



## PART 8

# Records Management Glossary

## PART 8: Records Management Glossary

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This glossary of key records management terms and concepts is structured as follows. The first part of each entry is the definition itself: what does the term or concept mean? The second section is a brief statement about the importance of the concept for effective records management.

The terms shown here have been adapted from different sources, as shown below. Those interested in reviewing other records management terms and concepts may wish to review these resources. Entries marked with **COST** are available for purchase.

ARMA, *Glossary of Records and Information Management Terms*, 2016. Purchase information available at <https://www.arma.org/store/ViewProduct.aspx?id=10477245>. **COST**

International Organization for Standardization, *Information and documentation – Records management – Part 1: Concepts and Principles* (ISO 15489-1:2016), 2016. Purchase information available at <https://www.iso.org/standard/62542.html>. **COST**

International Organization for Standardization, *Information and documentation – Records management – core concepts and vocabulary* (ISO 30300:2020), 2020. Purchase information available at <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:30300:ed-2:v1:en>. **COST**

Province of British Columbia, Canada, *Records Management Glossary*, current to 2020. See <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/services-for-government/policies-procedures/government-records/glossary>.

Society of American Archivists, *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, 2020. See <https://dictionary.archivists.org/>

## KEY TERMS

<b>Access</b>	<p>The right to retrieve and/or use records or information, or the act of finding, retrieving, and using records or information.</p> <p><b>Access</b> is a cornerstone of records management; records and evidence are preserved in order that they can be accessed and used by organizations and by citizens and the public.</p>
<b>Active records</b>	<p>Records or evidence in continuous use that need to be retained and maintained in easily accessible locations, whether in physical storage in or near offices or in electronic systems that support regular and easy digital access. Also known as current records.</p> <p>Managing records effectively, from the time they are created throughout their life cycle, helps an organization save on space and resources, by knowing which <b>active</b> (or current) records need to be immediately accessible, which <b>semi-active</b> (or semi-current) records can be kept in less-expensive or more remote storage environments, and which <b>inactive</b> (or non-current) records can be disposed of – by destruction if they are obsolete, or by transfer to archival custody or control if they have enduring value.</p>
<b>Accountability</b>	<p>The ability of an organization or individual to acknowledge and take responsibility for its actions, transactions, and decisions, including the creation and execution of policies.</p> <p>Records management ensures that records and evidence are created and managed so that they remain authentic, reliable, and usable, which allows the creating agency to achieve the goal of <b>accountability</b>.</p>
<b>Analog record</b>	<p>A record created by capturing a continuous signal in or on the medium itself. The word “analog” comes from the idea that the copy is “analogous” or comparable to the original sound or image. Analog records differ from electronic records in that the digital signals that make up electronic records are represented in discrete numbers, whereas analog signals are physically attached to a base, such as the grooves (the signal) on a vinyl record (the base).</p> <p><b>Analog records</b> need to be managed differently from paper or electronic records. The carrier used to hold the analog content is physical, and often magnetic – a strip of film or tape holding a series of signals that can only be accessed using appropriate equipment. Preserving analog records means establishing processes for ensuring the carrier or base – the film or tape – and the content – the images or sounds on the film or tape – are both protected from harm. Sometimes preservation of analog records involves transferring the content from one carrier to another, such as converting audio recordings to electronic format.</p>

