

**Institute for Advanced Study
Shelby White and Leon Levy Archives Center**

Managing Electronic Records - Recommendations for Institute Staff

File Management: Guidelines & Policies

Which files are considered records?

Files created or received pursuant to the transaction of Institute business or in the fulfillment of its educational, administrative, business, or legal obligations are records regardless of format. Records are evidence of the activities of the Institute, and as such it is important to capture information about the record, such as author and date of creation.

What is records management?

According to ARMA International, the professional association for records managers and administrators, records management is "the systematic control of all records from their creation, or receipt, through their processing, distribution, organization, storage, and retrieval to their ultimate disposition." Records and information are assets and should be managed just as the Institute manages its facilities, equipment, and financial resources. Maintaining physical and intellectual control over records and information throughout their entire life cycle has many benefits. Records management:

- improves efficiency in the management of information
- permits the timely destruction of nonpermanent or transitory records,
- reduces the need for on- or offsite records storage
- enhances identification of permanent records for archival preservation
- meets legal evidentiary requirements
- provides evidence of fiscal and administrative transactions
- reduces institutional risk by eliminating records after their useful lifespan

While the Institute does not have a formal records management program, it is important that records be managed in an appropriate manner and that records with permanent value be transferred to the Institute Archives on a regular basis.

What is a record series?

"A records series is a group of similar or related records that are normally used and filed as a unit, and that permit evaluation as a unit for retention scheduling purposes." - ARMA, Guidelines for Managing Email.

Examples of record series include:

- Correspondence files
- Topical files
- Inactive personnel files
- Accounts payable files
- Monthly reports

What is a "record copy" and who is responsible for it?

"A record copy is the official copy of a record that is retained for legal, operational, or historical purposes."– ARMA, Guidelines for Managing Email.

While there may be many copies of a document, the record copy is the official copy. For example, although many staff members may receive reports while on a committee, it is the convenor or other designated employee that maintains the official record copy of the reports that group creates. It is this record which should be retained by the designated employee's office and preserved as an Institute record. The copies circulated to other committee members are reference copies and do not need to be retained once no longer needed.

What do I do with electronic files that are considered records?

If you have electronic files that are records you are responsible for maintaining that record throughout its established retention period. The Institute Archivist can guide you in determining how long those files must be kept. It is considered good practice to create files in a standardized format, such as tif for images, or maintain or update them in the latest version of software, such as Microsoft Word, to ensure future access.

What do I do with electronic files that are not Institute administrative records, but have long-term value?

There are some electronic files, such as personal correspondence or scholarly publications, that, while not official Institute records, may have long term value. Although they should not be transferred to the Archives as administrative records, you should keep these records organized, maintained and preserved for personal reference in the future and possible donation to the Institute Archives or another archival repository. The Institute Archives welcomes donations of the papers of Institute Faculty, and the Institute Archivist can advise you on appropriate disposition of such materials.

Should I handle electronic documents differently than paper documents?

Electronic files should be managed by their content, not their format. Whether or not you keep a file depends on its value, subject, and function. Although the fact that the record is in an electronic format does not affect how long you retain the file, you should be aware of issues with maintaining access to electronic files over time.

Electronic files are particularly fragile due to hardware and software obsolescence, unstable media formats, and the ease with which files can be erased either knowingly or unknowingly. A consistent backup plan is essential to the preservation of digital materials. Long term preservation requires migration across software versions and media formats.

How do I know if my electronic files have archival value?

The determination that a record has historical or archival value rests not on the form of the record itself, but rather on whether or not it contains information of enduring administrative, legal, fiscal, or historical value to the Institute or to researchers. Though these are only general categories and by no means a comprehensive listing, the following are examples of the types of electronic materials that should be preserved for potential transfer to the Archives in the future.

- annual reports
- meeting minutes
- websites
- correspondence
- photographs
- policy and procedure files
- reports of committees and task forces

Some materials, including the personal papers of Faculty members, may have archival value in some cases and merit collection in the Institute Archives or another manuscript repository. Because of this potential value, Faculty members should endeavor to maintain their most important electronic files according to best practices for digital preservation. See "Should I handle electronic documents differently than paper?" for more information about preserving electronic records.

File Management: Keeping & Deleting

What electronic files should I keep?

The Institute Archivist can assist you in determining which files are important to keep and for how long. Remember that content, not format, determines record retention.

Some electronic files, such as personal correspondence or scholarly publications, while potentially not official Institute records may have long term value and should be maintained according to best practice guidelines.

How long should I keep them?

The Institute Archivist can assist you in determining which files are important to keep and for how long.

Files have different values based on the content of the document. With the popularity of high-capacity storage systems, users may feel inclined to store all their documents indefinitely. It is incumbent on Institute employees, however, to evaluate the value of their files on an on-going basis and retain files only for their established retention periods.

