



TECHNICAL LEAFLET

Presented to the State Records Commission and Local Government Records Commission on October 23, 2013.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NAMING ELECTRONIC FILES

Just like paper files, electronic files need to be well-organized and labeled correctly so that they are identifiable and accessible to all appropriate users. This need applies especially to government records which are subject to legal requirements concerning the availability, integrity, accessibility, and, if appropriate, the confidentiality of public records.

Efficient management of electronic records begins with accurate file naming. The following file-naming conventions incorporate recommendations in electronic records management and information technology. This leaflet explores the general characteristics of records, how records are used and referenced, and file-naming rules that should be applied to all electronic records.

An electronic record is machine-readable, meaning that it requires hardware and software to be accessed and read. Electronic records include documents; spreadsheets; databases; and image, video, and audio files. If not managed, a computer assigns a unique name to each file when saved; but the name does not provide a context for the file, nor is it logical for ready human access. For example, the default file name in some word-processing programs consists of the first few words entered on the first page. Images are frequently labeled with sequential numbers. These types of file names do not promote accessibility and ease of identification. For ease of explanation, the examples in these guidelines will focus primarily on documents; however, the standards outlined below apply to all file formats. In addition, this document will frequently use “record” and “file” interchangeably, as the records discussed here are generally files on a computer.

This document is intended to be used primarily by individuals creating records on a daily basis. The recommendations discussed below are one suggested system; however, every recommendation may not be relevant to every office. This information is designed to provide a foundation for developing a consistent and easy to use file-naming standard that can be implemented in any office.

Many offices utilize a network server to store files so that they are accessible from multiple locations by various people. This system structure requires that file names (as well as folder structures) make sense to more than just the creator. A file name should be clear to everyone in the department or agency in which the file was created. Records should be distinguishable from files with similar subjects, as well as different versions of the same file.

When other individuals access a record, they may be using different operating systems (Microsoft, MAC), different versions of the system (e.g. Windows Vista, Windows XP), or different software programs (e.g. Microsoft Word, Notepad, WordPerfect). It is important to follow rules that will allow a file to be recognized in as many different environments as possible.

Recommendation #1: Establish an agency-wide folder management system that relates to the agency's Records Disposition Authority (RDA).

The point of organizing an agency's electronic records is to enable accessibility, not only by current users but by future users as well. When an agency cannot locate requested records, whether by the public, auditors, or lawyers, it may face legal action and/or negative publicity. Efficient records management systems reduce the inaccessibility of records. The file management system should be based on the agency's Records Disposition Authority (RDA) with folder names corresponding to the subfunctions listed in the RDA. Agency RDAs are available online at <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/officials/staterda.html>.

The folder management system should be implemented agency-wide to ensure the accessibility of records throughout the agency.

Recommendation #2: Separate permanent records from temporary records.

In the paper world, agencies separate permanent from temporary records to ensure that permanent records are not accidentally included in the destruction of obsolete temporary records. In the electronic world, agencies should have file structures that separate permanent records from temporary ones in order to prevent the accidental destruction of the permanent records. Separating permanent records from temporary records also makes them more accessible. One way to separate permanent from temporary records is to have a drive on an agency's server which is only for permanent records. Separating permanent records from temporary records will aid in the transfer of permanent records to the Alabama Department of Archives and History. For information on transferring permanent electronic records to ADAH, see our leaflet Transferring Electronic Records to the Alabama Department of Archives and History, available on our website at [web address here](#).

Ideally, agencies will also separate permanent records which contain restricted information, such as social security numbers, from permanent records with no restricted information. Agencies should name folders so that those that contain restricted information in them can be easily identified. For example, agencies could place an abbreviation, such as RES, at the beginning of

each folder name containing restricted materials. This will help to ensure restricted materials are not accidentally made available to the public.

Recommendation #3: Separate temporary active records from temporary inactive records.

In fulfilling their established retention periods, electronic records may need to be retained longer than their usefulness to the agency. Agencies should establish an electronic filing system that separates temporary active from temporary inactive records. Folder names for inactive records should include the destruction date of records they contain. This will ensure that records are not destroyed before their retention period expires. Agencies that destroy records before their retention period ends may face legal action and/or negative publicity.

Recommendation #4: The file name should include all necessary descriptive information, independent of where it is stored:

Records will be moved from their original location. Files are frequently copied to other folders, downloaded, and e-mailed. It is important to ensure that the file name, independent of the folder where the original file lives, is sufficiently descriptive. For instance, if the following files were pulled out of their appropriate folders, they would appear to be the same file: minutes.doc (the information before the final \ indicates folder location):

gr_appraisal\SRC\MINUTES\2011\minutes.doc

gr_appraisal\LGRC\MINUTES\2011\minutes.doc

While this is an organized way of storing records, it is only efficient as long as the files stay in their original folders in their original context. When multiple staff members work on a project, it is easy to misfile a document. As soon as “minutes.doc” is copied to another folder or e-mailed to another individual, the context provided by the folders in which the document is nested is lost. Context is particularly important in legal situations, because it supports authenticity and trustworthiness claims about a record. Losing the context of a record can possibly compromise its trustworthiness and, therefore, its validity or admissibility for court proceedings. Thus, the recommended names of the files above are

gr_appraisal\SRC\MINUTES\2011\ SRC_minutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc

gr_appraisal\LGRC\MINUTES\2011\ LGRC_minutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc

where the names of the files are SRC_minutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc and LGRC_minutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc, respectfully.

