

How To Conduct A Records Inventory

South Carolina Department of Archives and History
Archives and Records Management Division

Introduction

When you conduct an inventory, you will locate, identify, describe, count, and measure all records in your office and storage areas — all loose and bound papers, microforms, optical disks, and magnetic tapes and disks. The information you gather will allow you to manage and dispose of your records systematically and will help you decide which records to reformat into microfilm or some other medium. In short, it will constitute the foundation of your entire records management program. Once you have obtained an accurate inventory, we at the South Carolina Department of Archives and History will help you develop records retention schedules which will tell you what records to destroy, which to store temporarily, and which to store permanently. For more information on scheduling records, refer to Public Records Information Leaflet No. 18, *How to Establish Records Retention Schedules*.

Who conducts the inventory?

Under the terms of the state's Public Records Act (*Code of Laws of South Carolina, 1976, Section 30-1-20, as amended*) all government bodies are authorized to appoint a records officer and to vest that individual with the authority needed to develop and supervise a records management program. That records officer should supervise the inventory and serve as contact between your agency or local government and the State Archives. In addition, your agency or local government should appoint a staffer in each of your departments to either help with or conduct the inventory.

Ideally, the individuals who conduct the inventory will have experience with the records, filing systems, and operations of government offices. Usually, however, conditions are less than ideal, and the task is given to staffers or part-time workers who must be trained before they begin. The use of staffers has several advantages: (1) they know the records, (2) you will not have to give outsiders access to restricted records, and (3) there will be no additional costs. We can help you train your staffers either on-site or at the Archives and History Center in Columbia.

Planning the inventory

Communication

Since the success of an inventory project depends on the cooperation of the people involved with the records, your top executive should send them a directive telling them about the inventory and inviting them to a meeting where the records officer will explain the process, assure them that the inventory is to identify records, not to criticize their methods, introduce the people who will conduct the inventory, and answer questions. Before the work begins, the records officer or a designee should visit your office supervisors to discuss the project, enlist their cooperation, and make it clear that the inventory staffers must:



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- ◆ have access to all unrestricted records and be given the information they need about those that are restricted
- ◆ have access to staff to obtain information on the way the records are organized and used.

Training and supplies

Your inventory staff should attend a training session conducted by your records officer, a records consultant, or by Archives staffers who will be happy to train on-site, so the trainees can work with the records to be inventoried. You should supply each inventory staffer with:

- ◆ organizational charts and any other material that describes the main functions of each office
- ◆ blank inventory forms, which are [available from the Archives](#)
- ◆ a letter-sized lined pad
- ◆ a ball-point pen, a pencil, a felt-tip pen or marker
- ◆ adhesive labels to identify records and containers and to show the record has been inventoried
- ◆ a flashlight, gloves, and a dust mask for storage areas

Preliminary survey

Survey all office and storage areas before you begin the inventory to:

- ◆ identify the location of records
- ◆ estimate their total volume
- ◆ flag any hazards
- ◆ note any problems with space and storage

Arranging a time

Following the survey, your records officer should work with the department heads to set up a schedule for inventorying each office and storage area. The schedule should be flexible enough to accommodate priorities — like the preparation of budgets, end-of-year reports, and so forth — and to revise as needed.

Conducting the inventory

When you conduct your inventory, you will include all your records and exclude your non-records.

Records and non-records

Records

You create records whenever your office either generates or receives information that gives evidence of its activities. Records include completed forms, correspondence, maps, drawings, photographs, reports, and so forth. The recording media may be paper, microform, optical disk, magnetic tape, or disk.

Non-records

- ◆ Reference materials. These are the convenience copies that are made of records you create or receive and publications that are not evidence of your governmental activities — magazines, catalogues, trade journals, federal or state policies or regulations, books, pamphlets, and so forth. These are not records and are not, therefore, candidates for records retention and disposition schedules.
- ◆ Blank forms. Until they are filled in, blank forms are supplies, not records.

Inventory forms

You will inventory your records as series — groups of identical or related records that can be evaluated as a unit because they are normally filed, used, and disposed of together — and record the information you gather on an inventory form. To help locate specific records in a series at a later date, you may find it helpful to fill out a separate form — omitting recurring data about the series — for each of the locations where records in a series are filed or stored and to consolidate the information from these forms onto a master inventory



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afterwards. You will eventually use the information from the master inventory to develop your records retention/disposition schedules.

You should use the standardized records series inventory form we have developed. You can get copies and arrange training sessions and workshops either on-site or at the Archives and History Center in Columbia by contacting either our state or local government records services units at 803.896.6123.

