

OSSArcFlow Learning Module 2: Documenting Workflows

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In this video, we will describe the process for documenting born-digital archiving workflows. First, we will discuss why you might want to document these workflows. Then, we will provide an overview of the documentation process, before delving into the details of creating visual workflow diagrams.

As we discuss in video 1, born-digital archiving can consist of many steps, require the use of a wide range of tools, and involve many staff members. Documenting your born-digital workflows can help to make sense of these complex processes.

The exercise of creating this documentation is itself a vital learning experience, providing space for you and your colleagues to reflect on your born-digital archiving practices. The resulting documentation will serve as knowledge artifacts to help you improve your workflows moving forward.

There are three main steps for documenting your workflows: assessing your current practices, describing your workflows, and creating a visual workflow diagram.

All stages of the documentation process benefit from engaging the diverse stakeholders involved in born-digital archiving at your institution, including archivists, curators, IT staff, and others. To create the workflow documentation, you might form a small team representing these different stakeholders or actively solicit feedback and input from these stakeholders at each stage in the documentation process.

Once you have identified and engaged the stakeholders, the next step is to thoroughly assess your current born-digital archiving practices with the aid of a questionnaire, which can be found in the *Guide to Documenting Born-Digital Archival Workflows*. The questionnaire will prompt you to think deeply about your current born-digital archiving practices. Be as detailed as possible in your responses, and have multiple stakeholders fill out the questionnaire.

Next, you will use the rich information gathered by the questionnaire to describe your workflows in a set of streamlined and easy-to-follow documents. Iteratively comb through the questionnaire responses to organize this information into a series of discrete steps or activities. We recommend creating both a narrative outline along with a spreadsheet, as each format captures slightly different descriptions of your workflow.

Each bullet point in the outline or row in the spreadsheet represents a step in the workflow. Provide details about the staff, tools, and practices involved in each step, along with any other relevant details. For instance, indicate if certain conditions need to be met for a step to be carried out or if some steps happen concurrently. Templates for both of these documents can be found in *the Guide*.

These descriptive documents are useful knowledge artifacts in their own right, and these also form the foundation for the visual workflow diagram. The diagram provides an overview of the entire born-digital archiving enterprise while also depicting how the individual steps fit together.

The visual workflow diagram essentially consists of a series of boxes connected by arrows, representing the sequential order of born-digital archiving activities. However, a great deal of detail and nuance can be added to this basic formula.

To create the visual diagram, you will first need to select a workflow modeling tool. There are a range of software options at varying price points and with various features and functionality. The OSSArcFlow team used LucidChart, a web-based tool well suited for distributed collaboration. The examples in this video and in *the Guide* use LucidChart, although the overall principles apply to workflow modeling in general.

Regardless of the tool you choose, workflow modeling software can have a relatively steep learning curve. You should plan to spend approximately 10-15 hours familiarizing yourself with the software and laying the groundwork for your workflow diagram. An important aspect of this is determining the special symbols you plan to use in your diagram. In addition to boxes for each step and arrows indicating the sequential order of steps, you may also want to include symbols for decision points where pathways diverge, steps with several concurrent activities, points where activities are delayed pending some other action, and “pain points,” or gaps and challenges in your current practices.

The guiding principle for the diagram is legibility: you want to communicate detailed information about your workflow while keeping the diagram easy to read, understand, and use. Each step box should only include a brief description of the activity, such as “create forensic disk image.” Additional details can be included in annotations. For instance, arrows can be labeled to describe differences in diverging pathways breaking off from a decision point. The staff roles or tools involved in each step can be indicated in tracks running parallel to the step boxes and arrows. More detailed annotations can be included in “sticky notes” added in the margins of the workflow.

The content of the diagram can be drawn directly from the descriptive outline and spreadsheet created in the previous stage. However, this is not a direct translation. The diagram condenses and visually represents a lot of this information. Creating the document may also lead to new insights and prompt revisions to the descriptive documents. All aspects of the documentation process are iterative and benefit from multiple passes and the engagement of diverse stakeholders.

As workflow modeling is a relatively new technique for born-digital archiving, norms for these visual representations are still emergent. The OSSArcFlow project has established a solid foundation, and we hope that others will add to this conversation.

The third video in the series covers in more detail some of the ways you can apply your workflow documentation to assess and advance your born-digital archiving practices.