

The RA Manual

Observation, description & the care of the record

A working handbook for readers, cataloguers and independent contributors.

Ravensworth Archive
Office of Collections & Special Studies
North Annex - Records Room

A careful description can outlast the explanation first attached to it.

[Start here](#)

Your place in the record

You do not need specialist vocabulary to make a useful observation. You need a clear reference, a description another person can check, and an honest account of what you could not establish. The public catalogue is the beginning of that work.

Use this manual with a familiar, stable object that you own or are authorised to document. A household cup, an envelope or a recent photograph is enough. Use reference images for practice when handling is inappropriate.

Begin by recording an identifier and a plain description. Make a small, consistent set of photographs.

Attach your sources. Then read the description again: which statements come from the object, which from another person, and which are your interpretation?

The worksheets on pages 20-22 may be copied. A private digital practice sheet is available in the website's Working Record. Your browser keeps that sheet; it does not submit a collection offer or contact the reference desk.

Use	Pages
Build a catalogue record	3-8
Handle and photograph	9-13
Read and compare records	14-18
Apply the method	19-22
Terms and further reading	23-24

A useful first contribution is a supported observation, however small.

From arrival to public description

A temporary receipt acknowledges that something arrived. An accession records a formal acquisition decision. A catalogue entry describes an identified item. A movement record states where it went. These records answer different questions; keep their references connected.

For personal practice, use a temporary reference such as PRACTICE-2026-001. Do not invent a Ravensworth accession or imply that your object has entered its collections. Formal accessioning belongs to the responsible institution.

Record the object's present location, who made the description and the date. Describe an enclosure separately from its contents when they can become detached. Preserve labels and accompanying correspondence as associated evidence.

Before publication, check identity, source references, image rights and whether personal or location information should be omitted. Keep a dated record of those editorial decisions. The public description should identify its current review status.

Record	Question answered
Receipt	What arrived, when, and from whom?
Accession	What was formally accepted?
Catalogue	What is this item, and what supports that description?
Movement	Where is it now?
Release	Which version may be consulted?

An object can be present before its ownership or history has been established.

Identifiers that remain useful

Choose one stable identifier for each item in your own practice collection. Write it on the record and on a separate label or enclosure. Never apply ink, adhesive labels or an improvised marking system directly to an unfamiliar historic surface.

An object number identifies an object. An image filename identifies an image. An attachment identifier identifies one source. Keeping these distinct prevents a replacement photograph from appearing to be a replacement object.

Use dates that sort unambiguously: 2026-09-27. Preserve the source's original wording as well when interpreting an old date. Record an uncertain date as uncertain, for example 'circa 1930' or 'not established'. A filename date should describe the capture, not an estimated manufacture date. Use component suffixes only when a documented relationship supports them. A lid and its vessel may be 001-a and 001-b; two unrelated cups should not share one identifier merely because they were photographed together.

Purpose	Practice example
Object	PRACTICE-2026-001
Overview image	PRACTICE-2026-001_20260927_01_overview.jpg
Inscription detail	PRACTICE-2026-001_20260927_06_mark.jpg
Revised description	PRACTICE-2026-001_description_v02.txt

Change a description by revision. Preserve the identity of the thing described.

The minimum useful catalogue record

A short complete record is more useful than a confident title with no sources. Supply the following fields, using 'not established', 'not examined' or 'not recorded' where appropriate. These phrases describe different gaps.

Field	What to enter
Identifier / object name	A stable reference and a plain noun.
Description	Visible form, construction, colour and distinguishing marks.
Materials / technique	Observed material; identify an uncertain material as tentative.
Dimensions	Values, units, orientation and method.
Date / maker	Attribution with the source and degree of certainty.
Inscriptions / labels	Exact wording and location; retain uncertain readings.
Condition	What was observed, where and on what date.
Provenance	Documented ownership or custody, with gaps stated.
Current location	A usable private location reference.
Sources / photographs	Stable file and document references.
Recorder / review	Who described it, when, and its review status.

Avoid replacing a blank with an attractive guess. A material that looks like brass may be plated metal. An inherited name may be a later family description. Record both the observation and the attribution when they differ.

The record should allow another person to find the object and repeat the observation.

A description someone else can check

Practice item: a recent household envelope. The example demonstrates method; it is not a Ravensworth collection accession.

