Survival Strategies for Personal Digital Records

From the Council of State Archivists

www.statearchivists.org

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.

Personal Files:

- Focus on your most important files. These files may include: resumes, school papers, financial spreadsheets, letters, maps, and family histories.
  - Decide which documents have long-term value and focus your efforts there.
- 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.
  - Make at least two copies of your files – more copies are better.
- 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.
- Check your files at least once a year to make sure you can read them. Every 3 – 5 years you will need to copy and migrate your files to a newer media. Storage media have limited life spans, and hardware and software changes can keep you from accessing files stored on media that hasn't deteriorated.
  - Use new, high-quality storage media. Avoid unknown brands.
- 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).
  - Files created with obsolete software should be converted to newer formats to avoid losing access.

Digital Images:

- Back up and copy/migrate your images as outlined above
- Organize them as you create them. It is much harder to identify thousands of images as time passes.
- In addition to facing the threats outlined above, image files are often compressed, which reduces file size but can permanently remove some visual information. Save important images either uncompressed or with lossless compression. Good choices format choices include TIFF (.tif), and JPEG2000 (.jp2).
- The resulting files are often quite large, so treat them as "master copies" and create GIF (.gif) or JPEG (.jpg) "use copies" to share via e-mail or the Web.
- You can also print out your images.
  - To ensure that your images last for decades, order prints from a lab that will place them on an archival medium.

Additional Resources:

- The Library of Congress is a great resource for information on personal digital archiving, found at: http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/records.html
  Key resources include:
  Why Digital Preservation is Important to Everyone:
  http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/multimedia/videos/digipres.html
  Preserving Your Digital Memories:
  http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/documents/PA_All_brochure.pdf
- The University of Michigan Library publication entitled ***Preserving Personal Digital Files*** is also a great resource. It contains a wealth of suggestions for further reading as well. This publication can be found at: http://www.lib.umich.edu/files/services/preservation/PreservingPersonalDigitalFilesGuide.pdf