

Digital acquisitions: Guidelines and checklists for working with donors

Adapted in 2019 from *Guidelines for library staff assisting donors to prepare their personal digital archives for transfer to NSLA libraries, 2011*

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Initial contact with donors

First contact might be initiated either by the donor or the library.

Use an approach similar to the one you use for paper archives, i.e. obtain essential details and indicate that you will be in contact within a standard reply period (e.g. four weeks), once you have been able to consider the information provided.

Record the information received in your offers tracking system or on a spreadsheet so that the results can be easily retrieved, and manipulated and analysed for statistical and planning purposes.

Basic questions could include:

- The donor's name and contact details.
- Is the donor the creator; if not who is?
- Does the material form part of an integrated paper/born-digital archive or does it stand alone?
- Is the material unique or have copies been kept in another format, e.g. paper?
- A general date range.
- The size of collection/extent of material on offer.
- A summary of content matter and the activities with which it was associated.
- If the born-digital component is part of a continuation of or part of a paper archive, what is the relationship of the contents to existing series?
- Is the material stored in its original form (i.e. on the creator's PC) or has it been transferred to a physical carrier?
- Which formats are represented, e.g. static documents, emails, websites, images?
- What software has been used? Most creators will be using Microsoft Office systems or Macintosh applications, although special non-standard software may also be represented.
- Which email system has been used and does the material include third party sites?
- What kind of supporting metadata has been created? It will be very important for this to be collected as part of the transfer of the records.
- Preferred transfer method to Library, e.g. as email attachment, copy to portable hard drive, via online server client or online web form.
- How ordered is the content, e.g. do the files have names, is there a structure? Request a printout of a screenshot of the directory structure and ask the donor to mark up which files are active and non-active.

- Have the files been backed up regularly and are copies stored in a separate safe location?
- Does the archive contain third party material and/or sensitive information?

Again, the above questions should be integrated as far as possible into possible into the existing documentation on your website so that personal digital records are incorporated in mainstream collecting activity.

Follow-up visit and/or conversation

It is usually necessary to work with the client rather than just send them checklists or surveys to complete. Ideally, born-digital archives should be appraised in-situ before being accepted, unless they are very small and stored on a physical carrier.

If the records are of potential interest to your library, try to arrange a follow-up visit to view the material and to conduct an introductory conversation with the creator and/or donor. This is the best way to make a first-hand assessment of the records and it will provide an opportunity for you to explain your library's current digital archiving program and where it is up to, e.g. just beginning, accepting physical format examples for testing, etc.

This early meeting will also enable you to provide guidance which is tailored to the creator/donor's specific needs. Emphasise that the transfer and preservation of born-digital content 'is a learning process for both parties'.

Be aware that, until your digital appraisal skills are fully developed, visiting donors can be a time-consuming process. Your time will need to be well-managed and factored into available workloads – good preparation and supporting documentation will assist in progressing conversations with donors.

Your visit will be more efficient if you forward donors a survey sheet or questionnaire ahead of time to get them thinking about their digital recordkeeping practices before you arrive. An example that could be adapted to your library's purposes is included at Appendix 1.

At this early stage it will be important to:

- Have a plan in place for managing the visit. Allow time for lots of questions but be prepared with exit scripts so that the session does not become bogged down in detail. Taking an assistant to assess the material whilst you talk to the donor can be a helpful technique. Record a list of any points outstanding for discussion at a follow-up meeting.
- Be aware that you also have a teaching role and you will need to guide creators on how to best create and manage their records for the long term. Explain that simple measures can have a dramatic impact on whether records will survive into the future. Have a handout ready with basic advice and a list of useful introductory websites and FAQs to give to the donor.
- Share your library's plans with the donor so that they can understand where their records sit within the bigger picture and clearly explain how your library intends to work with them.
- Make clear that in the short term it is your library's approach to assist creators to self-manage their born-digital personal archives and that their records may not necessarily be transferred to an institution immediately. Emphasise that is the library's role at this stage to assist the creator/donor prepare and curate their archive with a view to enhancing long term preservation and possible transfer at a future date.
- Be honest about where your program is at and do not be afraid to admit that your library has limited experience and doesn't have all the answers yet. Ask the donor if he/she has tried to use a disk that

was filed in a drawer five years ago and have had to make sense of it? Explain that this is akin to the challenge facing archivists when dealing with transfers of digital archival material.

