

What We Don't Talk About When We Don't Talk About Paper

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Introduction

When I started thinking about what we don't talk about when we don't talk about paper in the field of archives and preservation, my research was focused on paper versus digital. I maintained the *traditional* (and *old-fashioned*, if I do say so myself) view that paper constitutes the tangible, more "authentic" original document, and all that digital technologies could offer are surrogates and copies. Or, at least, that's the "authorial" concept of authenticity that aims to be unfailingly faithful to a creator's intentions that MacNeil and Mak (2007) describe. But as a devoted "tangible reader" (Blaha, 2021), I also recognized that this question of paper—why we still use it, why its presence is still felt—had to have more to do with the *nature* of paper than "the arrival of digital technologies" that have thrown print culture, which paper represents, into a certain "relief" (Dever, 2019, p. 5).

I'll admit that my original perception of this *nature of paper* was a romantic one. The same romantic perception that makes Susan Orlean believe that books have souls, which is why she can't bring herself to burn a copy of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* in her thorough investigation of the 1986 Los Angeles Library fire *The Library Book* (2019). "Once words and thoughts are poured into them," Orleans writes, "books are no longer just paper and ink and glue: They take on a kind of human vitality" (p. 56). Now that I've taken a deeper dive into paper, I can no longer assign human agency to books and paper documents (Kafka, 2012, p. 14). This doesn't mean that I'm now of the opinion that we can burn books because they're not human after all; it just means that I understand the capabilities of paper without being sentimental about it. Another point Orlean makes that I would contest is that *text* is what transforms a work—paper is merely a carrier. This is precisely what Derrida (1996) argues against: that paper is just a "neutral support" for text.

Through my exploration of paper and how it's often *invisible* in discussions of archival research and practices, I've come to understand that when we don't talk about paper, we don't talk about the archive's relationship to our past, present, and future. We can't critically talk about the archive as a site of contradictions (Derrida, 1996; Kafka, 2012; Lurz, 2019), as an instrument of political power and social struggle (Kafka, 2012; Yale, 2015). While the introduction of digital technologies did spark a renewed awareness of paper—what Dever calls a "heightened materiality" (p. 6)—the conversation hasn't moved to focus on its "affordances" (Dever, 2019),

the space it gives writers (Derrida, 1996; Dever, 2019; Lurz, 2019), the individual interactions we each have with the page (Dever, 2019; Lurz, 2019). In this paper, I highlight three key findings from my research about the ways we ignore paper and offer solutions to move the field forward.

Key findings

From the literature, I've identified three ways that the field of archival research ignores paper and the issues this creates. One major theme that cuts across most of the works cited is the need to recognize what Derrida (1996) calls the "cleavages" and Kafka (2012) calls the "contradictions" of paper. When we don't acknowledge the multitudes it contains, we misunderstand what it is and what it is not. This *misunderstanding* is what renders paper *invisible*.

Paper is a neutral support for text

This is the main reason why paper goes unnoticed. We're obsessed with the text on the page, with analyzing its meaning, but we rarely take into account the role paper has in constructing that meaning. In Susan Orlean's *The Library Book* (2019), she expresses the dominant view that the words poured onto a page are what bring an object like a book to life (pp. 55-56). But Dever (2019) and Zboray and Zboray (2009) both describe the problem with looking too closely at the text without considering the "materiality" of the page it's written on.

In "The Weight of Paper," Dever argues that we need to "underst[and] paper" as an index of feeling" (p. 27) in order to see the *intimacy* that exists in the correspondence between Greta Garbo and Mercedes de Acosta. If we look only at the text of each individual letter, we'd be overlooking the fact that "de Acosta preserved anything that Garbo's hand could be presumed to have touched" (p. 39), and what could be more romantic than that?

Zboray and Zboray's point is less about the "trace" a lover's hand leaves on a piece of paper and more about how the emotional state of a person can shift the form their writing takes. In their examination of New England manuscripts from the antebellum period, they find that focusing too much on "distinct entities" would cause them to miss the significance in how many of the personal records mixed genres, such as combining a diary with a scrapbook. Of course Zboray and Zboray also point out the new challenges that this mixed media poses for archivists.

