

# Finding Original Records

## Understanding What's Out There

Searching for original records on the internet can yield a variety of access points ranging from researcher catalogues, to finding aids, to metadata aggregators, to curated collections, to lesson plans, with each representing benefits and challenges unique to its format.

Researcher catalogs, such as the [National Archives' Catalog](#), provide access to the breadth of the collections they represent. While these searches often highlight a substantial number of records and finding aids related to a topic, for the non-researcher hoping to find easy access to a particular document, sifting through the volume of records they return can be tedious. If you are looking for digital records, be sure to limit your search to that format.

Finding aids, or descriptive “tools that facilitate discovery of information within a collection of records” by helping the user to “gain access to and understand the materials,” are not records, but represent [descriptions](#) of a collection of records, similar to how a card catalog might document the books in a library ([SAA](#)). Finding aids are created for researchers who will spend extensive time in an archive and need to quickly identify if a collection is relevant to their research.

Metadata aggregators, like the [Digital Public Library of America](#), compile the digital collections of a variety of cultural institutions through use of information describing the record, or metadata. Aggregators, then, present numerous records from a variety of different collections relating to a singular topic. Although aggregators make the search process more efficient, they may still require you to sort through the results to find the most relevant content.

Curated collections are collections that have been curated by someone to tell a story and, as a result, often include information to help you understand and contextualize the records. These [collections](#) include different levels of contextualization ranging from simple background information of individual documents to a fully curated story, similar to what you might find in a museum exhibit. While you may prefer to use these collections because the records are curated in some way for ease of use, you need to remember that decisions have been made about what records were included in the collection. Ask yourself who created the collection, what was their intent, and if all sides of the story are accurately and evenly represented. Also, don't forget that collections may be limited in scope based on the availability of records (digital or otherwise).



Finally, you may also find lesson plans created by cultural heritage institutions or other educators for use in the classroom. Complete [lesson plans](#) offer a packaged presentation of original records and may include alignments to state or national standards (depending on the creator), as well as instructions for use and delivery. That said, as with any lesson plan you do not create, it is important to review these before you use them. Key questions to ask include:

- Are documents excerpted and, if so, how is that process made obvious?
- Are the excerpts true to the original intent of the record(s) or record creator?
- Who created the lesson plan - are they an expert or did they rely on expert information?
- Does the lesson plan accurately represent all sides of the story? and so on.

Please note: This list is not intended to be an exhaustive explanation of how you might find original records; rather, it shares some of the most common ways cultural heritage institutions share records.

## How to Limit Your Searches

You can use Boolean operators to limit your search for original records in Google or in archive or museum websites. Boolean operators are words and symbols that allow you to combine or exclude key terms in a search. Much as you might use these operators when you are performing a search in a database, these operators allow you to limit your internet searches to only the most helpful results.

Common search operators include:

- AND, limits results by combining terms (president AND archive)
- OR, searches for content that contains one word or the other (president OR archive)
- “ ”, searches for an exact word or phrase (“George Washington”)
- - , excludes terms from your results (president -Washington)
- -site, excludes a particular site from your search (-site:wikipedia.org)
- ~ , searches for a term and its synonyms (~president)
- Google also offers more [advanced search operators](#)

Boolean operators can also be used together to create more precise searches. For example, the following code would return results related to George Washington from either archives or museums.

“George Washington” AND “archives” OR “museums”

## Tips for Looking

When you look for original records, here are a few tips to keep in mind:

1. Google has powerful algorithms. Use the Boolean operators to make them work for you.
2. Check the websites of popular museums, archives, and libraries (especially University and Special Collections Libraries).



3. Remember that other entities, such as historical associations and private collectors, often hold and make records available.
4. When you're in a website, look for the sections dedicated to research or education—usually these are marked by “Research,” “Education,” “Learn,” “Educators,” or “Teachers.” It's also a good idea to look for the terms “digital” and “collections.”
5. When you are using a cultural heritage site and your search returns extensive results, use the filters they provide to narrow your search. Start by selecting only digital records and then consider further narrowing your results by the type of record, date of the record, etc.
6. Always cite the records you find and use—some institutions provide preferred citation formats, so be sure to look. At a minimum include the institution name, record identifier, and a hyperlink so others can access the record.
7. If you search for a record and fail, keep looking! If you're working on a lengthy project, come back and search again—NARA uses “null” returns on searches to prioritize their digitization projects.

## Where to Start

Below you will find a list of websites. The list isn't exhaustive, but it's a great place to start your research.

### THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Together, the [National Archives and Records Administration](#) (NARA) and the [Library of Congress](#) (LOC) document the American past. NARA collects records documenting American history and the inner workings of the government. The LOC collects records relating to “human creativity and knowledge” ([LOC](#)). These collections should be viewed as complementary, not competing.

- LOC, [Catalog](#) and [Classroom Materials](#)
- NARA, [Online Catalog](#) and [DocsTeach](#)

### OTHER ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS, AND LIBRARIES

As you choose your search sites, remember that the sender and receiver of a record may both have copies. For example, the British National Archives also has a copy of the United States Declaration of Independence. And, on that note, former colonial empires often hold extensive World History records.

- [Digital Public Library of America](#)
- [The Smithsonian](#)
- [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)
- [Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History](#) (create a free account)



- [The CIA Reading Room](#)
- [The British National Archives](#) and [The British Museum](#)

## PRESIDENTIAL COLLECTIONS

- [Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum](#), (see Collections and Lincoln Research)
- NARA, [Founders Online](#) (records) and [Presidential Libraries](#)
- University of Virginia's Miller Center, [U.S. Presidents](#)
- White House Historical Association, [The Presidents Timeline](#) (context)
- Wikipedia also maintains a list of all [presidential libraries](#), NARA-owned and otherwise

## Analyzing the Records You Find

The following materials can be used as guides to help you analyze the original records you find. Before you use them, however, be sure to ask yourself what you can determine about the record without them.

- Use the Thinking Like a Historian Guide
- LOC, [Teacher's Guides and Analysis Tool](#)
- NARA, [Document Analysis Worksheets](#) (includes Elementary/ELL and Secondary versions)
- Use [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) to analyze a visual record, by asking these questions:
  - What's going on in this picture?
  - What makes you say that?
  - What more can you find?