Are there electronic files that I can/should delete?

The Institute Archivist can assist you in determining which files can be deleted and when. You should periodically remove materials scheduled for deletion.

You should be particularly careful about maintaining sensitive materials, such as personnel records on your computer.

Where should I store my files?

If you would like to learn more about specific storage options available to you, contact your department's IT staff.

In general, you have several options for places to store your electronic files that you may want to discuss with your IT staff. These include the shared local area network drives, your local computer hard drive, and removable media (such as disks or CDs). Your decision on where to save may depend on how often you need to access the files.

Saving files on the local area network drive has several advantages. Files on a network may be accessed from multiple locations, are generally more secure, and are usually backed up regularly (see your IT department for details). The disadvantage to saving all of your messages on a network drive is that you may run out of your allotted space.

If you save files on your local machine, you can avoid filling up your allotted Institute server space. However, you should check with your department's information technology staff to determine if and when safety backup copies of your local machine are made. Files saved on your local machine are also not available from multiple locations. If you use a laptop and create and store all of your documents on this laptop, it is essential that you backup these documents in a more secure location.

The third option is to save files on CDs or removable drives. This may be appropriate for inactive files or topics that you would not need to access frequently. If you choose to store files on CDs or removable drives it is a good idea to have multiple copies because of the instability of removable media. Files stored on CDs or removable media may be more difficult to locate than those on your local machine or server. Also, over time the media may degrade or become obsolete, making the retrieval of those files difficult or impossible.

How should electronic records of continuing or long-term value be cared for in electronic formats?

Electronic files are particularly fragile due to hardware and software obsolescence, unstable media formats, and the ease with which files can be erased either knowingly or unknowingly. A consistent backup plan is essential to the preservation of digital materials. Long term preservation requires migration across software versions and media formats. It is a good idea to save files in open, non-proprietary formats such as PDF/A and XML.

What's the best way to preserve my department's website?

The Institute Archivist coordinates regular snapshots of the Institute website overall. If you would like to make more frequent preservation copies of your department's web presence, please contact the Institute Archivist.

If I scan paper records into a digital format, do I have to keep the original paper copy?

There is no simple "yes" or "no" answer to this question, however, some of the issues to consider include:

Value of the paper records: Records identified in a retention and disposition schedule as permanently valuable or archival should not be destroyed after scanning because the media on which the images reside are not preservation media. In other words, they do not meet the criteria of permanence, stability, or durability that paper or microfilm possess. Records with short term value typically can be destroyed after scanning as long as appropriate systems are in place to establish the trustworthiness of the images.

Planning: Scanning paper records will not improve a poor record keeping system. A careful analysis of system needs, retention requirements, indexing needs, user demands, and costs/benefits should occur before investing in the hardware and software required to digitize a large volume of paper records. This needs assessment also should examine workflow and areas where image sharing can take place.

The entire scanning "system": Often the entire "system" employed to scan records will fall under more scrutiny than the images or paper documents. The "system" includes up-to-date procedures, user training, indexing, the type of media used to store the images, quality assurance, equipment specifications, access rights information, audits of hardware and software performance, and full documentation of hardware and software modifications or upgrades.

Laws and regulations and admissibility: In most cases an accurate reproduction of an original record is admissible as evidence in an official proceeding even if the original does not exist. The exception is when the original is held in a custodial or fiduciary capacity or when its preservation is required by law. a. Consult qualified legal counsel if you have questions about legal issues surrounding your scanning system.

When should I print a copy of a file?

Until there is an Institute repository and associated policies for the electronic transfer of records, we recommend printing your most important files and storing them with their appropriate records series if applicable.

If I print a file, can I delete it?

If you choose this management technique for maintaining physical and intellectual control over your electronic files, it is not necessary to retain the original electronic file. It is advisable, however, to document this practice of printing and purging as a regular business practice.

If you manage your routine electronic files by printing and filing them, you can purge and delete electronic copies. For files of particular importance you should consider retaining them in both electronic and print formats. Some files, such as websites and databases, are intrinsically electronic objects. While you can capture a snapshot of them by printing, you cannot preserve them as a complete evidential record in this fashion; therefore you must manage them electronically.

Should I keep multiple versions of a file?

Retention of multiple versions or drafts can depend on whether you are the creator or recipient and on the type of document. When you are the creator of a document, keeping drafts throughout the creation period allows you to maintain a backup of the most recent version. It also allows you to refer back to original or previous content.

In most cases, the final version is sufficient for long-term retention. Earlier drafts can often contain erroneous, sensitive or conflicting information. Once the final version is created, the primary author of that document should only keep the final version of that document, unless they are needed to document the process, such as evidence when negotiating an agreement or the creative process of writing.

