Best Practices for Naming Electronic Records

Establishing a file naming convention is a key part of managing electronic records throughout their lifecycle. A naming convention helps keep records orderly and accessible. In contrast bad or inconsistent file naming can lead to accidental overwriting and misplaced files. A consistent naming convention:

- helps organize electronic records during active record use,
- encourages better management and maintenance while inactive, and
- provides more efficient access to electronic records for personal or legal needs.

This document provides best practices for the naming of files and folders. File naming conventions that follow these best practices can be applied to files and folders on personal or network drives, as part of digitization projects, or to items in a content management system. They may be used by individuals or result in policies adopted by government units or private institutions and distributed to all staff members.

Be Consistent

Keep the process simple and easy to administer and use. Before you start saving files, determine and document:

- which abbreviations will be used and how to use them correctly,
- how to name repeating documents (meeting minutes, news releases, etc.),
- whether a date should come at the beginning or the end of the file name, etc.

The standards chosen by your organization will depend on your business purpose and the types of documents you produce.

Create unique file names

File names should be short, descriptive, and easy to understand by people not familiar with the contents. They should make sense over time, not just to people currently working with the records. File names should be distinctive enough to exist independent of their original folder location as electronic records can be moved or copied to other folders. Do not allow applications or systems to “auto-save” a file name since they are unlikely to be helpful over time.

The examples below do not represent all available options. Consider ways to incorporate such things as division or program names, document types (agenda, speech, minutes), and/or a geographic location consistently into file names. Remember the metadata or

information you choose to include, as well as the correlation with any related paper records, will aid in the usefulness and access of these records.

NewPolicy_Released_yyyymmdd.doc (for a release date)

MyBook_Published_yyyymmdd.doc (for a publication date)

Policy_v1_20160401.doc (for a version number)

Appraisal_cbclifton_20160523.doc (for a creator)

20160704_SpeechLaCrosse.doc (for content description)

20160901_GeneralPublicNewsRelease.doc (for intended audience)

20161019_Committee_ABC_Minutes.doc (for an associated group)

ElectronicRecordsGrant_Workflow_20160831.doc (for project name or number)

PolicyDept_Report_20160603.doc (for a department name or number)

RDA_00003000_20160203.doc (for a Records Disposition Authority)

Document the use of abbreviations

Abbreviations are a great way to shorten a file name and still provide some context for the file. It is critical to document the appropriate use and meaning of abbreviations in your file naming conventions to apply them consistently and make them understood across time. For example, if you use an abbreviation for a program area or division, that abbreviation may not be understood once the file is transferred to the State Archives or even within the same agency if that program area is disbanded during an agency reorganization.

Use only alpha-numeric characters

Avoid using special characters such as: &! % / \& ? # , - : < > in all file and folder titles. While your software may allow them, these characters may make it difficult to move files between systems or to render the file name correctly on a web server.

Additionally, a period should only be used between the file name and extension in a file name.

Be aware of spaces

Spaces are often reserved for operating system functions and might be misread when moving files between application programs or into proprietary systems. As an alternative, you can remove spaces altogether, then capitalize each word in the file name or use underscores (_) to represent spaces.

- 20160214_NoSpacesHere.doc
- No_Spaces_Here_20160331.doc

Realistically, it may be difficult to get employees to remove all spaces from electronic file titles, but if you are successful in implementing the other standards outlined here, spaces can be removed via file renaming software as needed.

Keep it short

The length of the file's name is important. Overly long file names combined with long file path names can render the record unavailable by the system. For Windows systems, it is recommended that total file path lengths should be kept below 260 characters. Shorter file names keeps a file path below that character limit.

- 20160907_ReviewBoard_Agenda.doc
- 20160907_ReviewBoard_Minutes.doc

Add dates that follow the yyyymmdd format

By embedding a date into the file title, the record can be managed independent of the system in which it resides. As records are managed over time and moved between drives and systems, documents can adopt a "create date" based on the date it is moved into a new folder or system rather than the date it was first created on.

Using the YYYYMMDD or YYYY-MM-DD format, follows a consistent, international standard, that maintains records in chronological order. In general, place the date at the beginning of the file name for documents representing events that are date specific or recurring and at the end of the file name for records which are more likely to be located by title than the event date such as a policy or procedure.

- 20160301_GroupAgenda.doc
- 20160301_GroupMinutes.doc
- 20150101_SpeechName.doc
- FileNamingPolicy_20160901.doc
- Emergency_Procedures_20150302.doc

Incorporate version control into the file name

For documents that have multiple drafts, include the version number (e.g. _v##) in the file name. While using "draft" as part of the file name is often used, it is not helpful in distinguishing one version from another. When finished, use "_Final" for the final version of

the document. When combined, it becomes easier to identify the drafts which can be deleted versus the final document that needs to be saved.

- 2016_AnnualReport_v1.doc
- 2016_AnnualReport_v2.doc
- 2016_AnnualReport_Final.doc
- 20110305_NewsRelease_v1.doc
- 20110305_NewsRelease_Final.doc
- 20130712_NewsRelease_Final.doc

When using sequential numbering, make sure to use leading zeros

Sequential numbering allows for multiple objects to sort correctly in a folder which will help you find things quickly. This becomes particularly critical for folders containing large numbers of records such as mass digitization projects.

For a sequence of 1-10:	For a sequence of 1-100:
ScanProject_01.pdf	ScanProject_001.pdf
ScanProject_02.pdf	ScanProject_010.pdf
ScanProject_03.pdf	ScanProject_050.pdf
ScanProject_04.pdf	ScanProject_100.pdf
ScanProject_05.pdf	
ScanProject_06.pdf	Without sequential numbering:
ScanProject_07.pdf	ScanProject_1.pdf
ScanProject_08.pdf	ScanProject_11.pdf
ScanProject_09.pdf	ScanProject_5.pdf
ScanProject_10.pdf	ScanProject_50.pdf

Additional Resources

The Digital Preservation Coalition's Technology Watch Publications

The Digital Preservation Coalition's Digital Preservation Handbook