- Explain that the collection and management of digital records is currently far more expensive than for their paper equivalents and that progress may be slow because of a lack of resources.
- Be upfront about which formats your library is unable to accept at this stage. For instance, you may be able to collect Word documents on physical format carriers but cannot yet preserve emails. Be ready to provide advice on how creators/donors can best manage more complex digital files until an institution is ready to accept them for transfer.
- Make clear that, whilst your library may be able to preserve simple files, providing access to them is much further away and will not be achievable in the short term as there are major technical, rights and access issues to be resolved.
- Ask for small a sample of files for testing purposes. This will enable you to identify technical or administrative issues prior to deposit. For example, technological difficulties (such as an inability to extract metadata, or non-rendering due to unusual colour encoding) can be encountered in otherwise straightforward files such as PDFs and TIFFs.
- Clarify whether the records form a continuation of an existing paper archive. Are the originator's creation patterns changing – for example, will the creator continue to work in a hybrid environment, or are the objects solely born-digital in the way they are/were created and used?
- Digital files are easy to copy and it is often difficult to identify the 'original' for acquisitions purposes. It is important, therefore, to determine if the donor is offering copies to other institutions, or retaining copies for their own use, to ensure that your library is absolutely clear about what it is acquiring.
- Version control is also important – hybrid collections in particular may contain various iterations of the original object. For example, original negatives, photographic prints, digital photographs, and scans of the original images may be contained in a single archive. It is important to clarify if the digital files are born-digital or digitised copies or a combination of the two.
- Ask if there is any sensitive material, for example digital scans of traditional artefacts. In cases where the original objects are owned by others or housed in another institution third party access and rights questions are raised. Your library will need to develop a policy on whether to accept these kinds of records.
- Keep your antennae alert to any intention on the part of the donor to sell the archive or part thereof. Valuation of born-digital personal archives is in its infancy and purchase of material raises additional issues regarding use and resale – for example, how to avoid purchasing duplicate material in the future.
- Be wary of motives of donors who might wish to store confidential material and then re-access and work on at a later point in time – it is important to make sure that donors have really finished with material before transfer.
- In appraising records, be mindful that your selection decision should be primarily guided by the worth of the material itself, not on whether your library is currently able to preserve the format. As a principle, the significance of the material will be the key consideration but other factors such as the cost of preservation and technical constraints will also influence your decision. For example, if your institution was offered the digital archive of a Nobel laureate you would probably make efforts to

collect and preserve this even if your preservation program was still in its infancy.

- After assessing the intrinsic value of the material, basic technical appraisal questions would include 'Can we open this file?', 'Can we purchase software that can open this file?', 'Do we already have this material in hardcopy?', etc.

Current and future donors

When liaising with current and future donors you will have the advantage of obtaining a first-hand explanation of the 'how, what, when and why' of the record creation process which should be documented as fully as possible.

Recognise that relationships developed with creators/donors will be a long term ones and they need to be cultivated, managed and will benefit from regular review. Once a relationship has been initiated staff time will be needed to support the maker over the lifecycle of the creation process.

In addition to the suggestions provided below, point creators to NSLA's Personal digital archive toolkit (<https://www.nsla.org.au/resources/personal-digital-archive-toolkit>).

Donors can be encouraged to:

- Adopt good recordkeeping practices now to ensure that their digital archives will be acceptable for transfer to an institution in the future.
- Make maintenance of their archive an ongoing housekeeping task and choose solutions which will fit their working style as they are more likely to be used and stick!
- Create documents in open, preservation-friendly format software as much as possible or migrate data to these formats when they are able to do so; avoid complex formats which are more difficult to preserve where possible.
- Create metadata as they go – make data self-documenting by using meaningful titles, by including a simple descriptive statement in the document, or by using the properties field. This will involve more work but unless it is done libraries will not be able to make sense of their records.
- Take responsibility for regularly weeding their digital archive and delete unwanted copies or low value material as they go. This will free up storage space and make it easier to navigate to, manage and preserve more important data.
- Regularly backup files and keep copies in a safe separate location to guard against disk failure or theft. Explain that backup is not the same as long term preservation – backup is intended for emergency protection, whilst long term preservation enables enduring preservation and use into the future.
- Maintain their hardware systems and have them serviced regularly and/or replace every 5-10 years to pre-empt system failure.
- Supply deposit documentation with each transfer of records, preferably using a standard form supplied by your library – see Appendices 4-5 for examples. Importantly, this will include a printout of the 'manifest' (i.e. the directory structure) of the hard drive.
- Organise and name files meaningfully – make sure that each file is clearly identifiable, has a meaningful title, and is enveloped in a folder within a hierarchical structure. An attempt should be made to describe any unidentified files. Label any physical carriers.
- Provide a record of their working methods, filing schema and other contextual information.