If you keep multiple versions, it is a good idea to add the date of change or your initials to the file name when modifying that file. Some people find it helpful to add words like “final draft” to help identify the differences between files.

If you are working with multiple versions on a shared network server, you should agree upon a policy for naming files in consultation with your coworkers and other accessing the network.

When can I transfer files to the archives?

You may transfer electronic files that are in a printed format to the Institute Archives when you send the other materials in that series.

If you are keeping your files in an electronic format, and not in a printed format, then you should keep those files in a structure that will allow them to be easily accessed in a current version of the software in which they were created.

The files should be kept so that they will be identifiable in the future within a filing structure that reflects your retention schedules and will allow potential transfer to the Archives when appropriate Institute policies are established for handling electronic records.

File Management: Keeping & Deleting

How should I organize the files that I need to keep?

A good file folder structure is a structure that helps you keep, find and contextualize materials.

When choosing a folder title, it is important to use a name that accurately describes the documents you will file there (example: “travel requests and reimbursements FY 2003/2004”). Try to use consistent spelling and vocabulary that others can interpret if they need to. Avoid using obscure acronyms and abbreviations when possible. Check that your categories do not overlap.

The following are examples of types of names that you can give your file folders:

Type	Example	Reasons to Use
Numbers or symbols	NF-001	Can be brief, specific, indexable. May not immediately be apparent what they represent.
Dates	March 2004	Allows quick deletion of documents that can be deleted after a certain period of time. Can quickly sort messages by date and move into a folder.
Subject Topics (names, organizations, companies, projects, publications, etc.)	Budgets, Art History Seminar	Brings together all documents on a particular topic, regardless of subject line. Allows you flexibility in overcoming erroneous subject lines.
Combo - Subject/Date	Evaluations Spring 2002	Can take a large subject file and break it down into smaller time-based files.
Geographic area or location	Travel Reports > England	Good for subfolders
Records Series	Annual Reports	Makes retention and delete of documents identified in records schedules easy.

Most people find a multiple level system of folders and subfolders useful. To the extent possible, folders at a given level should not be overlapping and they should relate to the nature of documents created and retention periods when possible. For example: your main folder may be Evaluations, with subfolders of Evaluations Fall 2002, Evaluations Spring 2003, etc.

If files are being stored on a shared network server, organization schemes and folder titles should be set up in consultation with system administrators and others accessing the network.

What should I include in a file name?

A file should be named according to its content. It should also include any revision or version dates and author identification if it's a file that has had multiple authors contributing to it. For example: Annual Report 11_01_04 Jane.

File name and folder structure often can work together to provide the context for a document. For example, a document may be housed within a folder structure such as Applications > subfolder 2004 > Jane Doe. While the file name only provides you with the information that the file is about Jane Doe, the structure tells you that the file is also an application from 2004. When sharing or printing this file, it might be a good idea to include this information that the folder structure provides.

Do you have any suggestions for sharing documents and organizing shared file space?

If files are being stored on a shared network server, organization schemes and folder titles should be set up in consultation with system administrators and others accessing the network. All members of your group should agree to standard filing and naming structures.

What's the advantage of adding metadata (filling out the "properties") of a file?

Adding information to the properties field, such as author name and description, can be useful for providing contextual information for the document. This can help the document's creator or users understand the document in the future.

Top Tips for Managing Electronic Files

- 1) Retain and dispose of electronic records according to established guidelines discussed with the Institute Archivist. Particularly identify files that are no longer needed or scheduled for destruction and delete them as appropriate for legal and storage considerations.
- 2) Use file names and folder names that are descriptive and indicative of the content of the files in order to facilitate retrieval by you or others in the future.
- 3) Consider creating a file folder structure, which will allow quick retrieval and a contextual view of all the files that are related to a particular topic and subtopics.
- 4) Make sure that your files on your network and/or hard drives are being backed up. Learn what your office policies are and if you are responsible for your own back up.
- 5) Remember that the security of your files cannot be ensured. Use caution when storing and handling confidential or sensitive documents.
- 6) Be aware of when you are the keeper of the record copy of a document and the responsibilities which that entails.
- 7) Generally, only keep drafts or multiple versions of a file when they are needed to document the creative process. When working with drafts, it is a good idea to add the date of change and/or your initials to the file name in order to make it easier to identify which version is the most recent.
- 8) Think carefully about the best place to maintain and backup your files. This decision may be based upon the frequency which you need to access the files or if access is needed from multiple locations or by multiple people.
- 9) Institute sponsored computers and software are intended for Institute business. Use them only sparingly for personal reasons.
- 10) When in doubt, contact the Institute Archivist.