

THE		
NATIONAL		
ARCHIVES		

Guidance on Providing Information About Your Records

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Cataloguing, Taxonomy and Data Department					

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Summary

This guide contains advice for government bodies that transfer records to The National Archives on supplying content for the higher levels of our online catalogue, [Discovery](#). These levels, referred to as department, division and series, are used to group records together to reflect their context.

The guidance provides clear and simple advice about how to record this specific information and what is needed to ensure these catalogue descriptions achieve required standards. It is format neutral, meaning it can be applied to both physical and born-digital records.

The guidance covers the decision making and processes for creating these higher-level catalogue entries. It differs to The National Archive's guidance for cataloguing lower-level entries, including the [cataloguing of individual physical records](#) and [supplying metadata for digital records](#). This is due to the different practical requirements for cataloguing these.

1. Structure of The National Archives' catalogue

In line with international cataloguing standards, specifically [ISAD\(G\)](#), descriptions for records held by The National Archives are catalogued in tree-like hierarchical structures. This structure starts with the department, the largest aggregation of records, and moves down through the smaller aggregations and groupings, called divisions and series. Finally, it moves down to individual pieces and items. This tree-like structure enables all descriptions to be linked together and for records to be placed in context.

The requirements for cataloguing the seven levels vary as the descriptive content serves users in different ways. Below is a list of all possible catalogue levels used by The National Archives.

1.1. The National Archives Catalogue Levels

Level 1: Department *

Level 2: Division

Level 3: Series *

Level 4: Subseries

Level 5: Subsubseries

Level 6: Piece *

Level 7: Item

Those marked with an asterisk are mandatory.

See [Appendix A](#) for an example of this cataloguing structure.

2. Department, Division and Series Catalogue Entries

This guidance focuses specifically on creating descriptions for the higher-level entries of our catalogue structure: department, division and series.

The contextual information provided in these higher-level catalogue entries gives users details about how and why the records within these groupings were created. This includes information about those responsible for creating the records as well as the functions, activities, and business purposes that led to their creation. These activities and/or functions could be a result of a change in the machinery of government, the passing of legislation and the delivery of policies and initiatives.

This contextual information is combined with an overview of the subject matter of the records within these groupings. This allows users to explore the records with an understanding of the content they cover, the context in which they were created and how they connect with one another.

The lower-level catalogue entries, piece and item, focus specifically on the individual record(s) being described. Please see [this guidance](#) on how to catalogue individual paper files and other physical records. Please consult our digital transfer advisers for [guidance](#) on supplying catalogue metadata for individual born-digital records.

The following sections provides more detailed information about departments, divisions and series types of grouping, including when new catalogue entries may be needed, what information should be included, and what to consider when writing descriptions. It also advises when to seek advice from staff at The National Archives.

2.1. What is the department catalogue level?

This is the highest level of The National Archives' online catalogue. It provides researchers with a summary of a government department, executive agency or other government body and the records it created, accumulated or inherited.

Information included at this level relates to the general subject matter of the records within this grouping, as well as details about the history of the creating body or department, any relevant organisational changes and the sort of functions and activities it performed.

When does a new department catalogue level need to be created?

In most cases, there will already be a department entry in The National Archives' catalogue where the records being transferred will naturally fit. Where appropriate, existing department entries can be amended and expanded to include records inherited or created by predecessor and/or successor bodies. Changes to a government body's name should be recorded within the catalogue but do not always require a whole new department level entry.

However, on some occasions, a new department is required to accommodate records created by a new and distinct government body. Consult staff at The National Archives if you believe that a new department-level catalogue entry needs to be created. Please send these queries to procatmanagingeditor@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

2.2. What is the division catalogue level?

This is the second level of The National Archives' catalogue structure. Division level entries are optional and are used when government departments have a large and complex organisational structure, such as directorates or other high-level business units. Divisions may also be used to reflect the business activities of a body's various functions.