Field	Entry
Identifier	PRACTICE-2026-001
Object name	Envelope
Description	Cream paper envelope with triangular flap; unsealed. Blue rule printed along upper edge of front.
Dimensions	110 x 220 mm, height x width, closed; steel rule, nearest millimetre.
Inscription	Lower right, printed: 'REFERENCE COPY'.
Material	Paper; composition not examined.
Date / maker	Not established from the object.
Condition	Lower left corner creased over 8 mm; observed 27 September 2026.
Source	Direct examination; images 01 front, 02 reverse, 03 inscription.
Interpretation	May have contained office correspondence; no contents survive with the item.

Notice the difference between a description and a story. The crease is visible. Office use is an interpretation. Absence of contents is an observation about the present examination, not proof that the envelope was always empty.

If a later source establishes a maker or use, add a dated revision and its citation. Keep the earlier description in the revision history.

A precise modest description leaves room for a better one.

Four kinds of statement

Keep the source of each claim visible. A person reading your record should be able to tell which statements can be checked directly and which depend on an attribution or comparison.

Kind	Example
Direct observation	The counterfoil is marked 10:28.
Attributed statement	The clerk states that no advance request was entered.
Documented relation	The ledger and counterfoil carry the same request number.
Interpretation	The difference may reflect an error in one clock.

A relation can be strong without proving a cause. Matching request numbers support a connection between two records; they do not establish why the times differ. Record alternatives that the evidence cannot yet distinguish.

Cite the smallest useful location: attachment identifier, page or leaf, and entry. Preserve a quotation exactly when the wording matters. In ordinary notes, paraphrase clearly and identify it as your summary. An authoritative heading does not make every statement beneath it correct. Read signatures, dates and the purpose for which a document was written. A personnel allegation and a witnessed observation have different evidentiary roles.

The confidence of a sentence is not evidence for it.

Measure and describe condition

Choose a stable orientation before measuring. State the order: height x width x depth, or diameter and height. Give units every time. Record whether the item was open, closed, framed or mounted. Photograph the measuring arrangement if the orientation is difficult to describe.

Use a ruler beside a stable object without rubbing its surface. Do not use calipers on a vulnerable surface without an approved method. Avoid false precision: a value read from a millimetre rule is not an instrument measurement to three decimal places.

Write condition as visible facts: 'split at upper hinge, approximately 12 mm' is more useful than 'poor'.

Locate changes by a labelled view or by an agreed orientation. Record old repairs and loose components without trying to test their strength.

Distinguish 'not visible in this view' from 'absent'. Photographs can hide shallow dents or cracks. A condition statement should say whether it comes from direct examination or an image.

Weak entry	Repeatable entry
Damaged	Lower edge: three losses, each 2-4 mm; image 05.
About 20 cm	198 mm wide, measured closed, nearest millimetre.
No marks	No inscription visible on the photographed front and reverse.

Date condition observations. A condition record is a record of an examination.

Before an object is moved

Prepare the destination and clear the route before handling. Examine the object for loose parts, weak joins and vulnerable surfaces. Support its weight from sound areas; handles and old repairs may be unreliable. Use a suitable rigid support or tray when that reduces handling.

Glove choice depends on the material and grip needed. Clean, well-fitting nitrile gloves are commonly suitable for metal and photographic surfaces. Clean dry hands may be appropriate for stable paper where institutional guidance permits. Cotton gloves are not a universal solution and can catch on fragile edges.

Do not clean, polish, unfold a resistant sheet, remove a label or operate a mechanism to improve a photograph. Seek the responsible conservator's direction for fragile, unfamiliar or hazardous material. Documentation can begin from a safe reference image.

For practice, choose a stable ordinary item. Record the support and orientation you used. If a component shifts or damage is noticed, stop, support the item, document the observation and inform its custodian.

Further guidance: Canadian Conservation Institute, Handling heritage objects; see page 24.

