

Preserving History

A Brief Guide to Storing Documents and Items

Agenda, not necessarily in this order.

- Critical Questions
- What Not To Do
- The Big Picture
- Those Tiny Things
- Additional Information

Do you feel like this?



And wish you had this?



From “Woah, what?” to “Nice!” The evolution of storage.



What's that smell?

We all probably have documents stashed away in ordinary corrugated cardboard boxes. However, over time, the organic materials will break down and cause the paper or fabric to deteriorate if not properly protected inside the box (off-gassing). Wooden bookshelves will do this too.

You've smelled an old book, kind of musty, maybe a bit like vinegar?

Additionally, if the box gets wet, it can mold and damage, if not destroy, what's inside.

The decision of how to store your items in is entirely up to you and depending upon your needs, wants, and allowable space, but let's compare.



Paper or Plastic, The Debate Continues

Paper

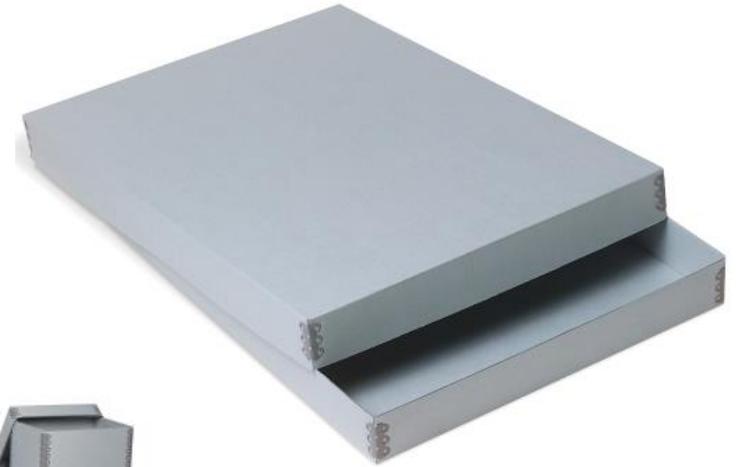
- Opaque
- Acid-free (ideal)
- Various sizes and colors
- Binder rings for sleeves
- Stacks nicely on a shelf
- Doesn't smell like plastic
- Can write or stick labels easily

Plastic

- Can be locked
- Clear or Opaque
- Generally sturdier
- Keeps out liquids
- Various sizes and colors
- Keeps out critters, big and small
- Can double as a coffee table

Acid-Free Cardboard

Clamshell, pamphlet, photo, newspaper, nesting, letter



Clear plastic

- Does not protect from UVA/UVB
- Can see what items are in there
- Available in multiple sizes at different price points



