

Dig Digital. Work Digital. Think Archive. Create Access.



A guide to managing digital data generated from archaeological investigations

Quick guide #2 – Metadata & documentation

What is it?

- Metadata is information about digital data which describes it for people and machines.
- Metadata describes the who, what, where, when, how, and why of data.
- Metadata is also data – it has meaning and forms part of the digital archive.
- As such, it needs to be collected, managed, and preserved in the same way all your data does.
- Documentation is information, like manuals or process documents, which supplement metadata.

Why is it important?

- Metadata ensures that we will be able find, understand and preserve data in the future.

Types of metadata

Different terms can be used for metadata, but they are generally consistent across three main levels:

- collection level – describes the archive itself, eg project details and summary of data included.
- contextual or reference level – describes the data itself, eg defines field names within a table and can be relevant to groups of data objects.
- descriptive or file level – describes technical and non-technical elements at file level, eg the camera used or the image caption, which can be unique.

Metadata can be very simple or very complex, depending on what level of information it is providing.

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Planning for metadata

- ✓ Make metadata creation part of the research process – not a job to be done at the end.
- ✓ Create and use a data management plan.
- ✓ Use standardised terms where available, such as heritage standards.
- ✓ Organise data using file naming and version control, and structure project data.
- ✓ Use templates for metadata creation that work with the intended trusted digital repository.
- ✓ Create organisational-level tools and templates for contextual or reference metadata types.
- ✓ Identify the *how*, *when* and *who* of metadata creation for your project and organisation.
- ✓ Be aware of supplemental documentation that supports the digital archive.

Find out more

- Dig Digital / Document
- Digital Preservation Coalition / Digital Preservation Handbook – Metadata and documentation
- ADS & Digital Antiquity / Guides for Good Practice – Project metadata

Links to Dig Digital resources

- Infosheet #4 – Metadata and documentation.