<b>Archival value</b>	<p>The enduring worth of records based on the importance of the documentary evidence or information they contain. Deciding whether to keep a record or piece of evidence in archival custody or control requires assessing the archival value of that record or evidence.</p> <p>Documents confirming an organization’s legal obligations or a government’s ownership of lands and property can have <b>archival value</b>, because they document rights and responsibilities that need to be remembered in perpetuity. Such records need to be kept permanently, even if the public does not have regular access to them.</p>
<b>Archives</b>	<p>1. Records and sources of evidence created, received, and used by a government, organization, individual, family, or group in the conduct of their daily work and life, which have been preserved because they contain enduring value as evidence of and information about actions, transactions, or decisions. The word “archives” can also refer to the institution responsible for acquiring and preserving archival materials and making those items available for use or to the storage repository housing archival collections.</p> <p>Every government or organization creates <b>archives</b>. These critically important sources of evidence can often be identified when they are created, if not before. Land and property records, documents confirming the rights and responsibilities of individuals or organizations, significant legal agreements are all types of evidence that may well need to be kept in perpetuity. Establishing effective procedures for protecting all records from the point of creation ensures that valuable archives remain authentic and reliable sources of proof, available for use decades or centuries into the future.</p>
<b>Audit</b>	<p>A formal inspection of an organization’s activities (or, for financial auditing, an organization’s budgets and expenditures), typically carried out by an independent body to support an objective analysis.</p> <p>An <b>audit</b> is a valuable tool in helping organizations achieve success with records management (or other) operations. It can reveal strengths and weaknesses in operations and help to identify risks that need to be addressed, such as inadequate electronic storage systems or limited staff participation in daily records management practices.</p>
<b>Authenticity</b>	<p>The quality in records and other sources of evidence of being genuine and not corrupted or altered. The authenticity of records and archives are usually inferred from an analysis of the materials and an understanding of the actions associated with their creation, management and use, including an assessment of the physical characteristics, content, context and structure of the materials in question.</p> <p><b>Authenticity</b> means that the record is what it purports to be. Confirming authenticity allows anyone using a record or other source of evidence to verify that the record has been created by the person or agency that claims to be the creator. Authenticity does not automatically mean that a record is reliable or</p>

accurate – some authentic records provide untrue or inaccurate information. Confirming authenticity, however, is essential to knowing whether it is possible to trust that the record was created and managed by the person or agency identified, no matter what the contents.

**Classification**

The process of establishing a system for identifying and organizing records or evidence so they can be stored and retrieved easily. Classification schemes are normally based on an assessment of the business function being performed or the subject addressed, rather than on the form or medium of the record or some other less informative criteria. See also **retention**.

Developing and applying consistent **classification** systems allows an organization to group similar records together, based on their purpose, so that they can be retrieved and used later easily.

**Continuum of care**

A record-keeping concept referring to a consistent and coherent process of records care throughout the life cycle of records, from the design and development of systems for making and keeping records to the actual creation and preservation of those records, to their retention and use in the office or, ultimately, as archives. See also **life cycle**.

Governments and organizations that manage records according to a **continuum of care** ensure that all evidence the organization might need now or in the future is protected from the moment it is created and that it remains accessible and usable for as long as needed, whether a year or a century.

**Data**

One or more elements of raw content, such as letters, numbers, or symbols, that refer to or represent ideas, objects, events, concepts, and things.

**Data** can serve as evidence. The data elements in a medical database or list of employees – name, birthdate, address, status, health condition, and so on – provide proof of some fact about the individual in question. Data needs to be identified so that it is protected if it might be needed as evidence.

**Data privacy**

See **privacy** and **personal information**.

**Destruction**

The process of eliminating or deleting a record. Ideally, records are destroyed using methods that ensure they cannot be reconstructed, such as shredding, pulping, or incineration.

**Destruction** is essential to effective records management. Not every record is worth keeping permanently, and if an organization eliminates those records it no longer needs, according to clear policies and guidelines, the whole records management system works much more efficiently and effectively. While organizations are not discouraged from considering environmental concerns when determining best practices for records destruction, the overriding requirement must be that destruction is complete and irreversible.

