

Simple Steps for Paper Preservation

Paper documents communicate to us through time and are very desirable for collecting. Preserving them is a challenge, even for professionals. The enemies of paper include insects and rodents; heat, humidity and light; and poor housing of materials. There are simple steps we can take to protect information documented on paper for future generations. Important considerations for safeguarding paper treasures include the storage location, the environment, storage containers and handling.



Storage Location

- Avoid attics (typically hot), basements (usually cold and moist), and locations near bathrooms, laundry rooms or water heaters.
- Storing materials near the center of a building, away from outside doors and windows will minimize the risk of insect and rodent infestation.
- Maintaining regular storage area

housekeeping will reveal rodent and insect hiding areas.

- Avoid using insecticides and poisons, as they can harm paper treasures. If you discover an infestation, call a professional with an understanding about artifacts and archive materials.



The Environment

- High heat and damp environments promote mold and mildew growth.
- Monitor storage area temperature (60 – 70° F) and maintain relative humidity (40 – 50%).
- Provide clean air with good circulation.
- If the room is comfortable to you,

your paper archive should be safe. Poor environmental conditions can attract the pests discussed above.

- Light used in storage areas can cause irreversible damage to paper-based artifacts.
- When displaying documents, use UV rated glass and exhibit on a rotational basis or use photocopies to minimize stress on archival materials and ensure longer preservation.
- Keep your storage area dark (block windows, if you have them, and turn off lights) when not in use.

Storage Containers

- Containers provide physical protection from dust accumulation and light. Conduct an inventory of your collection to determine appropriate containers for the long-term care of different types of documents.
- Use containers made of non-acidic materials.
- Store like things together (separate news clippings and letters;



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newspapers acidic content can harm other archival materials).

- Avoid overfilling folders and boxes.
- Maintain uniform folder sizes within boxes or file drawers.
- Match folder size with box or drawer size.
- Folders should be larger than items they house.
- Note contents clearly (fragile, oversized, heavy, etc.).
- Consider metal shelving, file cabinets and flat files, instead of wood.



Handling

- Begin by establishing guidelines for reference, handling, and reproduction of archival collections.
- Avoid the use of paper clips, rubber bands, rubber cement and other glue, like that found on sticky notes.
- Provide researchers with photocopies or access to digital versions of original materials to minimize handling.
- Use master copies for duplication or print a copy from the digital version.
- Always handle documents with clean hands.
- Encourage the use of cotton or

latex gloves to avoid oil from hands coming in contact with, damaging and/or destroying archival materials.



Other Helpful Hints for Handling

- Photocopy or digitize content from acidic documents (such as news clippings) to preserve them longer.
- Digitize frequently used items during housing or re-housing a collection.
- Support fragile documents with a stiff piece of archival board. This will also aid in turning the item over.
- To remove a staple, slide a stiff piece of plastic under it on both sides of the paper, bend the edges of the staple up and pry it out with tweezers or a thin knife.
- Avoid lamination of important documents.



Paper Preservation Checklists

STORAGE AREA CHECKLIST

- Does the storage area provide a stable environment away from heat and moisture?
- Does the storage area minimize the risk of rodent and insect infestation?

ENVIRONMENTAL CHECKLIST

- Are the light levels safe for archival materials?
- Is the room comfortable for staff to work in?
- Is it too warm or too cool?
- Does it feel damp?
- Is there a musty or moldy smell?



STORAGE CONTAINER CHECKLIST

- Are containers (shelving, cabinets, boxes, folders) stable and appropriate for the items stored within them?
- Could the archival materials damage other documents in the same drawer/container?



HANDLING CHECKLIST

- Have you established reference, handling and reproduction guidelines for your archival collection?
- Can you photocopy or digitize frequently used documents to minimize handling?
- Have you scanned or photocopied content from acidic documents onto stable paper?
- Have you removed paper clips and/or rubber bands before storing archival materials?
- Are displayed items framed with UV rated glass and safe framing materials?
- Do you have gloves available for handling items in the collection?

Resources

We encourage you to seek further information about specific preservation projects. There are many paper preservation resources available online that provide information about storage areas, environmental conditions, containers and handling. We've listed a few below:

- National Park Service Conserve O Grams: https://www.nps.gov/museum/publications/conservoogram/cons_toc.html
- Northeast Document Conservation Center: <http://www.nedcc.org/home.php>
- The Conservation Outreach Program of the Minnesota Historical Society: <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/conservation>
- The Smithsonian Museum Conservation Care Institute: http://www.si.edu/mci/english/learn_more/taking_care



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