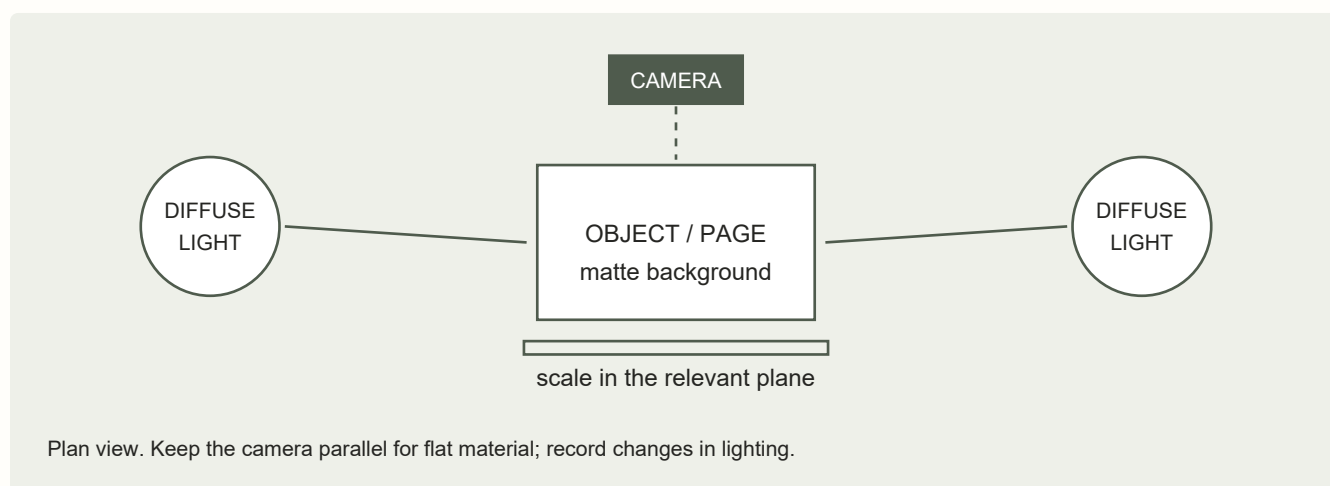
Set up a small photography station

Use a clear working surface, a stable camera position and a plain matte background. Allow enough space around the object to show its complete outline. Keep the background separate from the object so it cannot pull on a fragile edge.

Place two diffuse lights to either side for an even overview. Avoid mixed daylight and room lighting, which can produce inconsistent colour. For a flat sheet, keep the camera sensor parallel to the page and the lens centred over it. For an object, establish a repeatable front view.

Include the identifier and a suitable scale in a reference exposure, with the scale in the relevant measurement plane. Include a colour target when colour comparison matters. Make an additional unobstructed view if a label or target obscures context.

A raking-light detail can show surface relief. Label it as a different lighting arrangement and keep the evenly lit overview too. Photograph the setup or record it in the shot log.



Schematic: two diffuse lights, camera centred, scale beside the object. Adjust safely to the material.

A phone can make a useful record

Clean the lens and use the main camera at its native view. Move the camera or change the setup instead of relying on heavy digital zoom. Stabilise it with a stand or support and use a timer when touching the shutter causes blur.

Use the highest practical original resolution. Disable portrait blur, beauty filters and decorative effects. If a device applies computational processing that cannot be disabled, record the device and capture mode. Keep the original file it produced.

Tap or set focus on the object's important plane. Inspect fine detail at full size before dismantling the setup. Reduce exposure if bright paper or reflective areas lose all texture. Keep lighting, exposure and white balance consistent across comparable views when the device allows control.

For camera systems with manual controls, choose low practical ISO, sufficient depth of field and a shutter speed compatible with the support. There is no single setting for every object. A sharp, evenly lit, documented image is the aim.

Photograph one test view, check it, then continue. Look for motion blur, clipped edges, reflections hiding marks and a scale that has slipped out of plane.

An attractive image and a useful evidence image sometimes require separate exposures.

Make a deliberate sequence

Plan the views before moving the object. Photograph only views that can be obtained safely. Keep the sequence understandable even if another person receives the files without you.

View	Purpose
01 / Overview with reference	Whole object, identifier and scale.
02 / Front, unobstructed	The agreed principal view.
03 / Reverse	Back or underside if safely accessible.
04 / Side / construction	Thickness, joins or structure.
05 / Condition detail	A located feature with context.
06 / Inscription / label	Legible close view and its position.
07 / Associated material	Envelope, label or enclosure as a separate item.

Log the actual filename, view, capture date, lighting and photographer. Note a view that could not be obtained and why. Do not leave a gap that resembles a missing file.

Before finishing, check that the identifier in the reference image matches the record. Confirm that the finest required lettering is readable, all edges are present where intended, and the original files have been copied successfully.

A second view can resolve an uncertainty that a more elaborate caption cannot.

Keep originals and working copies

Keep the camera's original files unchanged. Make working copies for cropping, rotation, tonal adjustment or delivery. Use a filename suffix and a short edit note so the relationship can be reconstructed.

Do not remove scratches, inscriptions, folds, labels or background evidence from an evidentiary image.

Any reconstructed or illustrative image needs its own label. A crop should retain a reference to the whole view.

Keep at least two copies in separate storage locations. Open a sample after copying and periodically check that the files remain readable. A checksum can detect a change in file bytes; it does not establish that the original depiction was truthful.