<b>Digital preservation:</b>	<p>The process of managing digital objects – electronic files and items – so they can be accessed and used by anyone in the future.</p> <p><b>Digital preservation</b> is most effective if the organization plans the management of a digital object – such as an electronic document, file, or database – early in the life cycle, so that procedures can be imposed before the item deteriorates or changes with time, and when the technology used to create the object has not yet become obsolete, in which case migrating or moving the object to another form or storage environment would be more difficult.</p>
<b>Digital records</b>	<p><i>See electronic records.</i></p>
<b>Disposal</b>	<p>A range of processes associated with implementing records retention, destruction, and transfer. Also referred to as disposition.</p> <p><b>Disposal</b> is determined according to approved records retention schedules and documented using formal disposal authorities. Disposal normally includes either destruction, if records are obsolete, or transfer to an authorized agency such as an archival institution, if the records have enduring value and need to be preserved and made publicly available.</p>
<b>Disposal authority</b>	<p>A formal instrument that identifies a set of records or evidence created and maintained by an organization; confirms how long they must be kept to meet legal, regulatory, or business requirements; and indicates when and how they may be disposed of when they have reached the end of their active and semi-active stages of the life cycle.</p> <p>Effective records management throughout the life cycle means formalizing and documenting decisions about how records are moved through the system and how they are ultimately disposed of: by destruction, if they are obsolete, or by transfer to an authorized agency such as an archival institution, so they may be preserved and made publicly available. A <b>disposal authority</b> should always be approved by designated officials before any specific action is taken regarding the records or evidence in question.</p>
<b>Disposition</b>	<p>See <b>disposal</b>.</p>
<b>Effectiveness</b>	<p>The ability of an organization or individual to produce the intended result of an action.</p> <p>Records management ensures that records and evidence are created and managed consistently and based on clear policies, which allows the creating agency to achieve the goal of <b>effectiveness</b>.</p>
<b>Efficiency</b>	<p>The ability of an organization or individual to make best use of money, time, space, staff, and other resources.</p> <p>Records management ensures that records and evidence are created and managed consistently and strategically, which allows the creating agency to achieve the goal of <b>efficiency</b>.</p>

<b>Electronic records</b>	<p>Records that can be stored, transmitted, or processed by a computer. An electronic record is maintained in a coded format and can only be accessed using a computer system that converts the codes or numbers into text, images or sounds that can be processed by the human eye or ear.</p> <p><b>Electronic records</b> are different from paper or analog records because the carrier used to hold the content is digital – bits and bytes of computer coding stored in a hard drive or other piece of digital technology. Preserving electronic records means establishing processes for ensuring the content – the bits and bytes of coding that are converted by the computer into accessible or readable form – is protected from harm. These processes may include migrating the content from one form to another, such as moving a digital file from an older piece of word processing software to a newer piece of word processing software. Electronic records are also referred to as digital records.</p>
<b>Emergency plan</b>	<p>A set of policies and procedures developed and tested by an organization to be used during an emergency or disaster to prevent or reduce damage to the organization, its people, its resources and, in the archival environment, its documentary holdings.</p> <p>An <b>emergency plan</b> allows an organization to identify priorities for the protection of evidence and establish procedures for protecting those records so they are undamaged in an emergency or they are rescued first should a crisis arise.</p>
<b>Evidence</b>	<p>Data, records, or other forms of recorded information deemed to be an objective representation of actions, transactions, decisions, opinions, or ideas, and so can serve as a source of authentic proof.</p> <p><b>Evidence</b> must be protected so that it remains authentic and reliable, particularly in the event it is needed as proof in judicial proceedings or other situations where it can be used to establish or confirm an alleged or disputed fact. Sources of evidence can include paper or analog records, electronic documents, files, databases, or other forms of digital content, or any other form – from video recordings to stone carvings – that are created, received, and used by a government, organization, or individual to capture information that might be needed as a source of proof, now or into the future.</p>
<b>Functions</b>	<p>The activities, operations, or procedures performed by a government, organization, individual, or other agency aimed to accomplish a particular purpose, mandate, or mission.</p> <p>In most organizations, <b>functions</b> represent the major responsibilities undertaken by departments, units, business areas, or agencies to achieve the organization’s strategic goals.</p>
<b>Inactive records</b>	<p>Records or evidence that are no longer required regularly by officials and can be disposed of as obsolete, if they are no longer needed, or by transfer to archival custody or care, if they have enduring value for the organization or society. Also known as non-current records.</p>

