



How to Preserve Archival Material

Under proper conditions, textual records can last for decades. There are a number of factors, however, that can lead to deterioration and the loss of these irreplaceable items. Some of the most common preservation challenges are listed below:

- Dirt and dust
- Pests, such as insects and rodents
- Moisture and mold
- High acid content and poor aging characteristics
- Physical and chemical contaminants such as ink, rust, rubber bands, adhesive tape, plastics, paint fumes, oils, lotions, dyes and household cleaning products

Some other tips and recommendations for preserving archives at home:

- Store archival materials at temperatures between 18°C and 25°C with a relative humidity of approximately 50%.
- Keep records in an area with limited fluctuations in temperature and humidity and limit exposure to light.
- If an original document is going to be displayed, frame the item with acid-free materials and avoid the use of adhesive tape or dry mounting. Use framing glass with a UV filter, and add an acid-free mat to keep the photograph or document from touching the glass.
- Hang framed documents and photos away from direct light.
- Rather than framing and hanging original photographs and documents, consider framing and displaying copies instead. Keep the originals in a dark place.
- Wash your hands carefully before handling archival materials, and do not use hand lotion. Nitrile, vinyl or white cotton gloves work well for handling photographs, negatives and film as they prevent damage caused by oil in your skin. Be sure to use gloves with a snug fit to reduce the risk of tearing the item.

- Store papers and photographs in acid-free folders. Keep paper documents flat and unfolded if possible, as paper deteriorates fastest along fold lines.
- When using clear plastic sleeves, choose products that are made of chemically stable plastics such as polyester, polypropylene or polyethylene. These may be sold in packages and labeled as “archival.” Avoid sleeves made of more than one type of plastic, such as those with clear fronts and solid or textured backing, as the backing may contain PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastic and contribute to deterioration.
- Do not use metal paper clips on brittle paper, as they can rust and weaken paper around the clip.
- Do not use rubber bands, adhesive tape or glue.
- Avoid self-adhesive or “magnetic” photo albums. The adhesives in these products typically have poor aging properties and become sticky or brittle over time, causing discolouration of paper materials. This makes it difficult to remove photos from the album.
- Do not use ink or felt pen on the backs of photos. Sharp-pointed writing implements may cause damage to a photograph by leaving an impression. Instead, use a soft graphite pencil such as a 4B or 6B (available at the Provincial Archives of Alberta’s Archives Store) and write on the back of your photograph along the edge rather than in the centre of an image. Consider writing on the page next to a photograph if it is stored in an album or scrapbook.
- Never attempt to clean archival materials; even a soft eraser can damage a fragile document. If cleaning is required, consult a conservator by checking the Canadian Association of Professional Conservators’ website at www.capc-acrp.ca, or by contacting the Provincial Archives of Alberta.

Supplies such as photo corners, acid-free paper, polypropylene photograph sleeves and mat board are available at the Archives Store or in art and drafting supply stores.