Information included at this level relates to the general subject matter of the records, as well as the history of relevant functions, activities or business units, and any relevant organisational changes. Information at department and division levels should complement one another, with each making sense on their own without duplicating the other. The link to the higher department-level grouping should also be made clear.

Using divisions can make it easier to describe the context of the records more clearly. It can also enhance users' ability to browse descriptions within the catalogue.

When does a new division catalogue level need to be created?

In most cases, there will already be a division level entry in The National Archives' catalogue where the records being transferred will fit. Alternatively, where a division may not be deemed necessary (given that it is not a mandatory level), the series catalogue entries can sit directly underneath the department in the cataloguing structure.

However, on some occasions, a new division level entry is required to accommodate records that do not fit within the existing catalogue structure. For

example, when divisions have not previously been used but are now considered necessary, or when existing divisions are not an appropriate fit for the records being transferred. Creating a new division, rather than a new department, may be also appropriate for the records of an arms-length body or a short-term body (such as a public inquiry).

Consult staff at The National Archives if you believe that a new division-level catalogue entry needs to be created. Please send these queries to procatmanagingeditor@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

2.3. What is the series catalogue level?

This is the third level in the structure of The National Archives' catalogue. Each series is a set or sequence of records with a common history, function, and purpose. Typically, the records forming a series will have been created, maintained or originally used for the same business activity or activities. They will often have been kept together within a government body's recordkeeping system. Occasionally these may have been inherited from another government department because it has ceased to function or because of a change in the machinery of government.

Information included at series level should provide an overview of the subject matter of the records within it, and details of those responsible for creating them. It should also include contextual information relating to the processes or activities within which the records were created or accumulated. For example, the minutes and papers of a committee or board or files created during the development of a government policy.

This information helps researchers to explore and understand records within the series. When advising members of the public about The National Archives' collections, staff often suggest searching or browsing within specific series.

When does a new series level need to be created?

New series are required much more often than new divisions or departments. It is likely to be appropriate to treat records as a new series if they have been created or accumulated in a different way, or for a different purpose than records within existing series held at The National Archives.

Where there is clear continuity in content and context with an existing series, adding the records to that series is more appropriate. We call this an accrual.

When a new series is created, we need to know whether there are likely to be accruals to it in later years. This will help with making decisions in future about whether other records belong in that series.

Consult staff at The National Archives if you are not sure whether a new series level catalogue entry is required or if the records being transferred fit better as an accrual to an existing series. Please send these queries to procatmanagingeditor@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

2.4. What to consider when writing descriptions for new groupings

Where a new department, division or series catalogue entry is needed, make sure that it is appropriate to the level being described.

For example, when creating a department level entry, you should describe the government body that has created, inherited or accumulated the records which sit within it. This should include details of that department more generally, its history and the sort of functions and activities it performed. When creating a series level entry, you should seek to reflect a more specific process or sequence of activity carried out in pursuance of the department's business and operating functions, e.g. minutes from board meetings.

Where a new department or new division is needed, it is important to start by creating the description for the larger aggregation first before tackling the smaller groupings within it. This is because it is easier to describe a smaller aggregation when you already know the larger context for it. Draft the department level information first, then the division (if appropriate) and finally the series.

This information should be entered in the relevant sections of the department, division and/or series request forms supplied to you by transfer advisors.

Consult staff at The National Archives if you are unsure about how to request and complete these forms. Please send these queries to procatmanagingeditor@nationalarchives.gov.uk.

3. Creating department, division and series descriptions

This section outlines what descriptive elements are mandatory for department, division and series level catalogue entries and what information is required for each of these.

The requirements for different levels vary as these provide users with different kinds of information.

3.1. Reference

References act as a unique identifier for each catalogue description. Researchers use the piece and item references to request to see records of interest.

References at The National Archives begin with the department code, and are followed accordingly by the series, piece and item numbers.

Existing department level entries can be searched by name or reference code in [Discovery](#).

References for new departments, divisions and series are assigned by staff at The National Archives.

