

**How to Save Your Stuff Archivaly at Home:
Basic Collection Preservation Strategies
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People love their “stuff.” You can do a considerable amount to help preserve your precious stuff simply through proper storage, display, and handling. Many well-intentioned but uneducated people have ruined their collections through doing these things improperly. Educating yourself in archival storage, display, and handling will significantly increase the life of your collectibles, your enjoyment of them, and ultimately their historic and monetary worth.

Enemies of collections are numerous and insidious: temperature, humidity, light, water, dust and dirt, critters, mold, poor storage and display conditions, rough handling, chemical interactions, fire and other disasters, and theft, for starters. How can you counteract these?

The big question is what do you want to do with your stuff? Do you want to have it out where you can see and use and enjoy it on a daily basis? Do you want to give it maximum protection to ensure its monetary and historic value? Do you want something between these two poles? Also, why is it valuable to you? Is it of historic, emotional, or financial value? Your answers will guide you to a good answer. Here are some basic strategies you can follow:

1. Environmental Concerns:

A. Temperature/Humidity: aim for a reasonable 65-70 degrees and 50% humidity; most important is constant and not fluctuating levels. Mold starts to grow above 60% humidity. Don't put your valuables anywhere you wouldn't be comfortable—attics, basements, garages. Also bad: outer walls/closets on outer walls, near fireplaces and heat vents.

B. Light damage: use UV filtering film on windows, UV filtering sleeves on fluorescent light bulbs, and UV filtering glass on anything framed. Use drapes/blinds on windows. Do not hang or display items in direct sunlight, or point spotlights at them. Archivaly box and wrap materials to protect from light and to slow down temperature and humidity fluctuation, and to keep out dust.

C. Critters/Mold: exercise good critter hygiene. Keep food/drink away from materials. Check new acquisitions to make sure they're not infested (silverfish, mold, etc.) If you find live bugs, egg cases, or active mold, contact a professional conservator immediately and don't bring the stuff into your home! Don't mess with mold! It can be dangerous!

D. Cleaning: clean shelving, storage, and display areas on a regular basis. Don't use anything that leaves an oily or chemical residue, including household cleaners, furniture polish, or chemically-impregnated cleaning cloths. Use a clean cloth to remove dust; if you want to wet it with something, use distilled water.

E. Emergencies/Disasters: store a list and photos of your valuables off-site. Update it as necessary. If you have materials worth considerable monetary value, get them appraised every 5-10 years and insure with a separate rider if replacement value is important. If you have a disaster (fire, flood, etc.) and materials are damaged but not destroyed, contact a professional conservator immediately. Never endanger your life to save your collection. Include plans for your collection in your will or it could get pitched or sold (willing to the right archival repository will get you big archival karma points!).

2. Storage and Display Concerns:

A. Archival preparation: prepare materials archivally for storage or display. This includes removing all metals and rubber bands, non-archival storage bags, etc., and cleaning the items as necessary. **Basic rule: store like with like.** This means similar media/formats and sizes, like trade paperbacks separate from hardbacks; VHS tapes separate from DVDs; photos separate from letters, etc. Differences in chemical makeup, size, weight, etc. can cause storage damage. Store items and original enclosures (boxes) separately if the box will damage the contents. Use the proper storage conditions for each medium/format (see last page).

B. Archival storage: use the proper archival storage for the material being stored. Use acid-free folders, boxes, envelopes, etc., or archival sleeves or Mylar enclosures for other materials. Educate yourself in the specific storage needs of various formats. Don't attempt repairs or cleaning beyond the basics (white eraser powder bags) unless you're trained.

C. Shelving: shelving should be large enough to support the materials without anything hanging off the shelf. Shelving and flat storage should be made of enamel-coated metal shelves (except for magnetic mediums, where wood is appropriate). Wood shelving and storage will damage paper and other materials over time. If you must use wood shelving, line it with a barrier of acid-free cardboard or Bristol board, or Mylar.

D. Framing: If you frame materials, pay for archival framing (acid-free mats and backing, UV filter glass). You'll be glad you did in 10-20 years—it's cheap insurance.

E. Display: If you display your collection, rotate parts of it between storage and display, as do museums, to limit exposure to damaging elements. This is a good compromise position.

F. Most scrapbooks are evil. Many current scrapbooking stores say their material is "archival." Not true! Their definition of "archival" or "acid-free" holds for about 20 years, not 50, or 100, or more. Older scrapbooks are even worse; many are on highly acidic paper, and glues are also damaging. The worst are the "magnetic" albums with the waxy dots on the page—these are highly destructive! If you must have a scrapbook, there are ways to accomplish this archivally. See the section on archival suppliers.

G. DIGITAL IS NOT ARCHIVAL! Archival storage is loosely defined as safely retaining materials for at least 50 years. Yes, numerous things, from book manuscripts to photos to artwork to sound recordings, are "born digital." Be aware that there is not yet any national/international archival standard, format, or platform for digital storage, though large institutions and consortia are creating their own standards. But you're not a large institution with huge servers and a big IR/IT department and backup systems out the wazoo. If it's that important, commit it to an archival analog format and store archivally. Books printed on acid-free paper and photocopies made on acid-free paper using a good photocopier and stored archivally have a potential life of 500 years. Don't fall into the trap of scanning all your photos, for example, and tossing the originals, or moving your family videos to DVD and tossing the originals.