- Highlight any special functions in the records that might need to be preserved, e.g. track changes, interactive art objects, etc. If the functionalities are of no importance, then conversion of content to a simple Word document may simplify the file and facilitate preservation.
- Manage emails with a view to enhancing their long term preservation by using a service which allows for easy downloads, by deleting non-essential and duplicate messages, by creating and using a folder structure, and by using email organiser functions, etc.
- Be aware of intellectual property and privacy issues – donors will need to clearly identify in your rights agreement those digital objects which will require an access condition other than available for reference
- Remove passwords – password-protected files are problematic for long-term preservation.
- Keep up to date with technological and rights issues and adapt work practices to maximise the survival of their digital archive into the future.
- Donate any redundant hardware and software that is needed by the library to assist with the ingest process of their records.



Appendix 1 – Example of a survey check sheet

AIMS Digital Material Survey – Personal Digital Archives (Part I)

Note: This part of the survey is designed to be a prompt sheet for phone/face-to-face interview with donors by curators/digital archivists.

1. Digital Material Creation

- 1.1 Are you solely responsible for creating your digital files?
- 1.2 If not, who else is involved, and what are their roles?
- 1.3 Do you maintain digital files created by others? If yes, how do you separate your files and files created by others?
- 1.4 Do you separate your personal files from your work files?
- 1.5 What are the earliest and latest creation dates (roughly) of your digital files?

2. Varieties of Digital Material

- 2.1 What types of content do you create? (E.g. writings, research notes, journals/diaries, correspondence, photographs, research database, etc.)
- 2.2 What types of digital files are created? (e.g. word processing files, images, spreadsheets, databases, etc.)
- 2.3 If you create files in both digital and paper formats, do certain files exist in both formats? (e.g. drafts of writings, email, etc.) Can you identify them?

3. Digital Material Organization

- 3.1 How are digital files named?
- 3.2 Is some kind of version control used? (e.g. filename1, filename2, to represent 1st, 2nd draft of the file filename.)
- 3.3 How are digital files organized? (e.g. filed in named folders?)
- 3.4 Are digital files destroyed in regular intervals?
- 3.5 Do you use more than one computer (e.g. office desktop, office portable computer, home desktop, etc.)? If yes, how do you synchronize files between different computers?

4. Mobile Device

- 4.1 Do you use smart phones (e.g. Blackberries, iPhone, Android phone, etc.)? If yes, do you store contents in the smart phone elsewhere?
- 4.1 Do you use tablets PC (e.g. iPad, etc.)? If yes, do you store contents in the tablet PC elsewhere?

5. Email

- 5.1 Do you have multiple email accounts?
- 5.2 Which email programs/services are you using? (e.g. Email program provided by your work place, Outlook, Mac Mail, Hotmail, Gmail, Yahoo! Mail, etc.)
- 5.3 How is email organized? (e.g. in self-created email folders, etc.)
- 5.4 How is email saved? (e.g. untouched in the email program, a copy in your PC, printed out in paper, etc.)
- 5.5 Are email and paper correspondence managed together or separately?
- 5.6 Do you use address books?
- 5.7 Is there a space quota assigned to your email account? If yes, have you ever exceeded the quota assigned?

6. Calendar Software

- 6.1 Do you use calendar software with your computer? (e.g. Outlook, Google Calendar, 30 Boxes etc.) Which one?
- 6.2 Do you use calendar software in your mobile device?
- 6.3 Do you have any synchronization issue between the calendars in your mobile device and your computer?