- A **department** level reference is formed of a sequence of up to four letters. For example:
 - [CAB](#) (reference for the Cabinet Office)
 - [JB](#) (reference for the Department for Work and Pensions)
- A **division** level reference is formed of a number, which remains internal to the cataloguing system. Divisions are presented in Discovery simply as 'Division within [example department]'. For example:
 - [Division within CAB](#)
 - [Division within FCO](#)

When requesting a new division, state which department it should be part of.

- A **series** reference is made up of the assigned department code and a sequential number, assigned after the completion of a new series request form. For example:
 - [CAB 128](#)
 - [JA 899](#)

When requesting a new series, state which department and (if appropriate) which division it should be part of.

3.2. Level

This enables the catalogue entry to be placed correctly within the catalogue structure. Specify whether the new catalogue entry is a department, division or series.

Please remember that the higher levels, e.g. department, will need to be created before any lower levels, e.g. series, can be created.

3.3. Title

This is the name given to the aggregation or grouping of records being described.

At all levels, the title should accurately and concisely summarise the records within the grouping. It should take the form appropriate to the catalogue level, as outlined below.

Department and division titles

- Department and division titles should start with 'Records' and continue with either 'of', 'created by', or 'created and inherited by' (as appropriate) and the name(s) of the record creator.
 - **Department** title example: [Records created or inherited by the Medical Research Council](#)
 - **Division** title example: [Records of Finance Divisions](#)
- If the **department or division** level entry contains records created, inherited and/or used by predecessors and/or successors of the specific government body, then add either 'and predecessor(s)' or 'and successor(s)' (as appropriate) after the name of the department.
 - **Department** title example: [Records created or inherited by the Department of National Heritage and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and predecessors](#)
 - **Division** title example: [Records of the Office of the Commissioner and successors](#)

Series titles

- A series title should include the name of the record creator(s) and the type of records making up the series.
- The title should consist of the following sections, separated with colons:
 - A) Creating body
 - B) Administrative sub-bodies or sub-groups of the creating body, if applicable
 - C) Type of records.

The first and last are mandatory.

- **A: Creating body**
 - When the records in a series were created by a single creating body, state its name in full.
 - If the series contains records created by more than one creating body, often only one is stated in the title. This decision should be made on a case-by-case basis. Consult staff at The National Archives for help with this decision.
 - For successive institutions (e.g. following a machinery change in government or when a body's name has changed), one or at most two should be named. This may be the earliest or longest enduring, or the one which produced the highest number of records within the series. Others should be indicated by a suitable form of words, e.g. 'successors' or 'predecessors'. Consult staff at The National Archives for help with this decision.
- **B: Administrative sub-bodies or sub-groups of that creating body**
 - If records within the series were created by or within a particular sub-body, sub-group or single unit, state its name.
 - If the sub-body responsible for creating the records changed its name, or the records within the series were transferred with the functions from one body to another, state either the earliest or the most enduring name. If necessary, add the phrase 'and successors' or 'and predecessors'.

- A generic series title may be preferred if this better reflects sharing or frequent transfer of responsibility for the records or the function that they reflect. Consult staff at The National Archives for help with this.
- **C: Type of record**
 - This last part of the series title should summarise the type or subject coverage of the records, e.g., registered files; reports and minutes.
 - **Series** title examples:
 - [Home Office: Children's Department: Statistical Reports](#)
 - [War Office: The Corps of Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers Other Ranks: Service Records](#)
 - [General Register Office: Registrar General: Private Office Papers](#)
 - [National Industrial Relations Court: Case Files](#)

Other considerations for creating a series title

- For series predominantly made up of registered files, the prefix code and/or reference used by the creating department(s) is often added at the end of the series title. For example:
 - [Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: Dairy Herd Conversion Scheme: Registered Files \(MTB Series\)](#)
- Words of substance in a series title should have initial capitals. An exception to this rule is when general words are used in place of several institutions or sub-bodies. These words should all be in lower case, e.g. 'and successors'.

Consult staff at The National Archives if you need help with creating a suitable title.