A simple folder structure is enough: originals, working, delivery and records. Keep a plain-text manifest listing object identifiers, image filenames, capture dates and edits. Use broadly supported delivery formats; retain the native original even when a delivery copy is converted.

For documents, keep the page sequence and record the relationship between an image, its transcription and any later corrected transcription. Never let an export overwrite the only source.

A smaller delivery file is a derivative. Its convenience does not make it the master.

Transcribe what is there

Identify the source before transcribing: title, identifier, date and page or leaf. Preserve spellings, numbers and meaningful punctuation. State any normalisation of line breaks or spacing at the start.

Use square brackets for editorial information: [illegible], [word uncertain: tray], [handwritten addition].

Distinguish a gap in the original from a redaction in the released copy. Do not guess text beneath an opaque redaction.

Keep original page numbers separate from the PDF viewer's page count. 'Leaf 74, released folio 03' is more precise than 'page 3' when records are assembled from several sources.

Read optical character recognition against the image. Common confusions include 1/l/I, 0/O, 5/S and punctuation near ruled lines. Mark an unresolved reading instead of silently choosing a version.

For a table, preserve the relationship between headers and cells. If the visual layout carries meaning, describe it: 'graphite note in left margin beside the 10:17 entry'. A transcription should make the evidence available to readers who cannot use the image.

A legible transcription may improve access without improving the certainty of an uncertain word.

Compare before reconciling

Choose one question small enough to answer from the sources. List the two references and the exact observations that agree or differ. Record differences in dates, numbers, signatures, wording or physical arrangement.

Ask whether the sources are independent. A later summary copied from a ledger is not a second observation of the event. A carbon copy can preserve an earlier wording while still sharing the same origin. Write a provisional interpretation separately. List what evidence would support it and what evidence would weaken it. Look for a negative comparison as well as a matching example.

Preserve both sources even if one later proves mistaken. An error may explain how a later description arose. Correcting the public description does not require erasing the history of the correction.

Working field	Example
Question	Which event does each time describe?
Source A	R02, leaf 74: first service entry.
Source B	R03: independently retained counterfoil.
Agreement	Request number and requested reference.
Difference	Service and request times.
Next source	A witnessed record using the same procedure.

An unresolved relation is a useful result when its limits are stated.

Prepare a reference release

A release should identify its edition, issue date, included attachments and extent. Keep source dates distinct from release dates. A page written in 1961 and released in 2026 carries both dates for different reasons.

Count the delivered pages. State whether the count includes a cover, schedule or blank separator. List withheld enclosures separately instead of leaving unexplained gaps. Distinguish 'not digitised', 'not located' and 'retained'.

Redactions in a public file must remove the withheld content from the delivered file, including hidden text, comments and layers. An opaque rectangle alone is not a reliable redaction. Provide a reason at an appropriate level without reconstructing the omitted information.

Publish an accessible transcription or equivalent reading copy. Give each attachment its own stable citation. Changes to source content require an identified edition; a quiet substitution under an old identifier prevents reliable comparison.

Keep a release manifest outside the public packet with the exact files issued and their checksums. The public schedule tells the reader what to expect; the manifest supports administrative control.

A release decision concerns access to a copy. It does not settle every question about the original.

Make a correction accountable

A correction needs the old statement, the replacement statement, its supporting evidence, the responsible reviewer and a date. If the old statement harmed an attribution, make the correction discoverable beside it. Use review statuses precisely. 'Transcribed' means a reading copy exists. 'Compared' means named sources were examined together. 'Reviewed' identifies an authorised assessment. 'Resolved' applies to a stated question, not automatically to the entire object.

Do not promote a visitor's note into institutional fact without review. A private Working Record may contain tentative suggestions, alternate explanations and abandoned readings. It is valuable because it preserves the course of inquiry.

When a finding is supported, cite the sources that support it and state the limit. A finding about a clerk's responsibility does not necessarily explain the event that led to the allegation.

Give overlooked contributors credit by name where the record supports it. Record the work they performed rather than allowing a later summary to absorb their contribution into an anonymous office.

An unresolved cause does not prevent a supported correction.

Independent reference copies

A reference set may be retained outside the originating office so that a later comparison does not depend entirely on one institutional description. Keep its edition, attachment order and source relationships intact. The independent copy should include the ordinary comparison as well as the exceptional entry. Selecting only the striking page makes the record less useful. Keep the source that resists your preferred explanation.