Managing records effectively, from the time they are created throughout their life cycle, helps an organization save on space and resources, by knowing which **active** (or current) records need to be immediately accessible, which **semi-active** (or semi-current) records can be kept in less-expensive or more remote storage environments, and which **inactive** (or non-current) records can be disposed of – by destruction if they are obsolete, or by transfer to archival custody or control if they have enduring value.

**Information**

Data, ideas, thoughts, or memories that have been conveyed, captured, or represented in a tangible form.

**Information** can serve as evidence if it is recorded in such a way that its authenticity can be confirmed and preserved. It is important to identify sources of information that might serve as evidence so they can be protected in the event they are needed as proof.

**Information security**

The ability of an organization or individual to protect paper/analog or electronic sources of information or evidence from unauthorized access or use, including misuse, inappropriate disclosure, destruction, modification, or theft.

Governments and organizations have a responsibility to implement measures to achieve **information security**, in order to ensure that records, evidence, and other information resources are secure from harm, thereby protecting the rights of individuals or groups documented in or affected by those sources of evidence.

**Inventory**

A descriptive listing of different records series or groups, which indicates the function or purpose they serve and the physical or electronic location in which they are kept.

An **inventory** is an essential first step in the process of classifying and scheduling records: it provides information about all the different categories of record in existence across the organization, including information such as type or format, purpose, responsible department or agency, date range, volume or quantity, storage location, and privacy or security requirements. An inventory does not capture information about records and evidence “item by item” but rather documents different series or groups of records – identifying all departmental annual reports as one series and all job applications as another series – so that systems can be developed to maintain those series consistently. Once an initial inventory has been completed and records management systems developed, the organization should revise and update the inventory periodically to ensure systems and processes remain up to date.

**Life cycle**

The concept that a record or other source of evidence follows a process from “birth” to “death” (or “second life” in archival care).

In the records **life cycle**, records and evidence may be created and used by the organization (active or current stage), kept so that they may be referred to when needed (semi-active or semi-current stage), then disposed of (non-active or non-current stage). Disposal may be by destruction, if the records or



evidence are obsolete, or by preservation as archives or transfer to an archival institution, if the records or evidence have continuing value to the organization or society. See also **continuum of care**.

**Metadata**

A set of data that describes and provides contextual information about other data, such as dates, names, titles, or similar information that help to define and contextualize records and other sources of evidence.

By applying **metadata** or descriptive and contextual information to physical/analog or electronic records accurately or consistently, organizations can access and use records much more easily.

**Migration**

The process of moving records or evidence from one piece of technology (an old software program, for example) into another (a new version of that software program).

The process of **migration** is used to ensure that electronic records and evidence remain accessible and usable when the computer systems or storage devices used to create or store them are danger of becoming obsolete. Migration is successful when the content and the format of the records or evidence do not change during the process of moving them from one software tool or platform to another. The authenticity and integrity of the evidence must remain intact.

Another process to ensure electronic records remain safe and accessible is emulation, which refers to the creation of new software programs that emulate or copy old software, allowing organizations to continue to access and use the records. Migration is considered a more robust and sustainable approach to electronic records management than emulation.

**Office of Primary Responsibility**

The unit within an organization in charge of creating, managing, and protecting a given set of records or evidence.

Identifying the Office of Primary Responsibility allows an organization to assign duties to one unit for the protection of a group of records, train staff within that unit to carry out these duties, and then instruct all other units that they do not have to retain copies of records or evidence themselves, thus reducing duplication in records and information and increasing effectiveness and accountability. See also **official record holder**.