3.4. Description

- The description provides users with concise, accurate and meaningful information about the content and subject matter of the records within the department, division or series. Users rely on this information to find whether the records are of interest for their research.
- The language used should be fully descriptive and as broadly accessible and inclusive as possible. Be accurate and consistent and avoid using

unexplained abbreviations. This will help users search the descriptions more effectively.

Department and division level description entries

- Department and division level descriptions should be relatively broad and provide an accurate and concise summary of the subject matter and content of the records that sit within them.
- Using bullet points can sometimes help make descriptions more user friendly.
- See Appendices B and C for examples of department and division level descriptions.

Series level description entry

- A series level description should provide a concise, meaningful, and accurate overview of:
 - The subject matter of records within the series, including: the topics, events, places, people and corporate bodies to which the records relate.
 - Specific types and formats of the records (e.g. registered files, annual reports, minutes etc.).
- If different types of records are brought together in a single series (e.g. registered files and annual reports), explain each type.
- For born-digital records, include information about data capture, validation and use, constraints on reliability, and content validation.
- See Appendix D for an example of a series level description.

3.5. Covering dates

- Covering dates provide users with information about when the records being described were created. They should reflect the earliest and latest dates of the records within the department, division, or series.
- Accurate covering dates help users find records of interest. Particularly as users often restrict searches to a specific date range.
- Covering dates are applied in the same way for department, division and series level catalogue entries.

- At these levels, the date will normally be a range of years. Occasionally, the covering dates for a series may be a single year, e.g. if all the records were created at the same time.
- Explain any significant year gaps within the date range in the description or administrative history, as appropriate.
- On rare occasions, there may be uncertainties about the dating. This can be discussed with staff at The National Archives during the transfer process.
 - Example of **Department level** covering dates: 1863-2022 ([CAB](#))
 - Example of **Division** covering dates: 1886-2003 (LAB [Division within LAB](#))
 - Example of **Series** covering dates: 1935-1951 ([PREM 8](#))

3.6. Administrative History

- Administrative histories provide users with contextual information about those responsible for creating, accumulating and maintaining the records being described.
- Users rely on this part of the catalogue entry to assess the evidential and informational value of the records and whether they are of interest for their research.
- The information provided should be relevant to the particular grouping of records being described, so that users have the contextual information that they need at the place where they need it.

Department level administrative history

- Department level catalogue entries typically include the fullest administrative histories in the catalogue structure. They include contextual information that applies to all the records within this grouping.
- It provides concise information summarising the origin, development, work, function, purpose, and dissolution (where appropriate) of the government department(s) and/or other bodies responsible for creating the records under that department.
- Please see Appendix E for an example of a department level administrative history.

Division level administrative history

- Division level administrative histories provide a concise summary of the sub-body, sub-group, directorate or agency of the government department(s) or body/bodies responsible for the creation of the records within it.
- Information included relates to the origin and history of the relevant sub-body and the way it functioned in terms of activity, purpose and organisation.
- Official name(s), date(s) of existence, relevant enabling legislation functions, purpose and development, the administrative hierarchy and any changes of name(s) are all relevant.
- Please see Appendix E for an example of a division level administrative history.

Series level administrative history

- Administrative histories at series level provide concise information about the purpose, functions and business activities that led to the creation of records within the series.
- Including information about wider events surrounding the records creation, e.g. the passing of an act or a change in government, may also be appropriate.
- If the series consists of private office or similar papers relating to individuals, rather than offices held, include: the person's full name and title, dates of birth and death (if appropriate), and an outline of their career or occupation during the time to which the records in the series relate, mentioning notable activities and achievements.
- When the records are those of a committee, commission or temporary body, the administrative history should include the following: dates of appointment and abolition, authority for appointment, terms of reference, name of chairperson(s), name of sponsoring department(s) or body/bodies to which it reported, and the date of any report with publication details.
- Sometimes, this information for records of private offices or short-term bodies is better placed within the administrative history at division level. Consult staff at The National Archives for help with this.

