

PROTECT YOUR INTELLIGENCE WITH ARCHIVING

Paper stands guard over your history. Exhibit A: The National Archives, which houses 10 billion pages of textual records. The papers you've amassed throughout your life are just as important to you as the Declaration of Independence.

Building an archive of handouts, notebooks and clippings, cards and favorite photos ensures you'll be able to access them easily. Digital archives don't have that guarantee. "We know how to preserve paper," says Margot Note, founder and principal at Margot Note Consulting LLC, an archiving and records management practice. "If there's a tear in paper, you can still read it—but one corrupt bit or byte in digital data and it can be completely unreadable." Here's how to let information that served you once embolden you in the future.

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—Archivist Margot Note

1 LET YOUR SYSTEM EMPOWER YOU.

"There's no one way to organize things," Note says. "It's more about having materials mapped the way you think about them so they're accessible right away." Consider the "buckets" you're likeliest to find useful—one person might think chronologically while another might think thematically. Once you've decided, go with your instincts when grouping papers together. You're doing this as a way to help yourself, so keep it simple. If you're feeling overwhelmed, start small: Identify what would help you the most right now and tackle that one part.

2 STAY ON MISSION.

"Archivists think about things as a collection," Note says. It's less about tracking every sheet of paper you own and more about knowing where to find groups of items. School handouts might be one "collection"; newspaper clippings might be another. Or maybe your collection is thematic: Materials related to literature are one collection, while papers about the sciences are another. This mindset can empower you to stay focused. Once a system is established, then you can stroll down memory lane—but for now, avoid musing on any one paper.

MATERIALS RELATED TO LITERATURE ARE ONE COLLECTION, WHILE PAPERS ABOUT THE SCIENCES ARE ANOTHER.

3 SEIZE THE SCANNER.

Delicate papers like newsprint might not hold up well over the years. Scan newspaper clippings and fragile papers, then print the files on bond paper, which holds up better over time. Keep the originals in polypropylene sleeves.

4 SECURE THE RIGHT TOOLS.

Once you know roughly how much space your collection will require, purchase enough acid-free, lignin-free corrugated document boxes to hold it. Boxes with built-in spacers help keep documents upright even when the box isn't full. Don't bend papers to fit inside a box; instead, use boxes of different sizes. Make sure any staples and paper clips are made from stainless steel and avoid using rubber bands. Store the boxes away from moisture—no basements, attics or garages—and on a shelf to protect them from floods and spills.

Once your system is set up, commit to the cause: Drop papers you'd like to add in a "to be filed" box, then spend a few minutes every week or month to put them away. Will it be perfect? No—but that's not the point. "Something is better than nothing," Note says. Getting started is the most important part. The time for action is now.