

## THE REVIEW

# The Delicate Art of Dealing With Your Archivist

By Alice Dreger July 29, 2018



ISABELLE CARDINAL FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

**T**he relationship between a researcher and an archivist is rather like an arranged marriage — except it is a marriage that has been arranged by a dead person who probably never met either one of you. Still, if you want access to what lies beyond that archivist, you must get along with him or her, sometimes for months or even years.

In a situation like this one, it pays to know the types. (No, really — sometimes it literally pays. I'll explain in a moment.) In my roughly three decades of experience working in archives, I think it is fair to say we can break archivists down by this basic taxonomy:

**The mensch:** This is the archivist we all desire, the researcher's dream — the person who knows the collection's material well enough to truly help you, and trusts you enough to let you lead. If you advise her in advance of your coming, the mensch will greet you like your mother's cousin's aunt's only child, and have key materials ready for you. She will size you up in a way that doesn't make you wonder if you have broccoli in your teeth, and when, through gentle poking, she determines what it is you do not know, she'll teach it to you in a way that makes you feel like you really earned that Ph.D.

It's easy to take the mensch for granted. Don't. At the very least, bring her the occasional coffee, leave her a pad of fun sticky notes on a Friday afternoon, share with her your juiciest find, and make sure you thank her in the acknowledgments. A mensch well respected will remain a champion of your work for decades to come.



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**The snob:** The snob is the polar opposite of the mensch. This is the archivist who is determined to make you feel like a troglodyte unworthy of visiting “his” archive. Every question to you will be murmured softly and phrased like a riddle, so that you will find yourself having to ask, “What? What?” increasingly loudly, until one thing becomes clear to everyone else in the reading room: You are an idiot.

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Paradoxically, much as he’s hell-bent on proving his intellect is way above yours, the snob is not there for the scholarship. He’s there to prove how refined he is. I once had to deal with an archivist-snob who decided which texts would stay or go in that archive based not on rarity, importance, or anything having to do with content, but on such factors as the volume’s provenance and whether the binding was original or reconstructed.

In the eyes of the snob, your binding is always reconstructed. In such a situation, I suggest you bring a copy of your CV — not for him, but for you. Glance at it as needed to remind yourself you are worthy.

**The distractor:** By nature, the distractor is a bubbly extrovert. Much as she might love your project, what she's really here for is your company until she gets back home to her five cats. She will excitedly show you this and that, draw your attention each day to a different fabulous illustration — sure, it has nothing to do with your project, but look at that exquisite shading! — and interrupt you constantly.

The distractor has her charms: She makes you feel welcome. She will work hard for you. Heck, she will probably find you a life partner if you want, and teach you how to make a killer meatloaf. But you'll never finish your project if you don't learn early to manage the distractor.

What to do? “Confide” in her that you're on a tight deadline and a limited research budget and ask her to help you focus by not speaking to you until you break for lunch. If necessary, pay attention to her before and after the archive's opening hours, over morning coffee or happy hour. (Bring a lint brush and an antihistamine.) If you find yourself truly desperate, you can do what I once did: Firmly shove another researcher into her sights. (I expect that other researcher is still there.)

**The mooch:** The mooch is a special blend of snob and distractor. This is the archivist intent on turning you into his “researcher with benefits.” I'm not talking about sex. What he wants from you is bragging rights, introductions to people more important than you — that kind of thing. You can usually spot the mooch by the name-dropping that starts while you are signing in. Did you know he helped so-and-so? Did you know he was thanked in this Pulitzer Prize-winning book? This guy is Archimedes with his status lever.

You can manage the mooch by acting self-important. If you must, stop by a drugstore on the way to the archive, pick up a pair of those over-the-counter reading glasses, and perch them on the end of your nose while you furrow your brow. It will convince him you are fancy-grade professoriate, which means he wants your project done, so he can put it in his trophy case.

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Now I am a firm believer that when you are wrapping up a significant archival foray, you should take your archivist out for a meal on you. But do not attempt this with a mooch. I did once, only to have the mooch pick out a five-star restaurant and a \$300 bottle of wine. (I didn't thank him in

the acknowledgments of that project. I figured the mentions on my Visa bill were enough.)

**The heiress:** The heiress would be perfectly happy if nobody ever came. She is content to sit among her archival jewels, polishing and admiring them. I met one who had managed to squirrel away, in a plain filing cabinet, a first edition Vesalius De Humani Corporis Fabrica — an important work from 1543 worth at least \$100,000. She kept it there, rather than in the institution's climate-controlled vault, because she figured it was hers and she liked having it near her desk.

The heiress always seems a little confused about why you're there. In my experience, there's not much point in engaging her. She sees you as akin to a tax auditor, and while she treats you politely, she would rather you left. You might as well finish up quickly and go. You'll never really know what was there anyway.

**The bureaucrat:** While often perfectly efficient with your requests for the next box in the series, this fellow is not worth trying to excite with a thrilling find. He is here for the health insurance. In my own experience, the best way to deal with the bureaucrat is to be grateful when he is predictable. If he arrives on time, doesn't dally when you hand him a call slip, and kicks you out exactly five minutes before closing, you can model his Swiss-like mechanism and get a lot done.

But if you run into that mysterious character abroad — the glacially-paced bureaucrat in the state archive — consider consulting a specialist in that culture to try to divine what's going on. Might the chilly attitude be in response to your lousy accent? Might you have accidentally asked him to violate some social protocol with a request you made? Is he concerned that someone is watching him watch you? Call a friend.

If you're new to archival work, take heart. The good news is that the majority of archivists show themselves mensches. (The snob would tell you I mean "menschen.") If you land a mensch, say a quiet prayer of gratitude to your dead subject for setting you up. And always remember to turn your head when you sneeze.

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