- Please see Appendix E for an example of a series level administrative history entry.

3.7. Creator name(s)

- Naming the record creators provides contextual information about the bodies, organisations, or people responsible for making and accumulating the records being described.
- For a grouping of government records, the creator is usually an organisation rather than an individual.
- The creator name(s) must cover the earliest and the latest dates for the records within the grouping.
- Provide the full name of the creating body, followed by the years when it was active.
- If the creating body is still active, provide the year it became active, followed with a dash to make it open-ended. This informs users that the body is still active.
- Provide details for new creator name(s) at the point of transfer. The name(s) should be accompanied with information relating to dates they were active and their remit and function.

Department level creator names

- As this is the highest grouping in the catalogue structure, the creator name(s) should be the broadest name for the government body/bodies concerned.
- For example, the **department** catalogue entry for the [Department for Work and Pensions Department](#) has the following creators:
 - Department for Work and Pensions, 2001-
 - Department of Social Security, 1988-2001

Division level creator names

- The creator name(s) listed at this level should cover the earliest and the latest dates for the records being described under the division.
- These may be directorates, units or other sub-groups or subordinate bodies of the creator(s) named at department level.

- For example, the division entry within ADM for [Records of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve](#) has the following creators:
 - Board of Admiralty, Royal Naval Reserve, 1859-1903
 - Board of Admiralty, Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, 1903-1964

Series level creator names

Registered or official papers

- The creator name(s) listed at series level should cover the earliest and the latest dates for the records being described within the series.
- For example, the entry for the [LAB 13](#) series has the following creators:
 - Department for Work and Pensions, 2001-
 - Ministry of Labour, 1916-1939
 - Ministry of Labour, 1959-1968
 - Ministry of Labour and National Service, 1939-1959

Personal papers

- If the series contains both official and personal papers, or only personal papers, then the person's name should also be entered as a creator.
- Creator name(s) for individuals should be accompanied with information about the remit and function of their post, and the dates they held the post.
- For example: the entry for the [T 720](#) series has the following creator:
 - Kenneth Clarke, 1940-2022

3.8. Physical Description

- This consists of two related pieces of information; the extent of the records and their form.
 - The extent is the number of records with the grouping being described
 - The form is the type or format of those records
- The two parts are combined and displayed as 'Physical Description' in our online catalogue.

Department and division level physical descriptions

- Physical descriptions at **department** and **division** level state the number of series included in the grouping being described. The extent is the number and the form is the word 'series'. For example:
 - **Department:** 394 series ([Department entry for PF](#))
 - **Division:** 37 series ([Division entry for COAL](#))

Series level physical descriptions

- At series level, the extent should be the number of orderable units or distinct records in the series. This is often the number of pieces (files) within the series.
- The form should be a generic term for the record(s) being described, such as files, volumes, or digital files. If necessary, consult staff at The National Archives for help with this.
- It should not be confused with the specific record type. Specific information about physical or digital record formats may be included in the description, if appropriate.
- Some examples of physical descriptions at series level:
 - 13047 Paper files and digital records ([FCO 37 series entry](#))
 - 132 boxes, bundles and volumes ([C 115 series entry](#))
 - 94234 file(s) ([WO 421 series entry](#))

3.9. Immediate Source of Acquisition

- The Immediate Source of Acquisition informs users of when records were first transferred to The National Archives and which government body transferred them.
- This information must always be supplied at series level.
- It is rarely needed for division level catalogue entries and only occasionally used at department level.

Series level entry for immediate source of acquisition

- State the name of the transferring body.
- State the year in which records were first transferred to The National Archives for inclusion in this series.

- If no further records are expected to be accessioned into the series, then the text should be entered as 'In', followed by the year of transfer. This makes it clear that it is not an accruing series.
- If it is anticipated that more records will be accessioned into the series, then 'From' should be used along with the earliest year of transfer.
- If the source of acquisition is not known, then this should be recorded.

