

Where Can UVic English Take You? An Interview With Elizabeth Basset (MA 2016)

What is your job?

Having recently completed UBC's dual degree program in library and archival studies, most of my work in the field thus far has been through student contract positions. I've worked as Archives Assistant at the Vancouver Art Gallery Library and Archives, as Digital Access Assistant at the University of Victoria Libraries Special Collections and University Archives, and as a research assistant for Dr. Jennifer Douglas' project on grief work in archives. I am also just starting a position as Digital Access Librarian at the West Vancouver Memorial Library.



What led you to pursue an interest in library and archive studies?

While I was studying English, both as an undergraduate and graduate student, I always had a feeling that I would like to work in libraries. Libraries have been incredibly important to my own life and studies, and I also enjoy service-oriented work—librarianship seemed like a good fit.

My interest in archives came a bit later. During my last semester of the UVic English master's program, I worked a co-op job at the South Vancouver Island Dance Archives (housed at Dance Victoria Society). I spent my days cataloguing dance materials, working with a volunteer committee, conducting oral histories, researching local dance history, and writing biographical pieces about local dance teachers. This job combined my love for research and writing with my passion for working with people. After this experience, pursuing library and archival studies at UBC seemed like the obvious next step for me.

What does a typical professional day look like for you?

One of the things that I have really enjoyed about my library and archives jobs is the variation in my days. Sometimes, I have spent days working closely with archival materials—arranging and describing them to create finding aids, and also re-housing the materials in preservation-friendly folders and boxes. At other times, I've been more focused on outreach activities—preparing presentations, or designing workshops, for example.

As much of my work thus far has been project-based (such as conducting a series of oral histories, designing a digital exhibition, and creating Wikidata visualizations), I have also spent a lot of my work days learning and applying new technology skills. This will be a large part of my new job, too, as much of my work will consist of teaching and designing technology workshops for children and adults.

What's your favourite part of your work?

Aside from the fact that I get to spend my days surrounded by books and archives, I love the people-centric aspect of my work. So whether I am answering a question on the reference desk, working with a volunteer committee, or working to make stories from the archives more accessible, I feel motivated by work that ultimately connects people with the information resources they are looking for.

Libraries and archives are also truly spaces of life-long learning, and I love going to work knowing that my job requires that I constantly challenge myself to learn something new.

How did UVic English help prepare you for this work?

In so many ways, actually! In addition to the fact that I worked my first archives co-op job while I was a UVic English student, I consistently turn to skills that I developed at UVic. For example, when you are working to support others' research, it is useful to have a background in research yourself. UVic English also helped me to hone my writing skills, and my work has consistently required that I write a variety of content (from blog posts to exhibition descriptions to finding aids) for different audiences.

Other experiences that helped to prepare me include my time working as a teaching assistant for UVic English (instructional skills are highly relevant to many jobs in the field), and being a student in Dr. Jentery Sayers' digital humanities seminar (having skills with GitHub, for example, has been really helpful!).