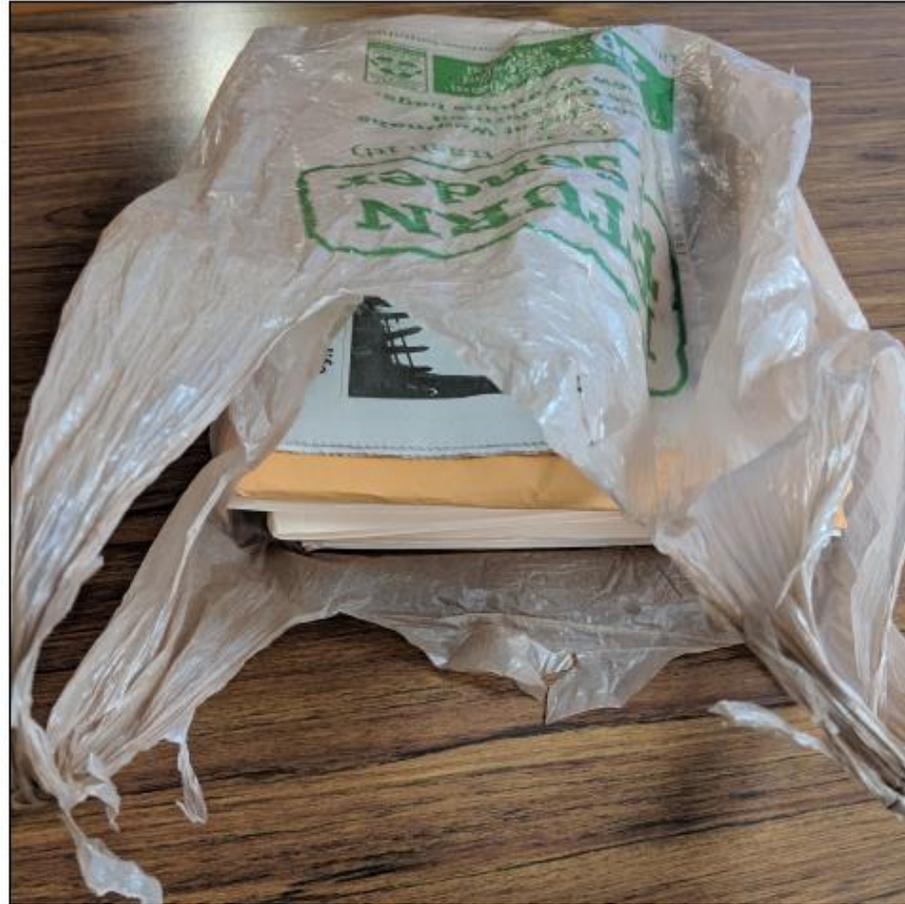
Opaque plastic

- Generally less expensive
- Not many smaller sizes available, does have quite large options
- Keeps out UVA/UVB light



DO NOT EVER DO THIS

(unless you are transporting them somewhere else.)



Critical Questions

- Is it fragile?
- Will it be on display?
- What is your budget?
- What size is the item?
- What is the item made of?
- Is it flat, or three-dimensional?
- Is it going to be handled often?
- Is the cover falling off; is it ripped?

Okay, down to the small stuff.

- Plastic sleeves are great for storing paper that gets handled
- Linens/textiles can be rolled in tissue, then put in a tube or box
- Glass needs to be protected-various supplies exist
- For 3D items, small boxes or divided boxes work well
- Books can be wrapped in acid-free paper and stored vertical

Types of Materials (in order of cost, high to low)

- **Archival Polyester:** Archival polyester (PET) is also known by the brand names Melinex and Mylar. In sheets and rolls, it can be used to line wooden shelves as a protective barrier, to make book jacket covers and to cover rolled textiles. For document storage, you will find envelopes, sleeves, L-sleeves, folders and page protectors made out of archival polyester.
- **Polypropylene:** heat-resistant and provides a highly protective barrier against moisture and vapors. It is slightly less clear than archival polyester but is clearer and more rigid than polyethylene.
- **Polyethylene:** has a filmy appearance but is an economical choice for items that need protection but not complete transparency.
- **PVC** is NOT our friend. It will cause breakdown of materials.
- **<https://www.gaylord.com/resources/understanding-plastics-for-preservation>**

Rather than posting pictures, we brought examples of what we use.

- Side-Loading sleeves: C-line; polypropylene
- Photo pages of different sizes: polypropylene
- Uh, the floppy long sleeves: archival polyester
- And the stiff envelope kind, too: archival polyester
- A map tube: 2 mm polyethylene
- Boxes of various shapes
- Book binding tape
- Acid-free paper

Paper Storage

- You want to use a sleeve or envelope that is an appropriate size for the document you are filing. For example, you do not want to put a 4x6" photo in an 8 ½ x 11" side loading sleeve.
- In some cases, you may want to double wrap your item depending on what you are using for storage; put an 8x10" photo in an envelope, then slide that into a larger binder sleeve.
- If you have letters with post-marked envelopes, use a postcard size sleeve, then keep it in the larger sleeve with the letter.
- Try not to put papers next to each other. If you have several pages you want to keep together, separate the sheets with plain acid-free paper.
- After putting your papers in their sleeves, keep them organized neatly with folders or individual boxes for larger collections. I find putting family letters in order by date if you have both sets, or by author if not, is easiest.