**Official Record Holder**

The individual (and assigned backup or assistant) responsible for managing a set of records under the authority of his or her unit within an organization.

The **Official Record Holder** maintains master documentation so that other units within the organization do not need to retain duplicates or obsolete records, thus supporting increased efficiency and greater accountability. See also **Office of Primary Responsibility**.

**Open access**

See **proactive disclosure**.

<b>Paper records</b>	<p>Records or evidence, such as reports, memos, budgets, or other forms of documentation created using paper products.</p> <p><b>Paper records</b> are different from analog or electronic records because the carrier used to hold the content is physical – a sheet of paper, a piece of parchment or vellum, or another tangible item. Preserving paper records means establishing processes for ensuring that both the carrier or base – the paper – and the content – the words or images on the paper – are protected from harm.</p>
<b>Personal information</b>	<p>Information or evidence that contains identifiable or distinguishing information about a specific individual – a “natural person” as opposed to a government agency, organization, or business.</p> <p><b>Personal information</b> – also known as personally identifiable information or personal information bank – might include name, social security or identifying number, address, telephone number, date and place of birth, parent’s names, biometric evidence, or financial, educational, medical, or employment information. Managing personal information is essential to protecting individual privacy, especially as information technology makes it easier to profit from collecting or selling personal information or to misuse the information to violate a person’s legal and human rights.</p>
<b>Preservation</b>	<p>A set of activities aimed at prolonging the life of a source of evidence, such as a document, record, database, or other information asset. Activities might include storing records safely, ensuring environmental conditions are within acceptable ranges, and backing up and storing copies of electronic records safely.</p> <p><b>Preservation</b> of paper, analog, electronic, and other sources of evidence is important to ensure those sources of evidence remain accessible for as long as possible with their authenticity and reliability intact. Preservation is different from conservation – the treatment and repair of items to slow decay, or restoration – the return of items to an original or earlier physical condition. See also <b>digital preservation</b>.</p>
<b>Privacy</b>	<p>The ability of an individual or group to seclude themselves or to withhold access to information about themselves.</p> <p>Protecting <b>privacy</b> is an important aspect of effective public-sector management; therefore, protecting records and evidence containing personal information is central to the goal of maintaining accountable and effective public-sector operations.</p>
<b>Proactive disclosure:</b>	<p>The act of releasing information or evidence before such information is requested by the public.</p> <p>Building on the concept of “open access,” <b>proactive disclosure</b> makes the release of records and evidence a routine act, rather than a reaction to public demand. Proactive disclosure not only enhances openness and transparency</p>

but also helps to save an organization money and time, by establishing processes for releasing information as a matter of daily practice.

**Record**

Information that has been captured on some fixed medium, which was created and kept to support a government, organization, or individual to perform activities, remember events or information, and provide proof of decisions or actions.

**Records** are created, received, and maintained as *evidence* of actions, transactions, or decisions. The creating agency may be a government, organization, individual or group. Records are not just sources of proof but are also assets for the creating organization or individual. The creator may need to be able to access and use the evidence contained in the records to support daily work or to confirm or uphold legal obligations or rights.

**Records management**

The process of creating, storing, using, preserving, and disposing of records and other sources of evidence in a way that ensures they serve as authentic and reliable proof for as long as they are needed.

**Records management** supports the consistent and accurate creation and care of records, data, or other sources of proof so that their evidential value remains intact. A central goal of records management is to enhance efficiency, improve economy, and produce authentic and reliable records, evidence, and other sources of documentary proof. Records management includes establishing and enforcing processes to support a continuum of care for records across their life cycle, from creation or receipt to management, use, and final disposition.

While it is common to interpret records management narrowly, as the responsibility of a designated records manager, in reality everyone in an organization contributes to effective records management by working together to support the effective creation, management, and preservation of records and evidence. In this *Roadmap* the term records management is intended to refer to all aspects of record-making and record-keeping.

