

How to Use a Finding Aid (Middle School Companion)

The example used in this companion is the [Samuel George Morton Papers](#).

- What is a **finding aid**?
 - A **finding aid** is a written guide used in archives to describe the contents of an archival collection. It is called a finding aid because it *aids* researchers and archivists in *finding* materials within a collection.

- What **elements** make up a finding aid?
 - All finding aids include several **elements** that **describe** the collection including:
 - A unique combination of letters and/or numbers used to identify the collection known as a **unique identifier**
 - This includes call or reference numbers, typically based on the institutions and collection.
 - Example: The unique identifier for the "Samuel George Morton Papers" is "Mss.B.M843."
 - A **title** related to the creator(s) of the collection
 - Example: The title of the collection is the "Samuel George Morton Papers."
 - A written description of the materials that make up the collection known as a **scope and content note**
 - A scope and content note succinctly describes the contents of the collection, noting significant items, series, or gaps.
 - Example: "The papers of Samuel George Morton offer important insight into the development of the "American School" of physical anthropology during the infancy of the

science, and insight into the conduct of natural history during its heyday in the 1830s."

Series I	Correspondence, 1819-1850	1.5 linear feet
Series II	Diary, 1833-ca.1837	1 vol. (25p.)
Series III	Craniological sketches, ca.1838	11 items
Series IV	Microfilm, 1838-1844	1 reel

- The **creator(s)** of the collection
 - This typically includes the person or organization who generated or collected the materials in a collection.
 - Example: The creator of the Samuel George Morton Papers is Morton himself.

- The **date(s)** of when the collection was created
 - Dates cover the range of when original materials in the collection were created.
 - Example: The Morton Papers span from 1819 to 1850.

- The amount of space that the collections takes up is known as the **physical extent**
 - Extent refers to the physical storage or space occupied. Archivists often measure this in linear feet.
 - Example: The first series in the collection measures 2.25 linear feet, with 486 items in 5 boxes.

- The **name** and **location** of the archive or library where the collection is held
 - This includes the full name and location of the institution which houses the collection.
 - Example: The Samuel George Morton Papers are housed at the American Philosophical Society Library in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- The **language** which the materials are in
 - Example: The Samuel George Morton Papers appear in English.
- Rules known as **conditions governing access** which determine who can access the collection.
 - These include any conditions that may restrict access to specific materials within the collections, such as deteriorating or fragile documents or sensitive materials restricted due to privacy concerns.
- Some finding aids may also contain:
 - A written description containing information about the creator of the collection known as a **biographical history or note**
 - Example: A background note which contains a biographical history on Morton can be found here:
<https://search.amphilsoc.org/collections/view?docId=ead/Mss.B.M.843-ead.xml;query=morton;brand=default#bioghist>.

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY