Handling Library and Archival Materials
| Best Practices |

Your visit to the library is a chance to study materials directly. In some cases, you’ll be allowed to handle the objects yourself, while in others, such as during class visits, you may be asked to look while the objects are handled by the instructor or staff.

The following instructions will explain the basics of using items from the collections safely and give you a sense of what to expect during your visit.

Preparing to Visit

Instructions for the reading room / library seminar room

Store your personal belongings according to the library’s practices. Coats and bags will normally be stored in a secure place and you will bring only what you need for taking notes, including a pencil rather than a pen. You will be asked to leave all food and drink outside the reading room, including water in covered containers.

Arrive with clean and dry hands. You can keep materials clean and avoid damage to them by washing and drying your hands thoroughly immediately before arriving in the reading room, and avoiding hand lotions and sanitizer once you have washed your hands. **Use gloves that will be provided** for photographic materials that aren’t in sleeves or mats and also when handling items made of metal or lacquer.
Guidelines

Safe handling of the materials

All items

Allow objects and documents to remain resting on the table while you study them, rather than lifting and passing them to others. If you will be handling them directly, remember that older materials can be vulnerable in unexpected ways, so handle them as gently as possible to help keep them safe. You can ask the library staff for help if you have questions or you have any problems.

Bound Volumes

You can help prevent damage to books by not opening them too far. Older books can be quite fragile, and usually 90 degrees is a safe maximum angle to open them. When opening a book, support the covers so they don’t flex sharply. Foam wedges are used to give you access to the book while holding it open safely, though the library staff may suggest additional strategies for supporting books in non-Western bindings. Turn only a small number of pages at once, holding them by their outer edges.

Image 1: Properly Supported
Items with Special Handling Requirements

**Fold outs:** Support the book on one side only, using flexible book weights (snakes) so that it is held securely. Fully support the joint and the fold-out itself.
Rolled items (scrolls, oversized documents): Ask library staff to assist with set-up.

Manuscripts, Bound Artworks, Prints

Protect manuscripts with painted decoration and illumination by never flexing them sharply, since this could cause loss of paint. Avoid touching the image areas of the page and prevent snakes, weights, and paper markers from touching the inks and paint. Instead, pages can be handled on the blank or unwritten margins.
Prints and Other Artworks

Create a clean work area and remove items one-by-one from a stack, keeping them face up. Handle items by their edges only, and avoid touching the image.

- **Pages joined together**: If you find pages that were never cut open (unopened pages) or any items that are stuck together bring them to the attention of the library staff instead of trying to separate them yourself, since this will cause damage.

- **Loose pages and documents**: Protect loose individual sheets by transferring them to the table while they are supported by their folder or other flat support, rather than directly in your hands. Study them while they are resting securely on the table.
Photography: Handheld photography for personal use is allowed in most cases, though tripods and flash are not permitted. You can capture images safely by making sure that you are holding your device so that it cannot fall on the object or make contact in any way with its surface. Be aware that you won’t be allowed to apply pressure to books to make them flat for imaging.

These points are given to help visitors know what to expect, but they’re not an exhaustive list. The reading room staff will help by letting you know what to do, and you are welcome to check with them if you have questions. Following are some useful resources:

- Columbia University Libraries:  

- Archival Collections Portal:  

- Digital Collections Portal:  

- RBML has a "Plan your visit" page that includes the handling videos:  
  - Care and Handling: Bound Volumes:  
  - Care and Handling: Manuscripts:  
  - Care and Handling: Medieval Manuscripts:  