7. Webpages / Blogs

- 7.1 Do you have webpages / blogs?
- 7.2 Are webpages / blogs updated? How often? By whom?
- 7.3 What software do you use to update webpages / blogs?
- 7.4 Have copies (digital or paper) of previous versions been kept?

8. Social Networking Sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.)

- 8.1 Do you have social networking accounts?
- 8.2 Is account information (e.g. profiles, photos, etc.) updated? How often? By whom?

8.3 Have copies (digital or paper) of previous versions been kept?

9. Photo / Video Sharing Sites (e.g. Flickr, Picasa, YouTube, etc.)

9.1 Do you post photos / videos to these web sites? If yes, which one?

9.2 How often do you post contents?

9.3 Do you delete photos / videos posted? If yes, do you have a copy of the deleted postings?

10. Document Sharing Sites (e.g. SlideShare, Scribd, Google Doc, etc.)

10.1 Do you post documents to these web sites? If yes, which one?

10.2 How often do you post contents?

10.3 Do you delete documents posted? If yes, do you have a copy of the deleted postings?

11. Digital Files Storage / Backup

11.1 Do you / your institution have a backup routine for your files / emails? If you don't know, do you mind we ask your technical support? How can we contact your technical support?

11.2 What media are used for backup files? (e.g. optical disk, hard disk, file server, web based backup service such as SugarSync., etc.)

11.3 Do you transfer files in your old computer to your new computer? If yes, what types of files are transferred? Did you encounter any problems in transferring the files?

11.4 Do you keep your old computers? Roughly when were they being used? Can you tell us what platforms they run on?

11.5 Have you ever experienced a serious hardware failure (e.g. hard-drive crash)? If yes, were the files in the affected computer recovered?

11.6 Are any digital files stored in unusual storage media? (e.g. punch cards, 8 inch. floppy diskettes, etc.)

12. Work Habits

12.1 Can you tell us about your work habits of using computers / mobile device? (e.g. always online, etc.)

12.2 Do you share computer with other people? If yes, how do files created by different people separated?

12.3 Since a visual representation of working space may provide researchers additional information about your works, do you mind we take photos of your computer with surrounding space?

12.4 Do you have any alternative online persona? If so, what are they and under what circumstance are they used?

13. Privacy and security

13.1 Are some digital file types of a sensitive nature? (e.g. tax records, medical records, peer-review comments, letters of recommendation, student records, etc.)

13.2 Are there files that you would want destroyed? If yes, please provide details so that we can act upon when we encounter such files when processing your files.

13.3 Do any digital files require passwords?

13.4 Where are user names and passwords kept? What service / software are used to save them?

13.5 Do you use digital watermarks? On what types of digital files? For what reasons?

14. File Transfer Arrangement

14.1 Do you want to delete any files / re-organize the files before the transfer?

14.2 Are there files you would like to transfer to us later? When?

This work is based on the Paradigm records survey published by the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

AIMS Digital Material Survey – Personal Digital Archives (Part II)

Note: This part of the survey is designed to be filled out by digital archivists regarding technical details of the tools used to create digital material.

1. Hardware

- 1.1 List the hardware configurations of each computers / mobile device. (e.g. manufacturer, model no, cpu, ram, hard drive capacity, video card, etc.)
- 1.2 Find out if the computers have USB ports or CD writers which could be used to copy the digital files.

2. Software

- 2.1 List the operating system and other system software with version no., installed in all the hardware (in 1).
- 2.2 Check if system date and time are set correctly. List the “Time Zone” used, if any.
- 2.3 With the help of the donor, list the main application software, with version no., used to create digital files.
- 2.4 If Microsoft Office is used, find out if the “User Name” field is set to the name of the donor. Find out similar setting for other main application software used.

3. Internet Access

- 3.1 Find out if the digital archivist can use the Internet access in the donor’s office using the digital archivist’s portable computer?

4. Networking

- 4.1 With the help of the donor, confirm if the computer is connected to file servers. Confirm if the donor save files in the file server. How much file server space is used by the donor?

5. Security

- 5.1 With the help of the donor, confirm if login is required to access desktop computers / mobile devices?
- 5.2 With the help of the donor, confirm if a digital certificate is used by the donor to login / sign digital files / encrypt digital files?
- 5.3 With the help of the donor, confirm if digital files are encrypted?

This work is based on the Paradigm records survey published by the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.