

American Archivist Special Section Proposal

We, the founding members of the SAA UX Section, are proposing a special section of the *American Archivist* that is devoted to the practice and application of User Experience Research in Archives. We see the publication of a special section as a way to introduce the newly formed UX Section and more importantly, to showcase the importance of this work to the wider archival community. As part of efforts to create a community of practice and to foster equitable, long-term professional and institutional support for user experience work, we hope to initiate a dialogue within the profession about best practices in designing and evaluating the research environments we create. Whether these spaces are physical or digital, our goal is to facilitate access, discovery, and use of primary source materials.

The revised DACS Principles set the expectation that archivists center users in their work, but User Experience has not always had a strong presence in archival literature. More than thirty articles have been published regarding online finding aids and the encoding standard EAD in *American Archivist*, with a strong focus from 2001-2010 regarding their usability, particularly in the work of Elizabeth Yakel, Deborah A. Torres, Morgan Daniels, and Burt Almann and John R. Nemmers, among others. Further and more expansive explorations of User Experience in the archives have been more limited, though some examples might be Luanne Freund and Elaine G. Toms' exploration of online finding aid usability in *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* (2015) and Betts Coups' usability study on the content of finding aids in the *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* (2021). For a more detailed literature review of this area of inquiry in the field, please see Coup's [study](#).

The hunger for continued research into how users experience archives - their description and content - remains. We know that students and new researchers are often frustrated when beginning archival research. At the same time, experienced researchers may feel alienated, betrayed, or frustrated by "improvements" made to tools and conventions in the name of better usability. Additionally, the need to establish centering users as a professional priority is underscored by DEI and social justice considerations. Archivists have a wide range of questions regarding user experience and the archival experience such as: how do marginalized individuals experience archival research? How do we smooth the tension between preservation and access? How do we make it easier for new researchers to read handwritten manuscripts, or understand the language used in the context of official documents from bygone eras? How do we seamlessly bridge collections across institutions? What practices no longer serve us? These are just a few questions that might be explored in the Special Edition, and answers just might

move our profession forward, lead to new discoveries, and make everyone's work a little more joyful.

Editorial Team

The editorial team, made up of UX Section Steering Committee members, will assist in spreading the word for the CFP, review submitted proposals and select for relevance, rigor of research, and value to the current profession, and assist in the selection of editorial reviewers. We seek a diversity of perspectives that will help us not only understand the shortcomings of our tools and spaces, but can help us visualize more ideal archival research environments of tomorrow.

Faith Charlton is the Lead Processing Archivist for Special Collections Firestone at Princeton University Library where she serves as the functional supervisor for the team of archivists located at Firestone Library. She seeks to provide user-centered discovery of and access to archival records, especially those documenting underrepresented communities. Faith has spearheaded and participated in usability testing of Princeton's finding aids website as well as a focus group study on the use of content warnings in finding aids. She also co-authored the whitepaper "[A Call to Action: User Experience and Inclusive Description](#)" with a team of colleagues who went on to found SAA's UX Section. Faith is a certified archivist and holds a BA from The College of New Jersey, an MA from Villanova University, and an MLIS from Drexel University.

Betts Coup is the Interim Head, Special Collections Processing in the Technical Services for Archives and Special Collections at Harvard University. Betts conducted a finding aid usability study in 2019-2020 and published a case study "[The Value of a Note: A Finding Aid Usability Study](#)" in the *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, and has also written internal reports for Houghton Library regarding user needs for description after a collaborative survey of all LibAnswers data regarding finding aids. She was also part of the team behind the paper "[A Call to Action: User Experience and Inclusive Description](#)," developed as part of the Lighting the Way Working Meeting, which led to the formation of the SAA UX Section. Betts holds a BA from Carleton College, an MA from New York University, and an MLIS from Simmons University.

Alison Clemens is the Access Strategist for Special Collections at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library. In her role, Alison initiates and implements projects to improve user experience in special collections, particularly as she focuses on ensuring that the library is providing seamless, ethical, and meaningful access to its special collections. She also co-leads Beinecke's assessment program, which provides data and analysis to inform

prioritization and decision making for platform improvements, tool development, online pathfinders or guides, new or enhanced digital collections, descriptive remediation, and other projects and initiatives across the library.

Shaun Ellis is a Library Software Engineer at Princeton University Library (PUL) where he has been active in the design, development, and assessment of Library web applications and discovery interfaces for the past fourteen years. Shaun is the co-author of "[Prototyping as a Process for Improved User Experience with Library and Archives Websites](#)," which was published in Code4Lib Journal in 2012. Shaun's innovative interface design for Princeton's online Finding Aids helped his team receive the [2013 SAA Coker Award](#) and the [2013 MARAC Finding Aid Award](#) for excellence in Archival Research Interfaces. He later contributed to the interface design of ArcLight, a popular open source discovery interface for archives. Shaun co-chaired the Princeton University Library's User Experience Steering Committee from 2018-2020, where he successfully led the charge to establish a User Experience department at the Library. Shaun is also an advocate for web accessibility, and became an IAAP Certified Professional in Accessibility Core Competencies in 2018. Shaun holds a BFA in Graphic Design from Mason Gross School of the Arts, and a MLIS from the School of Communication and Information, both at Rutgers University.

Editorial division of labor

Acknowledging that the editorial process is a mixture of administrative tending and developmental interaction that will evolve as needs emerge, we plan on equitably balancing our editorial labor in the following ways:

- Collective responsibilities
 - Finalizing and distributing/publicizing CFP
 - Defining editorial schedule including reminders, deadlines, revisions, and American Archivist needs
 - Develop editorial review rubric for initial review of submissions
 - Determining what will be included in the introduction for the special section and generating/adapting that content
 - Completing all end game work needed to finalize publication

- Submission review and editorial shepherding
 - Divide up submissions evenly for initial layer of editorial review

- Editorial share sessions allowing us to recap, discuss, and recommend each submission we've been working with, using a team-developed review rubric to help focus in on specific accept/reject decisions + editorial assignments
- Divide up accepted submissions amongst the three of us evenly based on interest, expertise, or other pertinent criteria determined to be useful
- Assigning/identifying peer reviewers, in line with American Archivist guidance
- Each editor is responsible for shepherding the submissions in their portfolio, doing any developmental editing and revisions oversight needed, and keeping on schedule

Editorial and publication timeline overview

The following is a possible timeline for the CFP and submission deadlines, based upon suggestions from Amy Cooper Cary and Eric Hung with some slight adjustments to reflect labor by the editorial team:

- Autumn 2024: Editorial team gathers feedback from User Experience Section on content ideas
- December 2024-March 2025: Editorial team revision and finalization of CFP
- Spring 2025: CFP distributed
- Summer 2025: Editorial outreach at SAA 2025
- October 1, 2025: Deadline for submissions
- November 2025 - January 2026: Editorial team completes article selection, reading, and editing
- February 2026: Article review by Amy Cooper Cary
- March 2026: Articles sent for copyediting
- May 2026: Articles sent for layout
- June 2026: Section published in Spring/Summer issue of American Archivist

Call for Papers

We propose that the call for papers will be in spring 2025, with a submission deadline in October 2025. We anticipate that the Special Edition will be included in the first American Archivist issue of 2026.

Example topics:

- Participatory Design Practice
- Case Studies in UX Design in Archives
- User Experience Research Findings

- Marginalized Populations' Experiences with Archival Research
- UX Research Methods Overview
- Presenting UX Research to Leadership
- Lit Reviews