**Records manager**

The employee in a government or organization responsible for establishing, directing, and supporting records management across that agency.

The **records manager's** objective is to ensure the agency can achieve both business objectives and legislative responsibilities by creating, managing, using, and protecting authentic and reliable sources of evidence. **Records managers** are often assisted in their work by members of staff across the organization, many of whom are not formally qualified records managers but who are trained and supported to perform day-to-day records management responsibilities on behalf of their particular units within the organization.

Successful records management is a team effort, based on strong policies and procedures and drawing on the expertise and support of professional records managers and other staff from all parts of the organization.

- Retention** The concept of determining whether, when, and for how long records or evidence are preserved so that they are available for use by the organization, before they are disposed of as obsolete, if they are no longer needed, or by transfer to archival custody or care, if they have enduring value for the organization or society.
- Retention** is a pivotal component of effective records management, because knowing which records to retain, and for how long, which can be destroyed because they are obsolete, and which should be protected as archives allows an organization to manage all its records and evidence effectively, efficiently, and accountably.
- Scheduling** The process of establishing and confirming time frames for managing records throughout their life cycle, from creation, through active use in the office, to storage of semi-active records so that they are available when needed, to final disposition, as obsolete, if they are no longer needed, or by transfer to archival custody or care, if they have enduring value for the organization or society.
- Scheduling** is pivotal component of effective records management because it formalizes retention decisions in a policy instrument that ensures the organization manages records efficiently, effectively, and accountably through their life cycle.
- Security** The ability of an organization or individual to achieve protection from hostile forces, whether human, environmental, technological, emotional, or otherwise.
- Governments and organizations have a responsibility to manage records and evidence, so those information assets are secure from harm, which is essential to protecting the rights of individuals or groups affected by the actions of the organizations. See also **information security**.
- Semi-active records** Records or evidence that have legal, evidential, or operational value for the creating agency but are not used on a regular basis. Ideally, semi-active records will be maintained within easy reach of officials, either in accessible physical storage locations or in “near-line” electronic storage systems that allow easy retrieval when needed. (“Near line” electronic storage refers to storage devices and systems that do not support immediate access to electronic records but still allow regular use of the records. Near line systems are usually more economical than online systems that support continuous, on-demand access to records.)
- Managing records effectively, from the time they are created throughout their life cycle, helps an organization save on space and resources, by knowing which **active** (or current) records need to be immediately accessible, which **semi-active** (or semi-current) records can be kept in less-expensive or more remote storage environments, and which **inactive** (or non-current) records can be disposed of – by destruction if they are obsolete, or by transfer to archival custody or control if they have enduring value.

**Transfer**

The administrative and physical movement of records or evidence out of the custody and control of the creating agency, often into the custody or control of a separate, formally established archival institution, whether that institution is administered by the same overall organization or exists as a separate agency.

The goal of **transfer** is to remove records or evidence from the creating agency because they are no longer needed for daily business but still have value, either to the organization or to wider society, and so must be protected so they are safe and accessible for internal or external use and reference.

**Transparency**

The ability of an organization or individual to operate openly, keeping the public informed about the organization's actions, transactions, and decisions.

Records management ensures that records and evidence are created and managed in an openly and with respect for public needs, which allows the creating agency to achieve the goal of **transparency**.

**Vital records**

Records and evidence created, received, and used by a government or organization that contain information essential to: resume business operations during and immediately following an emergency or disaster; re-establish, confirm, and uphold the organization's legal, financial, and operational rights and responsibilities; re-establish, confirm, and uphold the rights and obligations of individuals, businesses, or other governments or organizations with respect to the organization in question. Vital records are often also referred to as essential records.

Identifying **vital records** allows an organization to assign resources to ensuring a small but critical subset of all its sources of evidence can be protected in an emergency.

A different use of the term "vital records" refers to records or evidence that document significant life events, such as birth, marriage, or death.