Paper is at odds with digital formats

Discussions around paper and digital formats tend to enforce a dichotomy based on one being “old” and the other “new and evolving.” In other words, we sometimes talk about paper as though it doesn’t have a *future*, as though it lacks the “plasticity” that Malabou defines as an “openness to change” (Lurz, 2019, p. 156).

For many writers, though, paper is considered a “device,” especially in the prewriting and editing phases (Becker & Nogues, 2012, p. 495). Paper and paper copies of drafts allow writers to get ideas down on the page in an *unpolished* way or make edits by hand before the “important editorial moment” of transferring a handwritten piece to a digital format (p. 497).

This bridging of paper and digital formats isn’t just important to the writing process. Laura Kells and Meg McAleer, senior archivists in the Library of Congress’ Manuscript Division, state that it’s also important for the preservation process, since different types of paper age at different speeds. Scanning photographs and newspaper clippings that will inevitably deteriorate ensures that these documents have a future.

“Authenticity” is fixed in a paper original

In Caryn Radick’s (2013) analysis of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* through an archival lens, she raises the question: what *is truth*? Is it only *facts* that can be verified? And, “whose duty, if anyone’s, is it to prove them true or untrue, and how does one begin to authenticate another person’s experience?” (p. 513). In the 19th century, when *Dracula* was written and set, authenticity was equated with originality, meaning that only original records (not their copies) can be *authentic* (p. 513). But what happens when those authentic originals are gone for good and all we have are copies? Is authenticity gone, too?

As Dever (2019) points out, there’s a sense of “heightened materiality” when original documents are threatened, and we suddenly get sentimental about paper. We “appeal to the earliest copy as the most authentic witness of a text,” fearing that the further we stray from the original manuscript, the more likely we are to be left with something that has “been exposed to corruption” (MacNeil & Mak, 2007, p. 34). Our sentimentality leads us to believe that a work could actually be a “witness” to a creator’s original intentions. This concept of authenticity ignores the relationship a document has with its past, present, and future.

Ways forward

What's proposed in this literature is to expand the way we view and work with archives. Yale (2015) calls on us to think "archivally," to see archives as more than the sum of their parts. Dever (2019) proposes that we experience archives "materially," to see them "as boxes and folders of paper that ha[ve] been preserved first by individuals and then by institutions" (p. 18). Zboray and Zboray (2009) suggest an openness to new genres in personal records ("diary-letters"), MacNeil and Mak's (2007) framework for authenticity recognizes that a document can "possess different authenticities over time" (p. 33). From all the readings, I believe there are a few clear paths that best summarize this expanded view of archives and materiality for us to consider:

1. **Look at files, as well as through files** (Kafka, 2019, p. 70): This refers to seeing the documents that make up an archive individually and as a unit. But, more importantly, looking *at* archives allows us to see the documents within a collection for what they are: "ink and paper" (Kafka, 2019, p. 70).
2. **Understand paper as a form with an "openness to change"** (Lurz, 2019, p. 156): Merleau-Ponty's theory of "thickness" and Malabou's concept of "plasticity" provide a framework that helps us recognize the "physically material aspects" of documents (Lurz, 2019, p. 152). Ultimately, it helps us imagine the future of form.
3. Acknowledge that paper changes and deteriorates, and have a plan for preserving documents in a legible state for the future. Laura Kells and Meg McAleer suggest scanning originals into a digital format (Ashenfelder, 2016).

Annotated Bibliography

Your Personal Archiving Project: Where Do You Start?

Ashenfelder, M. (2016, May 11). Your Personal Archiving Project: Where Do You Start? Library of Congress, The Signal. Retrieved from <https://blogs.loc.gov/2016/05/how-to-begin-a-personal-archiving-project>

In order to answer the question, what *don't we talk about when we don't talk about paper?*, I felt that I needed archiving advice from people who have a lot of experience dealing with the materiality of personal papers. This post from the Library of Congress' (LOC) blog "The Signal" provides tips from two senior archivists in the LOC's Manuscript Division, Laura Kells and Meg McAleer, on how to organize archival messes in any format.