Recommendation #5: Avoid using special characters or spaces in a file name.

/\ : * ? “ < > | [] & \$, . – are frequently used for specific tasks in an electronic environment. For example, a forward slash is used to identify folder levels in Microsoft products, while Mac operating systems use a colon. Periods are used in front of file name extensions to denote file formats such as .jpg and .doc. Using them in a file name could result in lost files or errors in file searches. Similarly, spaces are frequently translated in a Web environment to be read as “%20”. For example,

Naming tutorial.doc would appear as Naming%20tutorial.doc

if it were available online. This alteration can cause confusion in identifying the actual file name. Spaces in file names can also cause broken links because word processing tools like Microsoft Word and e-mail clients like Microsoft Outlook recognize a space as an opportunity to move to another line. Therefore a link to

\\Archives\Intranet\naming conventions

could become

\\Archives\Intranet\naming
conventions

Underscores are not used for specific tasks by either Microsoft or Mac operating systems. Thus, they can be used in place of periods and spaces in file names. For example, the underscores in the following example aid in the understanding of the file, without the operating system mistaking them for commands.

SRC_MIN_2011_04_27FINAL.doc

Recommendation #6: Strive for brevity while ensuring inclusion of basic elements.

Another difference that is found among operating systems and software is the acceptable length of file names. Some systems allow up to 256 characters, while others allow far fewer. Generally about 30 characters is a sufficient length to capture enough descriptive information for naming a record.

Recommendation #7: Format dates consistently.

Having the relevant date associated with the file is essential. Although many operating systems store date information with the file, as users move the file among folders and computers, and as the file is re-saved as revisions are made, the dates change. A file could have dates that do not make sense to its original creator.

The best way to prevent confusion is to embed the relevant date (the date that the file was created or revised) in the file name itself.

Some workgroups might find it more useful to have the date at the start of the file name, while others might prefer it at the end. Either way, the date is a useful sorting tool when files are organized. Just be sure to keep the structure consistent.

The best way to list the date is based on an international standard: ISO 8601. This standard specifies numeric representations of date and time to be used in electronic format. The international standard date notation is:

YYYY_MM_DD or YYYYMMDD

For example, April 5, 2011 is written as 2011_04_05 or 20110405.

This format allows ease of sorting and comparing files by date and prevents confusion with other date formats (especially in other formats that use just two digits for the year).

For example, the meeting minutes of the State Records Commission from April 27, 2011 could be named SRC_minutes_2011_04_27 or SRC_minutes_20110427.

Recommendation #8: To more easily manage revisions and drafts, include a version number.

A file will frequently have multiple versions/drafts. The versions may result from a workgroup collaborating on a document or an individual making multiple drafts before a document becomes the final version. The existence of multiple drafts makes identifying the most current draft or the official final draft difficult. To ease the identification of specific versions, use standard version numbers. The easiest way to do this is to use the letter “v” to represent “version number”. Then, “v01”, “v02”, “v03” can be added as needed to a file and the main file name can stay the same. This is much more effective than other common additions like “update”, “new”, “old”, etc. An exception to this recommendation is using “FINAL” to indicate the final version of the document. This can be helpful to quickly identify the most accurate version of the document. When using “FINAL” be sure to use it instead of the version number, rather than in addition to it.

Recommendation #9: Be consistent.

The most important recommendation of file naming is to be consistent. Some choices will need to be made about organization that affect the entire workgroup: where to include the date, what abbreviations to use, etc. Regardless of what the group decides, it is only effective if everyone follows the same practices.

Recommendation #10: There will be exceptions.

One notable exception is the batch-scanning process. This process typically relies on a program that sets its own parameters on the file names allowed. If this is the case, take advantage of the folder hierarchy and, when possible, apply the rules outlined here to folder names. Avoid spaces and special characters. Be consistent throughout the project; consider developing a file-naming standard for all batch-scanning projects.

If any exceptions arise, ensure agency staff members agree on a solution and implement it agency-wide.

Note: this leaflet is not going to apply absolutely to every situation; it should be used as a guide to encourage discussion in offices and workgroups, in order to develop file-naming practices that work best in those specific environments.

If you have questions, contact us:
Alabama Department of Archives and History
Government Records Division
(334) 242-4452
records@archives.alabama.gov

This document borrows heavily on guidelines set forth by the Government Records Branch of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources.