



Guidelines for the Careful Handling of Documents

Summary: Whenever materials of permanent value are handled, they become vulnerable to damage. By raising awareness about the potential harm caused by unsound handling techniques, damage can be minimized. A number of simple guidelines are outlined below.

Always handle materials with clean hands.

- Avoid touching materials with dirty, oily, or greasy hands.
- Washing hands frequently when handling records will prevent oils and dust from transferring to the materials.

Keep your work space clear.

- Food and drink in close proximity to documents can cause damage and attract insects and pests.
- Avoid extraneous materials and clutter in your work area.

Keep a safe distance (three inches) between the edges of a document and the edge of your work surface.

- Ensure that the document is entirely supported.
- Be careful to avoid placing elbows on a document or allow an item to hang over the edge of the work surface.

Always place items on a solid surface that completely supports them.

- Avoid handling documents unsupported or in mid air.
- Transport documents in a folder or on a rigid piece of card stock.

Use pencils for inventories and for labeling folders.

- Inks from pens or markers may permanently mar an item.
- Inks will run and bleed if exposed to water.

Gently lift items from folders or boxes.

- Removing items roughly from their folders, boxes, or other original housing can cause tearing or other damage.

Carefully unfold items if paper is flexible.

- Open documents on a tabletop and gently smooth creases flat with clean fingertips.
- Do not fold an item back on itself or attempt to unfold a document that is inflexible or brittle.



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Replace damaged storage boxes or other containers that do not provide adequate support for records.

- Folders should fully enclose the entire document.
- Folders should be sized to match the interior dimensions of the box.
- Overstuffing folders or boxes can cause damage to brittle and fragile items.
- Do not attempt to roll or fold records that have previously not been stored in that manner; separate oversized items.

Replace damaging fasteners with metal (preferably stainless steel) paper clips using alkaline strips of paper as a barrier between the clip and the document.

- Fasteners that come in direct contact with fragile documents can cause damage.
- Avoid plastic clips, they cause cockling and tearing.

Dust off records with a soft white brush, if necessary.

- Avoid wiping documents using cloths or other materials that may be abrasive to the document's surface.

Separate items in fragile condition. Place these items in their own polyester I-sleeves sealed on 2 adjacent sides or alkaline folders.

- Do not use any pressure sensitive (Scotch ® -like) tapes or other materials which contain damaging adhesives (such as Post-it ® type notes).
- Do not have documents of permanent value laminated. The plastics accelerate deterioration, and the process is not reversible.

Always consider the consequences of remedial action.

- Attempting repairs without sufficient training may result in permanent damage or accelerate deterioration.

Always favor preventive measures.

- Store documents in a climate controlled environment (e.g. 60-72°F, 40-55% R.H), away from prolonged exposure to light, and in non-damaging enclosures.
- Display copies instead of originals.

If in the course of your work you are unsure what to do, contact a preservation or conservation professional for assistance.

Resources and Referrals

- American Institute for Art and Historic Artifacts (AIC); 202-452-9545; www.conservation-us.org
- National Archives, Preservation, www.archives.gov/preservation/
- LYRASIS (formerly SOLINET) Preservation Services, 800-999-8558; <http://www.lyrasis.org>