Eye-accessible media (i.e. books, photographs, photocopies) have no hardware or software standing between the user and the content, so there's nothing to become obsolete. Did you have material stored on 5 ¼ inch floppies? Do you still have the hardware/software on your computer to read them? Did you get everything transferred from them before they went belly-up? Most folks didn't. Digital is great for making use copies or for sharing, but it's still not considered an archival storage mode, especially for hobbyists and collectors. Not only is the hardware and software unstable and proprietary, the storage mediums are short-lived, even if you have the hardware and software. Magnetically-encoded information (audio and video tapes) will last 15-20 years under ideal conditions. Other digitally-encoded formats, like CDs, which are physically encoded, are already self-destructing physically. No digital storage medium has been designed for archival storage. These mediums are designed to be changed every few years, and to keep consumers buying (you pitched your LP and bought the cassette tape; pitched the tape and bought the CD; pitched the CD and bought the download from iTunes, etc., so in 20 years you bought the same album four times—gottcha!). It's worse with proprietary hardware/software. If you decide to retain materials digitally, be ready to migrate early and often! Don't expect sympathy from me when your digital stuff gets messed up! End of rant!

3. Use Concerns:

A. Handling: much damage comes from incorrect handling. Make sure your hands are clean and free of food grease, dirt, hand lotion, etc. Don't eat, drink, or smoke while handling your collections. Use book props, gloves, etc. as needed. When writing around your materials, only use pencil (it erases, pen doesn't). Don't lean on, write on top of, or put objects on top of your collectibles. Don't let others photocopy, photograph with a flash, or scan your materials (light and pressure damage). Instruct others in the proper handling of your materials, or make them off-limits. If the grandkids want to take the Civil War letters to school for show-and-tell, have color photocopies made and send those instead. Photocopying will do less damage than 25 grubby little sets of hands. Be aware that visitors to your home (including friends and family) may leave with "souvenirs."

4. Exhibition Concerns:

A. Exhibit environment: it's wonderful to have an institution ask to use your materials for an exhibit, but items may be damaged by exhibition as much as by misuse and rough handling (this holds also for home display). Before you display anything, make sure its display environment will not harm it. Display a second copy or a duplicate if at all possible. All the concerns raised in the environmental and storage sections above apply here. Many exhibit cases seem to be designed to harm the materials in them--interior light sources contribute to light damage and throw off heat, are made of wood, and are not particularly secure. Make sure there is no direct light (including sunlight) falling on the case or object; that the case or object is secure physically; that the heat and humidity in the case do not fluctuate; and that the case itself or case dressing or props are not off-gassing to cause damage. If you lend, demand a proper archival display environment; ask what their insurance coverage is in case of loss or damage; keep a list of what's being loaned; and ask for a signed loan agreement with all of the above laid out. Otherwise you have no recourse if stuff comes back damaged, or is lost or stolen.

This information is a starting point only and is not by any means exhaustive or complete. Please continue your own education through reading books and using the websites listed below for preservation/conservation information, archival materials suppliers, and appraisers. One of the best books on the topic is by Don Williams, the senior conservator at the Smithsonian, and covers everything from letters to photographs to baseball gloves to wedding dresses: *Saving Stuff: How to Care for and Preserve Your Collectibles, Heirlooms, and Other Prized Possessions*. Don Williams and Louisa Jagger. NY: Fireside, 2005. ISBN 0743264169

Preservation/Conservation Websites:

- *Library of Congress "Caring for Your Collections": <http://lcweb.loc.gov/preserv/careothr.html>
- *American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works and Conservation OnLine (CoOL): <http://www.conservation-us.org/> Comprehensive professional site.
- *The Archivist's Toolkit (Archives Association of British Columbia) http://aabc.ca/TK_00_main_page.html Excellent overall site.
- *Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC): <http://www.nedcc.org> Excellent preservation site; technical leaflets available online.
- *Ready, 'Net, Go! (Tulane University, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library) <http://www.tulane.edu/~lmiller/arintro.htm> Comprehensive index of archival sites.

Archival Suppliers:

Conservation Resources International: 800-634-6932 / www.conservationresources.com
Gaylord Brothers: 800-448-6160 / 800-634-6307 / www.gaylord.com
Hollinger Metal Edge Corporation: 800-634-0491 / www.hollingercorp.com
Light Impressions: 800-828-6216 / www.lightimpressionsdirect.com
University Products: 800-628-1912 / www.universityproducts.com / www.archivalsuppliers.com

Appraisers: these are major professional national organizations:

The Appraisers Association of America

Phone: (212) 889 5404/ Email: aaa1@rcn.com / www.appraisersassoc.org

International Society of Appraisers

Phone: (206) 241-0359 / www.isa-appraisers.org

American Society of Appraisers

Phone: (703) 478-2228 / www.appraisers.org

You can also contact your state museum, historical society, or other archives to ask for a list of appraisers or conservators in your area.

For ball-park figures, check E-Bay and rare book sites (Alibris, Bibliofind, Abebooks). For many collectibles, condition is everything. Beware of asking an unknown dealer to appraise your stuff. Some will quote low and offer to buy then sell high. Ask for an appraisal for insurance or donation reasons to help avoid this problem. If you donate to an institution, it legally cannot assign a value because of conflict-of-interest issues.