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Survival Strategies for Personal Digital Records

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Electronic files are much more fragile than paper records, and their long-term survival requires attention and planning. These tips can help you better preserve your personal digital collections.

- Focus on your most important files, such as resumes, school papers, financial spreadsheets, tax returns, letters, photographs, and family histories. Focus your efforts on those with long-term legal, financial, or sentimental value.
- Print out your most critical files to protect them against loss. Doing so increases the chances that your documents and images will remain accessible and allows you to focus upon backing up and copying/migrating files that cannot easily be printed out (e.g. databases, video files).
- Create multiple copies of the files and manage them in different places. Doing so will keep your information safe even if your computer crashes. Use automatic backup programs (either cloud or local) to ease the burden.
- Organize your files by giving individual documents descriptive file names. Creating a directory/folder structure on your computer will help you organize your files. Write a brief description of the directory structure and the documents for future reference. Remember that someone else may need to make sense of them in the future.
- Organize your photographs as you create them. It is much harder to identify thousands of images as time passes. Photo management software can help, but that software will eventually go obsolete. Make sure you can understand your photos without it.
- Storage media have limited life spans, so you can't just file and forget. Make sure to check your files at least once a year to ensure they are still readable. Keep track of the formats and media you use, so you are prepared to move the files forward as computer systems change.
- Convert important files to a universal output format such as plain text (.txt), Rich Text Format (.rtf), or PDF/A (a form of PDF designed to support long-term preservation). These formats are less likely to be inaccessible in the future. Identify files in obsolete formats for conversion as soon as possible.
- Save master copies of important digital images as TIFF (.tif) and create GIF (.gif) or JPEG (.jpg) copies to share or post online.

Additional Resources:

- The Library of Congress is a great resource for information on [personal digital archiving](#).