If custody of the records has passed between government bodies in between their creation and transfer to the archives, consult staff at The National Archives for help in whether additional information should be recorded.

Please consult with staff at The National Archives for more information about the information provided above.

3.10. Arrangement

- This provides users with information about the way in which records were arranged when created and accumulated by government bodies and departments.
- This is mostly used at series level, but it can be useful for department or division catalogue levels. Consult staff at The National Archives for advice on this.

Series level entry for arrangement

- The original order in which the records were created should be maintained. This should be preserved when the records are transferred to The National Archives. Information about this should be added to this part of the series description.
- Where records are known to have been rearranged prior to transfer to The National Archives, then information should be provided here. This information should include how and why rearrangement occurred, e.g. if there was no discernible original order of the records.
- For example:
 - The records are arranged in chronological order ([HO 614 series entry](#))
 - Files are arranged in numerical order ([J 98 series entry](#))
 - Records are arranged in file prefix order ([T 484 series entry](#))

4. Updating department, division and series level catalogue entries

Descriptions regularly need updating and amending at department, division and series level. Most often this happens when new records are transferred to The National Archives.

For example, we regularly update covering dates and/or creators when accruals are transferred into an existing series or department. Some catalogue entries will also need updating to reflect that they contain physical and born-digital records. We call these 'hybrid series'.

We update these catalogue entries to ensure they give users an accurate understanding of the content and context of the records that sit within these groupings. This assists users to determine if these contain records of interest.

Staff at The National Archives carry out this activity but may need to contact transferring departments if further information is required, e.g. when new creator name(s) are needed.

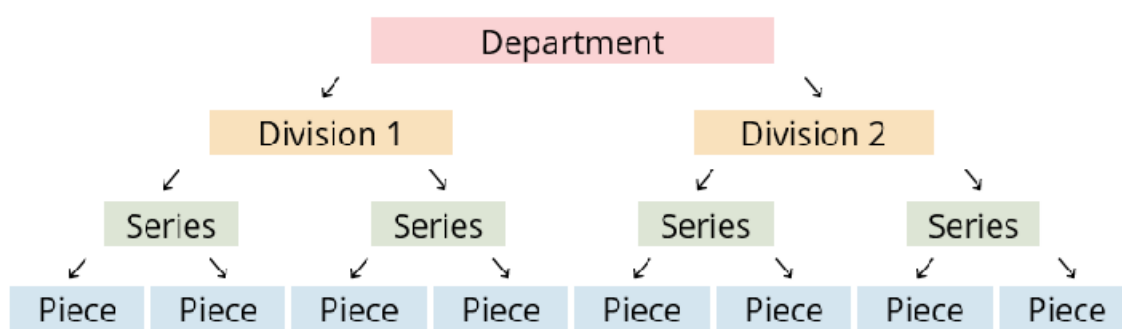
5. Appendices

Appendix A: Example catalogue hierarchy

A: Below is an example of the cataloguing structure that The National Archives adopts for displaying the descriptions for the records it holds.

The catalogue works downwards, with the catalogue entries going from the highest aggregation, department, to the smaller aggregations, division and series and finally the bottom catalogue entries, for pieces and items.

The structure follows the [ISAD\(G\) International Standard](#). The terminology for some of the catalogue levels has been modified to accommodate the type of material we hold.



Appendix B: Example Department level entry

This [link](#) provides access to the Department level catalogue entry for the Ministry of Defence on our online catalogue, Discovery.

Appendix C: Example division level description

This [link](#) provides access to the a division level catalogue entry, 'Records of Economic Planning Divisions' within the HM Treasury department on our online catalogue, Discovery.

Appendix D: Example series level description

This [link](#) provides access to the description for a series level catalogue entry in our online catalogue, Discovery.

Appendix E: Example administrative history catalogue entries

These links provide access to administrative history entries for [department](#), [division](#) and [series](#) level catalogue entries on our online catalogue, Discovery.

This part of the description can be found at the bottom of each of the catalogue entries.