

Archival **appraisal** is the single most important function in the field of **archives and records management**. Put simply, appraisal refers to the act of determining what records are worthy of keeping and what records can be disposed of. The archivist, in carrying out appraisal, is responsible for assessing the value of the records created by individuals, organizations, and societies. The outcome of their work determines which elements of our society are transmitted through the documentary record to future generations.

The right to appraise records, known in the profession as “**authority**,” can stem from a number of different sources.

-law – the Public Records Act, for example, delineates the National Archives’ jurisdiction over records of the executive branch of the United States Government.

-policy – not based on legal requirements, but rather functional considerations; for example, Ford Motor Company doesn’t have to destroy their records after a certain amount of time, but they may choose to do so as a matter of policy.

-society – most relevant in the realm of private papers, informal “moral” or “social” values about what people feel are appropriate to do with records; in doing appraisal, archivists often look for indications of how our society feels about what records are significant, what can be done with them, and whether or not they should be maintained

Appraisal did not become a significant facet of the archival profession until the middle of the 20th century. Prior to that time, archivists primarily concerned themselves with the arrangement and preservation of complete sets of documents generated by government agencies. An early advocate of maintaining sets of records in their entirety was **Hilary Jenkinson**, who defined

archivists as “hands-off” protectors of the historical record. Largely in response to the growing amount of documentary evidence and information resulting from new technologies, increasingly complex organizations, government programs, and globalization (including wars), questions about what to keep and what to throw away took on added importance, especially in the years following World War II. Various models emerged to help archivists make their appraisal decisions more effectively.

T. R. Schellenberg was a pioneer of modern appraisal theory. Schellenberg developed and applied the concepts of primary and secondary value to appraisal decisions. **Primary value** refers to the value of a document when issued, that is, its value in accomplishing the purpose for which it was created. **Secondary value** refers to the value of a document beyond its initial use. Schellenberg also applied the concepts of Evidential and Informational value to appraisal. **Evidential value** is the value a document has as evidence of a process or action having occurred, while **Informational value** refers to the actual information content of a document. A stamped passport, for example, might serve as evidence that a person had traveled to a particular destination; it would also give such information as height, weight, nationality, and so forth.

Other models soon emerged suggesting different ways that our activities as a society might best be documented. These models vary largely because appraisal is a subjective process – different people can look at the same set of records and come to different conclusions about what they think is of value.

One example is the **documentation strategy** approach to appraisal espoused by **Helen Samuels** and **Hans Booms**, among others. This approach suggests that creators, users, and custodians of records work together to define and take responsibility for documenting a specific sector of society, the “documentary universe” for a specific organization, group, or activity.

Another example is **functional analysis**. The functional analysis approach to appraisal argues that archivists should identify records of enduring value according to an assessment of the relative value of functions within an organization. For the Kellogg’s cereal company, for example, the most important functions might include producing cereal, marketing products, and serving as a major employer in the community. The functional analysis approach to appraisal would argue that documenting these functions would be most important.

Frank Boles and **Julia Marks-Young** (1985) attempted to develop a systematic model of appraisal decision making that would remove some of the subjectivity from the process of appraisal. Boles and Young believed there was a trade-off between the value of information, the costs of retention, and the implications of appraisal recommendations.