



CARING FOR YOUR DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHS

Which are better, prints or digital files?

It's a toss-up. Prints are 'eye-readable' meaning you don't need a machine to access them. Even if a print is damaged (torn, folded, etc.) you can still see the image. They are durable, reliable and long-lasting. They only need basic storage requirements for good, long-term preservation.

Digital files require a machine to read them and display them. The technology may go obsolete or the software required to read a proprietary file may not be available at some point. Computers and digital devices are easily damaged and vulnerable in disasters. Digital files can be harder to preserve because they need to be periodically migrated, checked, and backed up. However, digital files are easily shared.

Digitization of old prints and negatives is a good preservation tool because it allows you to look at and share photographs without harming the original. However, a digital copy shouldn't be considered a replacement of an original.

Steps for preserving personal digital photographs:

The key to preserving digital files of any sort is active management. If you wait too long to manage your files you may end up with so many files that you become overwhelmed. Or, your hard drive may crash or you lose your personal digital device before you've backed it up and you lose all your files.

1. Where are your files?

Determine where you have digital photographs. This list might include: your desktop computer, your laptop, your phone, your camera, SD cards, flash drives, CDs, DVDs, other disks, or social networking sites like Facebook or Instagram. Gather your files and save them to one computer where you can work with them.

2. Decide which files are most important.

You might find that scattered over all your devices you have thousands of files. If this is the case, you may want to weed or delete some files—bad photos, duplicates, etc. If you still have a lot of files you might want to choose to preserve only the most important ones. However, just going through all your files and choosing good ones might take a lot of time in itself. Perhaps the best way to approach your project is to work in batches—start with important events and then the less important ones.

3. Organize your chosen files.

Your computer will automatically organize your files in some manner, but this is not always the most helpful manner. You can group files into folders and create a hierarchical folder system. For example, you could create a folder for each year and then within that folder create sub-folders for big events or for each

month. Be sure to be consistent with your organization so that you and others looking at the files later will have an easy time understanding it. Printing out a folder hierarchy list will also help you and others remember your organization system.

4. Create metadata:

Metadata means information about information. In terms of digital photos, there are basically two kinds: technical metadata that your camera creates and descriptive metadata that you add.

Technical metadata that your camera creates includes the file type, file size, date, time, type of camera, shutter speed, aperture setting, and perhaps location information if your camera has a GPS tool.

Start your management before you even take a picture. Review all your camera settings and make sure they are set how you want. These include:

- Date and time: set this so that the information is recorded properly for each photo you take
- File format: most cameras will take jpegs, but higher-end models will have other options, such as raw. Make sure you understand what type of file you will get.
- File size: most cameras will give you the option of a few file sizes. Larger files will create higher quality images, but will take up more memory. Perhaps not all occasions will merit the greater storage needs.
- Other data, such as GPS. You may have the option to turn on or off other metadata. The more metadata you have will make the file more “findable” in a search and will record more information for posterity, but some options, may use up your camera battery more quickly.

The time and effort is up to you, but the more time you spend and the more metadata you record with your files, the richer your collection will be.

Descriptive metadata that you create is going to be much more valuable to you and others who view your photos because it can help you remember who is in the photo, what the photo is of, if it was related to a certain event, etc. If you have a large collection of digital files, metadata will also be invaluable in searching for a particular photo. Metadata can be written directly to files through tools such as Adobe Bridge or through your computer’s file directory. You can add descriptions individually or to several files at once. See tutorials below for more information.

5. Make and distribute copies.

One great aspect of digital information is that it is easily distributed. But because digital storage devices are easily damaged or quickly go obsolete, best practices include storing lots of copies. One digital preservation method is called LOCKSS, “Lots of copies keeps stuff safe.” Once you have your files organized and have added metadata, you should make several copies using a variety of media and store them separately. You don’t want all your copies to be susceptible to the same threats (such as a house fire or robbery) so keep them at the very least at opposite ends of your house.

Examples of storage media:

- Laptop or desktop computer hard drive
- External hard drive
- Flash drives
- Optical media (CDs, DVDs), preferably archival quality

- The “cloud”—shared servers or other subscription based services. Some of these, such as Flickr or Picasa, might double as photo sharing sites, or they might be only for private backup and access

Keep in mind that no one method is perfect and few are trustworthy for more than 5 years; the best method of preservation is to use several different media options.

Further information and tutorials:

- **Personal Digital Archiving** – a website from the Library of Congress with information and videos about how to preserve “born-digital” materials, i.e. digital photographs, websites, email, digital video, digital audio, and other digital records, and how to scan your personal collections <http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/index.html>
- **Preserving Your Personal Digital Photographs** – a recorded webinar from the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services which walks you through the steps of preserving personal digital photographs <http://www.ala.org/alcts/confevents/upcoming/webinar/pres/042612>
- **Adding Descriptions to Digital photos** – a video produced by the Library of Congress to demonstrate how to add tags and descriptions to your digital photo files <http://digitalpreservation.gov/multimedia/videos/personalarchiving-photometadata.html>
- **Meta Tutorials** – Tutorials with screencasts and videos on how to add metadata to photographs. The website is aimed at professional photographers, but can be helpful to anyone. Other parts of the site have more information about metadata <http://www.photometadata.org/META-Tutorials>
- **Saving Your Facebook Data** – a YouTube video from the State Library of North Carolina which provides the steps for extracting updates, photos, and other personal information from Facebook <https://www.youtube.com/embed/d0I1KvI3Py4?fs=1&autoplay=0>
- **How to Scan Your Photographs** – Written and video tutorials from tech company cnet on options for scanning your old prints <http://www.cnet.com/how-to/how-to-scan-and-archive-your-old-printed-photos/>
- **Scanning Your Personal Collections** – A blog post from the Library of Congress detailing some of the settings options on scanners when scanning <http://blogs.loc.gov/digitalpreservation/2014/03/personal-digital-archiving-the-basics-of-scanning/>

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