Archives and Artificial Intelligence

A Statement of Intention from the Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

University of Virginia Library
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Our approach

We approach artificial intelligence (AI) with curiosity and caution. Above all, **we affirm that AI tools cannot replace the professional expertise, judgment, and ethical responsibilities of archivists, librarians, and preservation staff.** Any use of AI must supplement — not supplant — human knowledge, decision-making, and care.

We recognize that archival and library professions have historically adapted to new technologies that introduced significant and transformative change. AI is no exception. Our engagement with it will be deliberate, critically informed, and grounded in archival values, ethics, sustainability, and stewardship responsibilities.

We follow the UVA Archival AI Protocol and its core rule, no access without control.

Potential applications for archival work

We recognize that AI tools may offer meaningful benefits in archival contexts, particularly in the following areas:

- Handwriting recognition and language translation or transcription
- Image description and alt-text generation
- Enhanced discovery and access, including full-text search of digitized materials
- Support for meeting Title II digital accessibility requirements

When AI is used for discovery or description, outputs must be traceable to specific source items and collections.

Other areas of interest

We are also monitoring and selectively exploring emerging applications of AI that may have relevance for archival and preservation work. These areas are exploratory and would require careful evaluation, documentation, and active human oversight.

- Digital preservation support (file-format identification, fixity anomaly detection, preservation-risk prediction)
- Metadata extraction and enrichment, including named-entity recognition and authority-control recommendations
- Audiovisual accessibility through automated captioning or speech-to-text transcription
- Digitization quality control, such as identifying scanning errors, skew, or missing pages

- Born-digital processing support, including detection of sensitive or personally identifiable information
- Enhanced research discovery, including clustering, thematic analysis, and user navigation tools

These applications are considered supplements to — not replacements for — the professional labor and interpretive authority of archival staff.

Shared professional concerns

Our concerns are shared widely across the cultural heritage field.

Environmental impact

- High energy consumption and water use
- Contributions to climate change
- The need for responsible vendor practices, including transparency, carbon offset commitments, and sustainable infrastructure

Trust, quality, and accuracy

- Unreliable or low-quality outputs
- Hallucinations and inaccuracies presented with unwarranted confidence
- Inconsistency across repeated prompts
- Potential erosion of public and researcher trust

Bias and ethics

- Biased outputs reflecting inequitable or incomplete training data
- Risks related to accountability, provenance, and interpretive authority

Operational and intellectual control

- Increased staffing needs and resources for digitization and data preparation
- Potential loss of intellectual control over materials ingested or processed by AI systems

Our commitments and next steps

To engage responsibly with AI, we commit to:

- **Professional learning**, including webinars, literature, conference sessions, and peer discussions
- **Thoughtful experimentation** that is documented and values-informed
- **Monitoring developments** in archival AI research, including externally funded pilot projects
- **Participation in institutional AI conversations** to ensure archival perspectives are represented
- **Internal reflection and documentation** to evaluate alignment with values, sustainability goals, labor realities, and user trust

Note: This statement reflects the views of our archival department alone. It does not represent the positions of other divisions within the Library or any other unit of the University of Virginia.