Record the comparison, not a biography of the reader. A private note can be useful without a name, account or institutional appointment. The website's Working Record stays in the browser until its reader chooses to export it.

Where a distribution instruction assigns a copy letter, preserve that designation with the set. A reference copy should not be silently substituted for the office master. A later correction belongs beside the earlier description.

Some circulation instructions distinguish return of a copy from closure of the associated receipt. Read those fields separately. The absence of a return request is not an instruction to alter the record.

Disclosure does not terminate custody. See the originating distribution instruction.

A first file to consult

The North Reading Room service file provides a short exercise in source comparison. Begin with the service ledger and the request counterfoil. Write down what each document actually records before deciding which entry should change.

Use the request number to establish the relation. Note the two times, their source locations and the words describing each event. Check whether the sources identify the same kind of action.

Then consult the controlled duplication memorandum. Ask what its comparison establishes about the clerk's responsibility, and what it leaves unexplained. Keep that distinction when you read the later personnel review.

The circulation papers explain why the selection includes material beyond the original service request. Read their copy designations as administrative evidence. Preserve an instruction's original date separately from its later review annotation.

Your retained finding can be one sentence with three citations. The value lies in its support, not its length. You may leave a question open without losing the work already done.

Form RA-W1 / Copy for use

Catalogue worksheet

Use a practice identifier for material outside the Archive. Keep private location and personal details out of a public copy.

Practice identifier / object name

Description: form, construction and distinguishing features

Materials / technique; mark uncertainty

Dimensions, units and orientation

Inscriptions and labels; exact wording and location

Date / maker attribution and supporting source

Condition observed / examination date

Provenance and gaps

Photograph filenames / associated records

Recorder / review date / next action

Record a fact once, then cite it consistently. Private digital version: Working Record.

Form RA-W2 / Copy for use

Photography log

Record the actual capture setup. A repeated view is most useful when someone else can reconstruct it.

Object identifier / session date / photographer

Camera or phone / lens or mode / file format

Support, background and object orientation

Lighting arrangement / white balance / exposure notes

File / view	Scale / target	Condition or capture note
01 / overview		
02 / front		
03 / reverse		
04 / side		
05 / detail		
06 / inscription		

Session check: identifier matches; essential details sharp; edges included; originals copied; unavailable views explained; any edits recorded.

Keep this log with the original image files.

Form RA-W3 / Copy for use

Source comparison sheet

Define one question. Preserve source statements separately from your interpretation.

Question under review

Source A: identifier, date, page and exact observation

Source B: identifier, date, page and exact observation

What agrees?

What differs?

Are the sources independent? Explain.

Provisional interpretation / other possible explanations

Supporting or contrary source still required

Finding and limits / date retained

Retain both descriptions until the relation can be supported. Copy designation: _____

A small vocabulary

Term	Meaning in this manual
Accession	A formal acquisition reference assigned by the responsible institution.
Catalogue	A maintained description of identified material.
Custody	Responsibility for holding or caring for material; not always ownership.
Derivative	A file made from another file for a stated purpose.
Edition	An identified version of released content.
Facsimile	A reproduction that presents the source's visible arrangement.
Folio / leaf	A sheet or numbered leaf; state which numbering system is used.
Provenance	Documented history of origin, ownership or custody.
Reference copy	A copy supplied for consultation with its edition and source relations.
Retained	Held back or kept in a named context; does not mean destroyed.
Surrogate	A representation consulted in place of the original.
Transcription	A reading of source text with editorial interventions identified.
Working Record	The reader's retained sources, comparisons and private notes.

A term can describe an administrative fact without explaining its cause.

Reference / Further reading

Keep the method with the material

This manual describes Ravensworth's reference practice. For wider museum documentation and material-specific care, consult the publications below. Their methods inform ordinary collection work; they are not accounts of Ravensworth holdings.

National Park Service - Museum Handbook, Part II: Museum Records. A substantial reference for accessioning, cataloguing, inventory and documentary control.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/museums/mh2.htm>

Canadian Conservation Institute - Handling heritage objects. Material-sensitive preparation, supports and handling considerations.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/handling-heritage-objects.html>

Canadian Conservation Institute - Digital Photodocumentation of Museum Objects. An introduction to the scope of structured photographic documentation.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/learning-activities/photodocumentation.html>

References consulted 27 September 2026. Follow the responsible institution's current procedures when working with its collections.

Document control: RA-MAN-01 / edition 1.0 / public reference copy. The worksheets may be reproduced with their reference headings. Amendments should carry their own date.

Preserving the record. Questioning the silence.

A reference copy may remain with its reader.