What was clear from Kells and McAleer's advice is the archival concern for the future of paper and what archivists can do to protect the "originals." Discussions of "the future" and protecting aging physical documents come up in most of the literature featured in this paper, but not in such a pragmatic way. For example, Derrida's thinking around the future in *Archive Fever* (1996) is, more abstractly, focused on an archive's *becoming*, and its relationship with that future "if there is such a thing" (p. 14). But Kells and McAleer are thinking tactically. They recommend digital scanning to preserve photographs and papers that don't age well, like newspapers. Apparently, "computer paper ages better than newspaper does."

But the point isn't that digital copies supplant or replace the originals; they're meant to freeze a document in time at a moment when it's still legible, still able to be held without crumbling. With digital scanning, we can create fossils of paper documents in preparation for a future of decay. I think that knowing how different types of paper age and what can be done to best preserve the quality of these documents is important to the discussion of an archive's future, which is foundational to its existence.

Saving-Over, Over-Saving, and the Future Mess of Writers' Digital Archives: A Survey Report on the Personal Digital Archiving Practices of Emerging Writers

Becker, D. & Noguez, C. (2012). Saving-Over, Over-Saving, and the Future Mess of Writers' Digital Archives: A Survey Report on the Personal Digital Archiving Practices of Emerging Writers. *The American Archivist*, 75, pp. 482-513.

Do we really make such a big distinction between digital and paper? In their study of how emerging writers preserve digital drafts of their work, Becker and Noguez found that many respondents “use ‘paper’ as a device” (p. 495). What does it mean to see paper as a “device” in the writing process? For the writers who responded to the survey, notebooks and even “scrap paper” tend to be “central to [...] prewriting practices” (p. 495). So there’s something about what Maryanne Dever (2019) calls the “affordances of paper” that makes it obvious that the blank physical page is where writers should *start*. It’s where they should get their initial ideas down before the important process of transferring their paper writing to a digital format (p. 497). It’s a kind of translation that happens, one that requires some tidying and tightening to make the handwritten word readable when it’s typed up. This shows that paper and digital aren’t at odds; they’re both devices that play different roles in the writing process.

For survey respondents, paper didn’t just feature in the prewriting phase. Some writers noted that they print out their writing (on longer-lasting computer paper) to revise it by hand, then they re-enter those edits into the computer. From this finding, I think we can interpret that a writer feels a deeper connection with the physical page than what’s typed on their computer screen. With paper they can read more deeply, which is what’s required for making edits. In this case, the digital device is a barrier to editing, but it’s also where the most polished version of a piece of writing is housed.

Because paper is used for drafts that are “interim” versions of the final piece, “only a few more than 50% (58.7%, or 61) actually saved these copies (p. 497) unless they use notebooks for their prewriting, which they are more likely to save. Perhaps this is because they’re in “book” form, a more manageable way to store lots of paper. How paper is stored, as we know, determines how well it’s preserved. But a notebook also more closely resembles what Zadie Smith calls “the final version” that most writers aim to achieve: a physical book.

Why I Print Out the Articles We Read for “Book” Club

Blaha, M. (2021, July 17). Why I Print Out the Articles We Read for “Book” Club. Online Article “Book” Club. Retrieved from <https://onlinearticlebookclub.squarespace.com/blog/why-i-print-out-the-articles-we-read-for-book-club>

“I’m a tangible reader, and digital articles and books feel *intangible* to me,” I wrote in a blog post on a website I created for a “book” club I started back in 2020. I put quotation marks

around *book*, because we don't actually read books in this club; we read and discuss online articles. I'm someone whose to-be-read *pile* of online content rivals that of the physical books that sit on my nightstand, and I thought that starting a club would force me to read all these articles I save or keep open as tabs in my browser.

In order for me to read and understand the articles we discuss each month "deeply," I have to print them out. To me, "online content might as well be located in the abstract realm of my thoughts—no beginning or end, no way to pin it down and keep up with it," I wrote. And "my way of making sense of the abstract is by making it tangible." This is what having a paper copy of digital articles allows me to do. I can feel close to the words, underline and highlight what I'm trying to comprehend. These are some of the affordances of paper: it can be held, it can be written on, it can be comprehended.

Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression

Derrida, J. (1996). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. The University of Chicago Press.

Derrida's work is cited in almost every article I read for this project, so I thought it was important for me to read. He introduced and expanded the idea that paper isn't just a material support for text. Rather, paper has voluminous depth. For this project, I'm mainly interested in his ideas about the future and the relevance archives will have when we reach this future. I'm also interested in the impulse we have to archive, to use up paper without knowing what the future will bring.

Paper, Materiality and the Archived Page

Dever, M. (2019). *Paper, Materiality and the Archived Page*, *New Directions in Book History*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Dever's collection of articles about paper and materiality inspired the topic of this paper. In her introduction to the book, Dever lays out the problem of paper's significance being ignored in archival research. By this she means that "the dominant view of paper" has been that it's "a mere neutral platform," meant only to be seen as the "carrier for written text" (p. 1). To address this, Dever turns to critical archival studies, a school of the discipline that understands that archives are not, as Elizabeth Yale (2015) claims, "innocent." Rather, they are "enmeshed in histories and politics that must be interrogated or accounted for before any investigation of

individual collections” (pp. 2-3). If archives are so entrenched in the historical and political moments they’re created in, so, too, isn’t the very paper they’re made up of? Can paper really be “neutral” or “innocent?”

Dever argues that the emergence of digital technologies has made paper more “visible” in archival work, giving it a kind of “heightened materiality” that seems to surface in instances “when the actual or threatened disappearance of a paper document suddenly makes its distinctive materially embodied nature present to us” (p. 6). In other words, when the future of a paper document is threatened, we can’t help but talk about its materiality. Think about all the ardent defenses of physical books that were sparked by the arrival of digital readers, which we thought would be the death knell of print. But even when we talk about paper in these moments, Dever claims, we don’t actually talk about “the productivity of the archived page” (p. 5).

What Dever goes on to argue is that no matter how well paper is cared for, its destruction and deterioration is inescapable. Perhaps that’s one of paper’s “affordances,” perhaps that’s part of “the work that paper does” (p. 11). And it’s that “work” that Dever wants more archivists to consider, recommending an approach that puts “thinking through paper” on an equal plane with “thinking through the archive.”

I think Dever’s work most benefits my project because it understands that paper isn’t “a mere material support” (p. 14) to text. Paper plays a much greater role in the writing process, because it sets a work “in motion” (p. 17). It is a kind of material energy that “manifests itself in our interactions with the page” (p. 17).

The Demon of Writing

Kafka, B. (2012). *The Demon of Writing*. New York: Zone Books.

For this project, I’m interested in Kafka’s introduction and his chapter called “The Demon of Writing,” where he explains how the contradictions of paperwork took lives and saved them during the year of Terror in 18th-century France. The abundance of paperwork at the time was meant to increase “surveillance,” but, at the same time it caused chaos and inefficiencies. It also left room for revolt—for documents to be destroyed and paper to be spared from the guillotine.

Medium Thickness: Phenomenology, Plasticity, and the Future of Form

Lurz, J. (2019). Medium Thickness: Phenomenology, Plasticity, and the Future of Form. *Criticism*, 61(2), pp. 147-166. Retrieved from <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/730034>

Constructions of Authenticity

MacNeil, H & Mak, B. (2007). Constructions of Authenticity. *Library Trends*, 56(1), pp. 26-52. DOI: 10.1353/lib.2007/0054

Any discussion of paper must at least touch on authenticity, especially since digital technologies make it possible to produce copies or surrogates of original documents. When we think of archives as mirrors that reflect some kind of truth (Yale, 2015), we become obsessed with finding the truest form of a work. First we need to define “truth” or authenticity, which MacNeil and Mak aim to do in three different senses: as authenticity pertains to the self, as authenticity pertains to literature, as authenticity pertains to art. Their conclusion is that authenticity isn’t fixed and can change over time. But more interestingly, they propose that an artifact like a work of art “can possess different authenticities over time” (p. 33)

This concept of different authenticities accounts for how paper—how any physical artifact—changes and transforms over time. It ages, like any corporeal form. But the field of conservation and preservation needs to rid itself of stricter definitions of authenticity in order to adopt this more dynamic view. Philosophers tend to liken authenticity to an “aura” that’s tied to an original work, which is why the “earliest copy” of any work is often seen as “the most authentic witness” (p. 34). In the art conservation world, this has led to often ridiculous conversations around what an artist’s original intentions might have been—would they have wanted all signs of decay removed from a piece, so that it can be restored to its original state?

