What are documents?

Outline of today’s lecture

1. The purpose of documents
2. The nature of documents
3. Documents in context

We are surrounded by documents

‘There is barely a moment in our waking lives when we are not engaged in either creating new documents or accessing existing ones.’
1. What are documents used for?

- to communicate professionally and personally
- to conduct business
- to establish our rights and obligations
- to entertain ourselves

1a. Document intent

- to inform (i.e., to convey knowledge)
- to communicate
- to entertain
- to authorise

1a. Document intent

- to control or regulate relationships between people
- to provide evidence
- to certify an action or deed
1c. Some documents are found:

- tree rings
- fossils
- forensic evidence

1d. Intentional documents

Information products are intended for publication:

- books
- music CDs
- signs
- published photographs
- commercial films
- political leaflets
- websites

1e. Intentional documents

Information by-products are created as records or evidence:

- private letters & diaries
- receipts & statements
- official records
1e. Intentional documents

Information by-products serve different purposes for different users.

– You may throw your receipt away, but can a shop afford to be so cavalier with its records of sale?
– What different information by-products might be generated by the sale of the following item?

2. A document is

• a representation of knowledge and/or
• recorded evidence of an action and/or
• a captured communication

2a. A document has attributes as

• Stored information
• Retrievable information
• Accessible information
2b. Document as **stored** information

- a physical object that can inform us (information-as-thing)
- it ‘stores/holds’ information
  *and we can in turn*
- store it in an information system

2c. Document as **retrievable** information

- stored in an information system, documents need to be available for retrieval
- how we classify a document can play a crucial role in allowing us to retrieve it when we need it

2d. Document as **accessible** information

- once retrieved, documents must be accessible
- ie, in a format that can be readily used
2f. A traditional definition of a document

‘a record on a more or less flat surface’

S. R. Ranganathan
(a key figure in 20th century information management)

2g. A Document can take the form of

- Text
  writing, numbers, musical notation
- Moving and still images
  film and video, paintings and photographs, diagrams etc.
- Recorded sound
  speech, music etc.

2h. Documents can assume various media

- Documents can be represented, captured, stored, retrieved and accessed:
  - as marks, signs, sound waves, images or bits
  - on paper, card, vinyl, film, magnetic tape or CD
2i. Elements are documentary forms

| The medium (on or in which it carries its information content and structure) |
| The technolog(ies) used to create and/or access it |
| Structure - elements and organisational features characteristic of the form |

2i. Elements are documentary forms

| Purpose for which it was created |
| Content - information unique to a particular document |

3. Contextual information

**Information about a document:**
- who created it?
- why was it created?
- under what circumstances?
- in what system?
- for which audience?
3. Contextual information

is external to the document, but central to its value as information or evidence ...

3. Document habitats

• The workplace
• The home
• The Internet

3. Document habitats

• The Library
• The Archives
• The Gallery
• The Museum
• The Zoo
Can an antelope be a document?


‘But some documents are:
– the photographs and the catalogues of stars,
– stones in a museum of mineralogy, and
– animals that are cataloged and shown in a zoo.’

Suzanne Briet (1951)
(another key figure in 20th century information management)

Next lecture:

Searching for information/
Document analysis

4. Further reading