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July 16, 2021  
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2021 Research Forum  
Society of American Archivists

## How to Create an Archival First-Aid Kit

### Biography

**Katy Sternberger** is an archivist, editor, and writer. She currently works as a research librarian at the Portsmouth Athenaeum in New Hampshire. Since 2016, she has served on the Society of American Archivists Dictionary Working Group, which maintains the online *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*. She earned her master's degree in archives management from Simmons College and her bachelor's degree in English/journalism from the University of New Hampshire. In 2020, she became a Certified Archivist and completed the Digital Archives Specialist certificate from SAA.

### Abstract

Just as every archives should have a disaster plan, complete with a salvage kit, every archivist should have an "archival first-aid kit." Such a kit could include a microspatula, microscope, and N95 mask. In the same way that you protect collections through preservation management, the creation of your own archival first-aid kit is an act of self-care that supports your work efforts in a proactive and productive way. This poster introduces the archival first-aid kit and offers strategies for designing a personal toolbox in which to keep your work supplies accessible.

### Presentation Transcript

Hello, my name is Katy Sternberger, and I am pleased to present my poster, "How to Create an Archival First-Aid Kit."

In 2018, I started a new position as a research librarian at the Portsmouth Athenaeum in New Hampshire. I had a shared workstation, and supplies have an uncanny way of disappearing. Plus, my previous position had been a temporary role, so I knew what it felt like not to have a professional home that I could settle into.

Around the same time, I was reading the "asserting the archivist" series of posts authored by Samantha Norling for the ArchivesAWARE! blog about outreach efforts that don't just highlight archival collections but archival workers. Past SAA president Tanya Zanish-Belcher also talked about the "invisible labor" of archivists.

I started thinking about what an archivist needs to succeed, and a question occurred to me: "What if I had a toolbox to carry all of my favorite archival supplies?" I went to an art supply store, found a portable plastic box, and filled it my "tools of the trade." These tools included a multipurpose

microspatula, a pocket microscope for photo identification, and N95 masks to protect my health when I work with moldy collections.

I called this toolbox my “archival first-aid kit.” I see many different applications for the archival first-aid kit and wanted to share this innovation with you.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, self-care in the archives has become all the more important. I think, hopefully, at least one positive outcome of the pandemic is that there is greater awareness about the need for personal protective equipment in order to support workers. You can’t take care of your collections, take care of your institution, or take care of your profession if you don’t take care of yourself first. The archival first-aid kit is something proactive and concrete that you can do for yourself.

If you have questions or would like to collaborate, my contact information is on my poster. Thank you for listening!

### Poster Text

#### **How to Create an Archival First-Aid Kit**

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Just as every archives should have a disaster plan, complete with a salvage kit, every archivist should have an “archival first-aid kit.”

#### **Self-Care in the Archives**

Archivists have increasingly raised awareness of the value of archival labor—the human beings behind the archives.<sup>1,2</sup> But recognizing archival labor begins with recognizing oneself.

When managing contingent positions, physical health risks from working with dusty and moldy collections,<sup>3</sup> and emotional labor involved with sensitive and controversial materials,<sup>4</sup> archivists need the right tools for the job.

Self-care is a form of advocacy. The first step entails taking charge of your well-being and understanding what you need to succeed, including—literally—a toolbox. I posit that the creation of your own archival first-aid kit is an act of self-care.

#### Sources

1. Norling, Samantha. “[Asserting the Archivist in Archival Outreach: A Case Study and Appeal.](#)” *ArchivesAWARE!* (blog). Society of American Archivists Committee on Public Awareness, January 28, 2016.
2. Zanish-Belcher, Tanya. “[What About Invisible Labor.](#)” *Off the Record* (blog). Society of American Archivists, August 7, 2018.

3. McLellan, Peter B., and Gordon P. Baker. "[Incidence of Allergy in Archival Work.](#)" *American Archivist* 28, no. 4 (October 1965): 581–584.
4. Caswell, Michelle, and Marika Cifor. "[From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives.](#)" *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43.

## Applications for Archivists

Multiple groups could benefit from the archival first-aid kit:

- Contract archivists, who move from project to project and may have limited access to institutional resources.
- Self-employed archivists, who may need to carry a core set of supplies when working with clients.
- Preservation archivists, who routinely use the same tools and need a way to stay organized.
- Archives students, who can learn how to use each tool as they assemble their kit and take ownership of their career.
- Everyone!

## The Archivist's Toolbox

The archival first-aid kit is a personal, portable toolbox that supports your work efforts in a proactive and productive way. It will keep you prepared and organized. **You need to take care of yourself before you can take care of the archives.**

## Archival Supplies

microspatula	for removing staples (when paired with a piece of polyester film), lifting manuscript pages, and other delicate tasks
nitrile gloves	for handling most photographs, certain objects, and moldy materials
N95 masks	for working with dusty or moldy collections
pocket microscope	for identification of photographs
hake brushes	for cleaning books and paper (preferably, one brush per format to avoid contamination)
pH pen	for testing storage supplies such as folders
bone folder	for crafting custom enclosures for materials
erasers	for removing minor marks from archival documents
pencils and sharpener	for marking items or folders
notepaper	to keep processing notes or make bookmarks
ruler	for measuring or using as a straightedge
bandages	for inevitable paper cuts
page protector	to store notes and important information (for example, I keep handy a copy of " <a href="#">Crafting Your Elevator Speech</a> " produced by SAA's Committee on Public Awareness)

contact numbers	including 24/7 collections emergency hotlines, such as the National Heritage Responders and Northeast Document Conservation Center
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→ These are only examples. Design your own kit with the things you use every day.

[Image]

Alt Text: Example of an archival first-aid kit, showing a plastic box with various archival supplies scattered around it.

Caption: I created my archival first-aid kit in 2018 using a plastic box (dimensions 11 x 5.5 x 7 inches) that I found at an art supply store. I filled it with my favorite preservation tools, including a microspatula, pocket microscope, and hake brush.

### Putting It All Together

→ To assemble your archival first-aid kit, consider your workplace and daily tasks.

→ Archives-friendly products can often be found at art supply stores. Other archives-specific tools can be found at archival vendors, such as Gaylord Archival or University Products.

→ Remember: Just because a product is marketed as “archives safe” or “archival quality” does not mean that it is. Look for products that are **nondamaging, reversible**, and have passed the **Photographic Activity Test (PAT)**. Research the products you intend to use. When in doubt, ask a colleague. As an archivist, you have the knowledge and experience to make informed preservation decisions.

→ Keep your archival first-aid kit handy in case of emergency.