, Advanced Writing in the Disciplines, keep that framework in mind.
- Ask lots of questions when unsure whether to code something -- add memos for future reference onto the codes you are uncertain about
- Use your best judgement of when to code, if it seems like it's repetitive and does not add anything new to the narrative do not code in excess
  - For example: Ethos- don't code every single appearance of an important figure - once is enough.
- Guidelines for code descriptors:
  - **Ethos:** Any statement that asserts credibility/authority qualifies as
  - **Assessment:** program evaluation, survey, formal, committees
  - **Career:** promotion, tenure, grant
  - **Reform:** curriculum, goals, something changes/shifts in practices, switch
  - **Positive Sentiment:** "my favorite course" "works well"
  - **Negative Sentiment:** frustration, "bullshit" "I feel..."
  - **Belief:** look for disciplinary terms from someone's field of expertise, something they do because of their training, goes beyond opinion, opinion grounded in authority and training

#### Overall experience notes:

This semester I feel like the 10-hour work study allotment was accurate since the transcriptions for long interviews were arduous assignments. At least compared to last semester, when I was mostly just familiarizing myself with the NUWPDPA mission. I did learn how to navigate Adobe Acrobat by uploading Syllabi and other Writing Program documents to that application and scanning them for legibility. Overall, those did not take too long after the first week of acquainting myself with the software, so 5hr/week would have sufficed.

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