



Guideline No. 1

File format

A guide to the physical design and construction of files

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What is a file?

A file is a grouping of records, which show organisational activities through an identifiable sequence of transactions. Individual records on the file have relationships with each other, for example an email and a reply, or a payment order and an invoice.

A file can be:

- wholly paper based (that is, a cover containing paper based records, managed under paper based lists and indexes)
- paper based and controlled by records management software or another electronic control tool, such as a spreadsheet
- wholly electronic (that is, electronic documents and control information saved and managed in records management software), or
- made up of both paper and electronic records, both of which are controlled by software.

Selecting an appropriate file cover

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Cover style

State Records recommends a 'wrap-around' cover, as this cover offers the greatest protection and utility. A wrap-around cover consists of a folder allowing for a front cover, spine and back cover. Common features of this type of file cover are:

- a fastener, usually for two hole punched documents, either pre-attached or purchased separately and attached using an adhesive backing
- a strengthened spine which increases the life of the file cover, and
- an end tab for printed labels, colour-codes or barcode stickers.

Maintaining documents in wrap-around covers has a number of advantages:

- the spine reinforcement keeps the file straight when kept in lateral shelf storage
- files require relatively little maintenance, as documents are well protected within the file cover
- fasteners do not protrude through the front or back of the file, and
- thickness of files is more easily controlled.

Cover size

File covers can vary in size. Ensure the cover selected fits into the standard Government Records Repository Type 1 box or equivalent (internal dimensions 37.5 cm X 17 cm X 24 cm).

Acid free covers

For files likely to have long-term or archival value, covers will ideally be made of a board which is pH neutral. The composition of archival and permanent papers and files is governed by the following national and international standards:

- Australian Standard AS 4300, *Permanent Paper*, 1996 and
- ISO 11108-1996 *Information and Documentation - Archival Paper - Requirements for Permanence.*)

To see a list of approved suppliers of acid-free archival quality paper and file covers, refer to the National Archives of Australia's *Register of Products approved to bear the National Archives Archival Quality Logo*, available online at: <http://www.naa.gov.au/recordkeeping/preservation/agt/approved.html>
See also [*Recordkeeping in Brief 22: Selecting appropriate paper for the creation of records*](#) (2001).

File fasteners

State Records recommends two-hole plastic fasteners that can be attached to the file with an adhesive patch. These allow the user to more easily browse the contents of a file or temporarily remove a document (to copy it, for example) without having to lift off preceding papers. Metal pins and fasteners are not recommended because they can rust and/or cause injury.

Displaying information on file covers

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Overview

In most contemporary recordkeeping systems, information about a file that assists us to manage it and understand its purpose and contents (metadata) is recorded in records management software or other control tools. This means it is not necessary to duplicate effort by recording a lot of detail on file covers. However there is some information that, if displayed on file covers, can assist in protecting files from loss or unauthorised use, or which can make location control and retrieval easier. This information is described in this section.

How information is displayed

Records management software products such as those listed on the Department of Commerce's ITS 2323 *Records and information management systems* contract are capable of printing selected file information onto adhesive labels for attaching to file covers.

Companies that produce pre-printed customised file covers are listed in the Records Management Association of Australasia's *Product Directory*, at: <http://www.rmaa.com.au/cgi-bin/pd/products.cfm>

Useful information to display on file covers

Name of the organisation and/or its crest or logo	This information can make it easier to distinguish official files from other information. Should the file become lost outside of the organisation, it is more likely to be returned.
Security classification	Information security guidelines recommend that paper based records are clearly marked if they have 'in confidence', 'protected' or 'highly protected' status. [1]
File title	File users often keep a selection of regularly used files on their desks, and will use either the file title or number to locate the appropriate file.

File number	Numbers on coloured labels can be used to make it easier to see when a file has been misfiled. Ensure the position of the numbers allows easy visibility when the file is shelved.
File category	Some organisations use different colours for different file categories, such as pink files for personnel files and white for general correspondence files. This can help records managers to ensure that unauthorised access does not occur.
Barcode	Barcodes are unique numbers which can be recorded in the records control system and used to track file location. To assist the records staff in reading barcode information, barcode labels should be positioned consistently on all files in an accessible place.
Instructions for file users	File covers can be used to remind staff about appropriate records to be placed on files or provide contact details for the records section.

For more information on information that describes records and assists in their management, see [Recordkeeping in Brief 18: Introducing recordkeeping metadata](#) (2003).

Footnotes

[1] For more information on see the NSW Office of Information and Communications Technology's *Guide to Labelling Sensitive Information* (2002) <http://www.oit.nsw.gov.au/pages/4.3.33.Guide-Info.htm>

File forms

Where records management software is used, information on the records contained in a file, the closure of a file, a record of who has had possession of a file or information on the actions required on a file or document can be captured and maintained in the software.

For paper-based or mixed systems, however, forms attached to files can be useful tools. These forms include:

- file request form - this can be completed by a staff member who needs the file and attached by the file creator (such as the records manager) as the first document on the file
- file movement sheet - this can be used to record who has looked at a record or a file over time, regardless of whether any changes were made
- file minute sheet - records file movements and concise directions as to the action required from user to user
- summary of the file's contents - the documents on the file are listed in order, including their folio numbers, providing an easy reference and some protection against unauthorised document removal
- file closed sheet - this usually records the file number, any preceding or succeeding files and the date of closure. It is attached as the top and final document in the file.

Tin: Sample file request movement and minute sheets and a 'closed file' sheet

are available for downloading from the 'Useful tools' section of the State Records guidelines [How to take control of your records](#) (2004).

Document order

Individual documents should be 'attached' to files in chronological order. This may be by physical attachment or by electronically linking an electronic document to a file in records management software. This order should be maintained for the file's lifetime. Keeping records in a file in chronological order assists in retrieval and provides a clearer picture of the chain of events for file users.

For paper based files, 'folio numbering' involves numbering the items on a file in the order that they were added. Numbers are recorded on both the items themselves and on a 'file content' form or 'minute sheet' attached as the top document in the file (see [File forms](#) section in these guidelines). Folio numbering can help users to locate individual items and provides a quick and easy means to check whether an item has been removed from a file.

Tips for handling and storing paper files

- Ensure pages remain in the order in which they were created. Do not remove, extract or rearrange pages on the file.
- Do not use adhesive (sticky) tape in files as it transmits acid to the file, causing it damage.
- Do not attach newspaper clippings to files as they also transmit acid. Attach photocopies instead.
- Avoid the use of metal pins and paper clips that rust.
- Where metal pins and paper clips have been used, remove these before storing files for medium to long term periods.
- If you need to isolate materials such as photographs from the rest of the file, or replace torn or loose folios, place them in polypropylene, polyethylene or polyester bags which should then be attached to the file.

For more information see [Recordkeeping in Brief 14: Handle with care](#) and [Guideline 11: Solutions for storage](#).

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