Paper Storage, Continued

- Paper will rip at the folds. Try to flatten your items. However, do not force it flat in one go if it has been folded for a long time—ease the paper and do not fold it the opposite direction.
- If the paper has ripped: if you have archival polyester available, the static should keep it together. However, book binding tape is a viable alternative (I have even used it on a glass negative that broke in 3).
- Transcribing letters is a great way to keep the original in good shape and still be able to share the information. Also, if their handwriting is legible, scanners have come a long way in terms of image quality. This also prevents the loss of information due to ink fading over time.
- For large items, such as maps, rolling it and putting it in a polyethylene sleeve is most efficient if you are short on space.
- Remove all staples, brass tacks, paperclips, and straight pins. These will rust over time and will become difficult to remove later.

Fabrics

- Do not fold your fabrics. The material will deteriorate fastest at those points. Rolling is your best option.
- If you are unable to roll your item, e.g. a wedding dress, professional services exist to preserve large pieces. Or, fold it loosely with padding.
- Use acid-free tissue paper or a cotton (unbleached/dyed if possible) sheet to lay your fabric on, use another piece of paper/cotton to put on the inside, and roll loosely and keep a layer of paper/cotton between each layer of textile.
- If available, store the linen in a poly or acid-free tube after wrapping.

Books, Scrapbooks

- Do not stack books on top of each other if at all possible. If you must, put heavy items on the bottom.
- If the book will not be handled often (i.e. you have a digital copy or photocopies of relevant pages), and is quite old, wrap the book in acid-free paper and store vertically.
- Try not to open a book completely flat; this will ruin the spine.
- Google has been doing a great job of digitizing books published prior to 1923, and they are searchable!

Photos

- ALWAYS **always** always identify your photos with names, dates, and locations, even if you are not sure who all the people in a group are.
- Use a pencil on the back; 4B hardness is best. These are available at most art stores for about \$2.
- If you have an old photo album with the pictures glued to black pages, and decide to rehome them into a new album, pick acid free sleeves and binder. Use a flat blade to remove the pictures from the paper pages. If you would like to keep that particular album as it is, wrap it in acid-free paper and store it like a book.
- Again, scanners have much improved in recent years, and provide another option for saving and storing photos.

Moving pictures and sounds

- With the advancement of data storage, having your old videos and home movies transferred to DVD or digital files is a great investment.
- Audio cassettes can also be transferred, as well as transcribed.
- If you do not have the hardware to view or listen to your tapes, professional services do exist.
- To find a local business near you, type into a search bar:
 - “convert vhs to dvd”
 - “audio transcription near me”

Glass, and film negatives, and slides, too.

- Negatives should be stored upright with padding between each image.
- Keep them in a sturdy box that is resistant to crushing.
- IDENTIFY your negatives in some fashion, either by creating a numbered index or putting a note on the divider.
- Glass negative envelopes are quite handy for labelling and storage.
- (Those envelopes are also useful for storing small three-dimensional objects such as pins and wooden nickels.)
- Film negatives and slides can be stored in sleeves away from UV light.

Miscellaneous Three dimensional Things

- If you would like to display it, put the item in a case that is out of direct sunlight and preferably behind UV resistant poly or glass. The same goes for documents or photos in frames. (This can be costly.)
- Breakables should be wrapped and stored in a crush-resistant box.
- Other odd things: baby shoes, press pins, military medals, rosaries. These are dependent upon what you would like to do with them.
- These should be evaluated and preserved on a case-by-case basis.

Things to keep in mind.

- Wash your hands before handling materials. The oils from your skin, nicotine, pollen, water, or food can hasten the breakdown of your items.
- Up for debate: using cotton gloves can either help or hinder the preservation of papers. Using gloves leads to less tactile function, but keeps fingers off important items.
- With time, the method that you choose for storage will have to migrate with the technological inventions of the future.
- Preservation is an individual task. Cost, availability of storage, and your personal opinion of importance will determine how much time, effort, and dollars you are willing to spend.

Additional Information/Credits

- Picture credits: Gaylord, Shutterstock, The Research Companion, Prairie Home Therapy, English Stack Exchange, Guggenheim Museum
- <https://collectionsconversations.wordpress.com/2012/01/27/pros-and-cons-of-plastic-storage-containers/>
- <https://abundantgenealogy.com/the-archive-lady-plastic-storage-boxes-vs-archival-storage-boxes/>
- <https://www.archives.gov/preservation/storage/negatives-transparencies.html>