For this project, I want to think about how this framework for ever-changing authenticity connects with Dever’s claim that the work of paper truly manifests in how we interact with the page.

The Library Book

Orlean, S. (2019). *The Library Book*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

I picked up *The Library Book* during lockdown and decided that it was finally time to apply to a Library Science program. The book reads both as a love letter to libraries and an investigative report on the 1986 Los Angeles Library fire that destroyed over one million books.

The fire still remains a mystery in that it's never been proven that someone intentionally started the fire.

For this project, I want to focus on the fifth chapter where Orlean decides to burn a book. It was a sensation she felt she needed to experience in order to understand why someone might set fire to a library. It's in this chapter that Orlean both discusses the *life* books have and how easily destructible they are. Well, the decision to set Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* aflame wasn't an easy one to make. "The problem was that I have never been able to do harm to a book," Orlean writes. "Even books I don't want, or books that are so worn out and busted that they can't be read any longer, cling to me like thistles" (p. 55). I understand how the thought of throwing out or destroying a book can make one ill. Orlean believes it's because "books have souls" (p. 56). What she was preparing to burn, it turns out, was alive. "A book feels like a thing alive in this moment, and also alive on a continuum, from the moment the thoughts about it first percolated in the writer's mind to the moment it sprang off the printing press" (p. 56). In Orlean's view, it's the "words and thoughts" that are poured onto the pages of a book that give them "a kind of human vitality," taking it out of the realm of "paper and ink and glue" (p. 56).

Relating this back to Dever, Orlean seems to be pinpointing the origin of this vitality to when words hit the page, when a writer interacts with the page. But Orlean seems to place a wedge between a writer's thoughts and the pages of their books; she sees the writer's words as the cause of the transformation and doesn't consider the work of the paper. This is a little strange given that she lights a match and watches each page disappear.

Perhaps that's what's so terrible about destroying a book in any way: it speeds up the inevitable. It robs the book of a natural deterioration, a natural transformation. According to Orlean, it's also "seductive": "there was the elation at overriding my own instincts, elation at the fluid beauty of fire, and terrible fright at the seductiveness of it and the realization of how fast a thing full of human stories can be made to disappear" (p. 58).

"Complete and in Order": Bram Stoker's Dracula and the Archival Profession

Radick, C. (2013). "Complete and in Order": Bram Stoker's Dracula and the Archival Profession. *The American Archivist*, 76(2), pp. 502-520. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.7282/T3VH5KWM>

Radick gives us an archival reading of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, which has everything to do with using records in different formats to track and stop Dracula. What I find relevant to my project is the point Radick raises about authenticity and the "destruction, falsification, and dilution" of records (p. 513).

According to Radick, the characters looking to defeat Dracula are compelled to record and make copies of records, fearing that they'll be destroyed. The copies were considered to be "diluted," less valuable than the originals that have "artifactual value" (p. 512). But in the novel, these copies prove to "be more valuable than having nothing," especially since Dracula destroyed the records they needed. When this happened, the copies *became* the originals.

In the 19th century when *Dracula* was written, new technologies were just emerging to make copying and reproducing documents less laborious. By the time Susan Orlean was burning a book in 2019, "it [was] easy to copy anything," rendering any single book as "ordinary," void of any "preciousness" it might have had when books didn't "exist in endless multiples" (Orlean, 2019, p. 56). In Stoker's day, these multiples would have been considered hard to verify, the assumption being that they were far removed from the truth of the original (p. 513).

This opens up the following questions: Is there more truth to paper? Are archivists responsible for verifying this truth? Is the truth of an original diluted when it's *transformed* by age or *transferred* to another format?