Where to begin

If your inventory staffers lack experience, start with your active records — those in your offices. They will be more accessible, better organized, and office staffers will be on hand to help. Once your inventory staffers become familiar with your active records, it will be easier for them to tackle the less-well organized records in your storage areas. If a particular office has its own storage area, inventory the records there as soon as you finish the office inventory. If several of your departments share a central storage facility, inventory the records in all those departments and then the records in storage. Exceptions to these situations, however, will arise. Sometimes, for example, you may want to inventory only the records in a single storage area to see what series you can schedule for disposal. In situations like these, your inventory must take related records in other areas into account because the schedules you establish will affect them as well.

Establishing a system

No matter where you inventory, you should be systematic. Begin at a specific location in a room, proceed logically, tag or label each book or file drawer as it is inventoried, and flag those records that are vital or permanent. These precautions will spotlight your valuable records and decrease your chance of overlooking or duplicating information, especially if you frequently stop and restart — a situation that often arises when the staffers who are taking the inventory are conducting regular office duties as well. Look at every record. Open each file drawer, each box, and each book, and check the accuracy of each label — often old volumes with one title hold a number of different record series, and sometimes old labels are not removed when the contents of files are changed.

Detail

You will not need to spend a lot of time going through loose items in files to gather information on individual names, dates, and types of documents. On the other hand, records that are difficult to identify and those that are older and contain significant historical data will require more study. See sample of completed form on pages 4 and 5.

Where to send your completed forms

When you have completed three or four forms, you should send them to one of our records services units — either state or local depending on your circumstance — for a quick review to head off problems early in the project. Our analysts will look them over, help you develop a timetable for the submission of the rest, then review those, consult with you as necessary, and use the data to prepare your records retention schedules. Since we will retain your inventory forms, you should make a copy of each one for your files.

Conclusion

Your records inventory will enable you to evaluate the content and function of your records and will give you data that will be crucial to your ability to make valid, justifiable decisions on the ultimate retention or destruction of those records. Conduct your inventory well, and you will build a solid foundation for a good records management program; conduct it poorly, and you will set the stage for continuing problems.



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South Carolina Department of Archives and History Division of Archives and Records Management RECORD SERIES INVENTORY FORM	Action Required <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Establish Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Revise Schedule <i>Schedule Number</i>
TYPE OR PRINT CLEARLY. COMPLETE ONE FORM FOR EACH RECORD SERIES. RECORD GROUP NUMBER: 47	
Section A. Identification of Program Unit and Contact Person	
1. State or Local Agency Any state or local government agency	2. Division or Office Finance Office
3. Subdivision	4. Program Unit
5. Person Completing Form: (Name) Charles Hampton (Title) Accounting Clerk (Telephone) 227-1212 (Date) 04/14/2009	
Section B. Description of Records	
6. Record Series (a) Title: Receipts (b) Variant Title: Receipt Carbons	7. Dates of Records (a) Beginning 1990 to Ending Present (b) Missing Dates: None
8. Are records still created? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes <input type="checkbox"/> no	9. Are records indexed? <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no If yes, title and location:
10. Arrangement of Record Series <input type="checkbox"/> Alphabetically by <input type="checkbox"/> Chronologically by <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Numerically by receipt number <input type="checkbox"/> Unarranged <input type="checkbox"/> Alphanumeric by <input type="checkbox"/> Other	
11. Description of Records (a) Who creates and/or uses the records and for what purpose? Copies of receipts issued by the Finance Office to persons turning over funds.	
(b) Informational Content Date, receipt number, from whom received, amount, purpose, authorized signature.	
(c) Value of Records (check all that apply) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Administrative <input type="checkbox"/> Legal <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Fiscal <input type="checkbox"/> Historical <input type="checkbox"/> Other	
(d) Are these records vital? <input type="checkbox"/> yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> no	
(e) Reference Frequency 1 times <input type="checkbox"/> daily <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> weekly <input type="checkbox"/> monthly <input type="checkbox"/> yearly for ___ months 1 years. Never after 3 years	



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For more information

State agencies, colleges, universities, and technical colleges

Contact the State Government Records Services Unit, Division of Archives and Records Management, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 8301 Parklane Road, Columbia, SC 29223.

Telephone 803.896.6123 Fax 803.896.6138

Counties, municipalities, school districts, and special purpose districts

Contact the Local Government Records Services Unit, Division of Archives and Records Management, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 8301 Parklane Road, Columbia, SC 29223.

Telephone 803.896.6122 Fax 803.896.6138

