

Encoding Finding Aids on a Budget: Using Atom and HTML to Put Finding Aids Online

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When I was in graduate school working on my MLS degree with an archives concentration, I took a summer class in Encoded Archival Description (EAD). I also took a class in XML and worked with TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) in my job at the University Archives. I felt well-prepared to do this kind of encoding work wherever I might land after graduating. A year after graduation, I found myself back at my undergraduate institution, a very small liberal arts college (Milligan University in Tennessee) where I was the only archivist (and a combination archivist/librarian at that). We did not have the means to use EAD, but my predecessor had already started working on transferring our finding aids from PDFs on the library website to HTML format to be embedded on our institutional repository website. This was a route that was feasible for us to have more modern finding aids despite not having EAD capabilities. Thus, I undertook continuing the project and learning HTML. Using the free training website W3Schools (www.w3schools.com), I learned the basics of HTML, which came fairly easy to me due to already being familiar with XML. I started working on how we could improve an HTML format from the bare bones basics. I learned how to add links so that you could skip to various parts of the finding aid if it was particularly long. Additionally, I consulted with IT to find a good free editing program to write the HTML in instead of using a basic word processor or text editor, since I had learned encoding using Oxygen XML Editor. This has ended up being an easy, streamlined process for us to present our finding aids in a better way, all without costing us anything.

To format the finding aids in HTML, I have created a template that can be easily opened in Atom, the encoding editor program that IT suggested I use. We also have a finding aid template, so I essentially translated that template into HTML. With some trial and error on our institutional repository, I determined what parts of the HTML header were necessary and how to write up the HTML template to translate properly. The template is based on my beginner's knowledge of HTML, but does include some options to use when necessary. For example, I have instructions included on how to make words red for restricted items, how to include notes on folders, and how to link to other parts of the finding aid. Another tool that I've used in encoding finding aids is Microsoft Excel. For the most part, I can just copy and paste the information from the Word document version of the finding aid into the HTML template, but sometimes that can be tedious with long folder lists. I've set up an Excel spreadsheet to quickly wrap (enclose) each item in a folder list in the proper HTML tags by having columns for the opening and closing tags and a column in between for the folder name. Then I can quickly copy all of that information over to the HTML template and not have to copy and paste each folder item individually. This has saved a lot of time for even the longest finding aids, which makes it much easier to quickly get polished finding aids up on our institutional repository. HTML has proven to be an easy jump from my XML/EAD training and a great way to still get nice-looking finding aids up on our website.

When my predecessor started the initial work on transforming finding aids into HTML, she was using a Notepad++ for Windows. Having experienced the Oxygen XML Editor, I contacted our IT liaison to find out what a good substitute program to use for free would be. He suggested Atom from GitHub. This open-source text editor was able to handle writing in HTML and was very customizable for various additions that helped improve the encoding work. Unfortunately, GitHub announced that they were sunsetting

Atom a year ago. My desktop iteration of Atom still works, but it is probably unavailable to anyone new. Even if it is still available, it is probably worth exploring other options since it appears to be going away. There are several other options that appear to be good options, although I will keep using Atom as long as I can because I have it set up to do that work I need done.

In my position as a solo archivist at a small institution with few resources, I have found being able to transform our finding aids from a list of PDFs into HTML-encoded webpages to be a nice addition to our archives offerings. While I still include a PDF version for users to download, users can now look at the different finding aids on individual pages of our institutional repository. Additionally, if we digitize items from a collection, they can be placed on the institutional repository in the collection that has the finding aid as its landing page. This gives a more professional appearance to our archives online and has been easy and cost-effective to implement.

Photo Credits:

MDR1: Screenshot from a finding aid on Milligan University's digital repository. Photo from the Dean Walker Presidential Papers finding aid on Milligan DigitalRepository:
<https://mcstor.library.milligan.edu/handle/11558/7710>

MDR2: Screenshot from a finding aid in HTML in Atom. Photo from the Charles R Taber Papers finding aid.