Rags Make Paper, Paper Makes Money: Material Texts and Metaphors of Capital

Senchyne, J. (2017). Rags Make Paper, Paper Makes Money: Material Texts and Metaphors of Capital. *Technology and Culture*, 58(2), pp. 545-555.

What interests me about Senchyne's article is the metaphor of paper, how it can be a stand-in for something of "real" value. As "a technology of capitalism" (p. 546), paper has played a key role in shaping how people think about and exchange money. It makes up the account books that people use to track their spending, and it produces the very currency we work to earn so that we can afford our lifestyles.

How many of us take the time to think about how most of the money we spend is made of paper? "Paper makes currency that, in itself, is no more valuable than the rags it is made of" (p. 546), Senchyne points out. It's value is "representational," an interesting concept for archivists to think about given that paper is traditionally viewed as the *original*. Here, it seems to be described

as a “surrogate.” Though as we know from Dever (2019), the argument isn’t that paper has inherent value; it has affordances for creating value.

The History of Archives

Yale, E. (2015). The History of Archives. *Book History*, 18, pp. 332-359. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43956377>

Telling the “history of archives,” Yale points out, requires concerning oneself with “the stuff out of which archives are made” because it’s necessary “to [explain] the functions of the archives” (p. 334). The “work that archives do” is what Yale and the study of their history is interested in as opposed to other types of collections like libraries (p. 336). It isn’t just paper that has affordances, as Dever (2019) has stated, but archives.

In the condensed history Yale provides, we see archives as instruments of political action and power, as foundational to the creation of nation states and empires—archives could be used to govern, archives could be used to revolt, archives could be used to “give back” the memory of loved ones to their families. These, I would argue, are the affordances, the possibilities, of archives. But they first required the invention of writing, the invention of paper. From these sprang the impulse to archive, to create “a kind of external memory system” (p. 332).

Yale cites Derrida’s (1996) claim that we turn to archives “seeking grounding in material realities,” which, perhaps, is what we mistake for *truth* (p. 336). We hope that archives will be able to provide us the “whole truth,” but they can only offer “partial truth,” “if at all” (p. 336). This is because we all have an individual experience with archives that only we, *you*, can have. An embodied experience. I think that’s why Yale calls for “archival thinking” (p. 345), an approach that focuses on “the circumstances of production of the documents in an archive, as well as their subsequent histories” (p. 351). Knowing these histories might help us to see archives as “sites”—as places from which the results of human desire and social struggles and political action spring.

Is It a Diary, Commonplace Book, Scrapbook, or Whatchamacallit? Six Years of Exploration in New England’s Manuscript Archives

Zboray, R.J. & Zboray, M.S. (2009). Is It a Diary, Commonplace Book, Scrapbook, or Whatchamacallit? Six Years of Exploration in New England’s Manuscript Archives. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, 44(1), pp. 101-123. DOI: 10.1353/lac.0.0055

From the “impulse” to record the events of one’s life during a period of “social upheaval” to the fact that “New England was a paper making center,” Zboray and Zboray cite several factors in antebellum New England that encouraged what they call “rampant document creation” (p. 102). These documents mainly took the form of diaries, scrapbooks, and commonplace books, and each were known to have a “distinct form and purpose” (p. 102). In practice, however, that wasn’t always the case, as people of that time “often merged formats, so that a diary [...] could easily morph into a scrapbook or a scrapbook into a commonplace book” (p. 102).

For the archivist, these “genre transgressions” could pose problems to the archiving process, because it is hard to categorize these blended formats as “distinct entities.” But for the people keeping these records, the changes in style and format occurred when it felt *right* or *necessary* to do so. Zboray and Zboray talk about encountering ship logs that vividly describe life at sea and diary entries that read more like daily logs. Who can know what caused these individuals to approach the page in this way? The shifts in style do, however, seem to be significant.

This research is important for my project because it proposes new ways of thinking about form, so that archivists can categorize “mixed material as something more than anomalies” (p. 116). It’s a framework that asks us to consider individual interactions with the page, even if that means “recognizing new genres” (p. 116).