Effectively Using Your Camera in an Archive

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With the growth of digital archives and the ability to quickly digitize archival material, the nature of archival research is rapidly changing in the 21st century. We are now able to very quickly take a snapshot of a document with us, or even photograph an entire carton or series of documents. These useful tips can save you some unneeded frustration and grief when using your digital camera in an archive.

1. Turn off the flash. Make sure to double check this every time you camera turns on or wakes from sleep, because many cameras reset the flash to automatic. Many archives are strict about their flash policies, and you don't want to lose the privilege (and convenience) of having your camera.

2. Use macro mode. Digital cameras are designed to "intelligently" focus on objects. In automatic mode, this means that your camera will try to get a depth of field by focusing on closer and farther away objects. This means blurry document pictures, because often your camera will focus on the table, your hand, or even the corner of the paper. Macro mode sets your camera to take close-up pictures. In this mode, if you set the green box over the text, your camera will make sure that the text is in focus.

3. Take pictures first ask questions later. In other words, if something looks remotely interesting, photograph it. You're not paying for film, and if it turns out to be unimportant, you can ignore it later. However, the converse is not true. Therefore, be prepared with extra SD/Compact Flash/SDHC cards. You'll want to make sure that you have plenty of space for photos so that you as many as you want.

4. Check your image quality setting. It will payoff to make sure that you have the camera set to the resolution you want. For archival pictures, you'll want the image quality set to the best setting, which might be called "SHG" or "Super Fine". As for the resolution, you'll want it high enough that the text will be easier to read, but you'll also want to make sure you can take plenty of pictures. When in doubt, set the quality settings to the highest setting.

5. Check your ISO setting. The higher the setting, the faster the camera takes the shot and the less light is needed for a clear picture. Higher settings mean grainier but better focused pictures in lowlight settings, very important when you aren't able to use a flash. The lower ISO settings (i.e. 80, 100, or 200) yield higher quality pictures but can often lead to very, very blurry pictures without a flash or sunlight. A good compromise is an ISO of 400, but 800 is recommended if you don't have a steady hand.
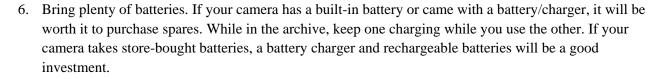
   100 ISO - Less grainy, good for shots with plenty of light.
   200 ISO - Still not very grainy, don't need as much light as ISO 100. Grain will be more noticeable when printed in larger formats.
   400 ISO - Mainly used for shooting without a flash, but with an ample amount of light. Slightly more grainy than ISO 200, but not by much.
   800 ISO - Very grainy, but will give 8x the light sensitivity of ISO 100. Will ensure that you have no motion blurs

6. Bring plenty of batteries. If your camera has a built-in battery or came with a battery/charger, it will be worth it to purchase spares. While in the archive, keep one charging while you use the other. If your camera takes store-bought batteries, a battery charger and rechargeable batteries will be a good investment.

7. Turn off camera sounds and/or preview. Turning off the sounds not only saves your battery, it is a courtesy to your fellow researchers. Disabling your preview can save you valuable time if you are photographing a lot of documents. These settings are found in your camera system settings.

8. Always photograph the carton information each time you start a new document series. When you upload the pictures to your computer, separate the folders into their respective cartons. It is advisable to upload the pictures to your computer the same day that you take them, so you don't forget where they go.