

Searching for records

How much time will you need?

Archival research can be exciting and challenging – exciting because until you search you can never be sure what records we hold or what information you will find (you may be the first researcher to see the record); challenging because archival records are more difficult to research than books in a library.

There is no single subject index to the collection. Archives are not organised by subject, but by the government agencies or individuals who created them. You can save time by searching the [RecordSearch](#) database on our website and, if unable to visit a research centre, you can order or request quotes for the copying of records you identify. If visiting one of our research centres, you should allow yourself several hours to search for, request and read the records. If your inquiry is complex or if you are doing detailed research, you will probably need more than one visit.

Know your research topic

It will help you to make the most of your visit to the research centre if you first visit our website, search our [RecordSearch](#), [PhotoSearch](#) and [NameSearch](#) databases, or do some background reading about your topic. For example, visit a library and consult encyclopedias and other published works or, if you are researching family history, establish names, dates of birth, dates of arrival etc. The more information you have about your topic the more focused your archival research will be.

Where to start your search

If you visit a research centre, a reference officer will be available to advise and assist you. If you are using our website we suggest you start by checking our [help with your research page](#). You will also need to use what we call 'finding aids' (see below), but there is no single finding aid that suits all types of research. The information you are seeking and the time you have available will determine where you should start your search. In many cases, if you have Internet access, you can find and order copies of many records directly from your home by using [RecordSearch](#), but you will often need to search other reference tools as well.

Finding aids

To see a record, you need to give us its reference or citation (that is, the *series number* and *control symbol*). To make your search easier the National Archives creates and maintains databases, guides, fact sheets and other reference tools – called finding aids. Some of these can speed up your search considerably.

Whether or not you already have the citation, a good place to start is the RecordSearch database, which you can use to search for subjects as well as citations. Other finding aids take longer to use but they allow for more systematic searching and the time you spend may be rewarded by finding records on your topic that have not been researched before. Each finding aid has its advantages and limitations. Four of the main finding aids are described below. For more information about using these aids please ask a reference officer.

1. Guides and fact sheets

Check whether a guide to records or a fact sheet is available on your topic. The National Archives publishes these on subjects that most frequently attract research inquiries. Guides and fact sheets are available on this website.

Guides can be used in the research centres at no charge and many can be downloaded or purchased through our online shop.

2. Search RecordSearch

RecordSearch enables you to search descriptive information about the National Archives' collection. This can be a way of quickly finding the records you want. This information comprises descriptions of 9000 creators and depositors, and more than 8 million record items (about 10 per cent of items in the collection). The database includes records held by the National Archives, as well as those held by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

For more information about using RecordSearch please see:

- *Fact sheet 13 - RecordSearch – an overview*
- *Fact sheet 14 - Keyword searching in RecordSearch*

3. Search item lists

Item lists are one of the National Archives' main finding aids. For any given series there is usually a list of every item in the National Archives' custody belonging to that series. The lists are kept in the research centre of the office where the records are held.

If visiting a research centre, once you have identified the series number you can browse the item list for that series. The lists are shelved numerically, by series number. Item lists vary in the information they contain, but a typical item list looks like the example below.

Series A816 – Correspondence files, multiple number series, 1935–58

Control Symbol	Title or description of record	Date range
3/301/531	Atomic test – effects of radioactivity on mammals, flora, etc.	1952–53
3/301/535	Atomic tests – Monte Bello Islands – warning notices to coastal shipping and aircraft approaching the target area	1952-56
3/301/542	Atomic test – motion picture coverage	1952

The data in item lists is progressively being added to RecordSearch.

4. Search PhotoSearch

If you are looking for photographs use [PhotoSearch](#) to search captions and view images from our photographic collections. [PhotoSearch](#) is available on this website.

The open access period

Remember that records held by the National Archives are generally not available for use until they enter the [open access period](#).