



APPRAISAL AND DISPOSITION OF RECORDS

This advisory may help public records commissions, in addition to records schedules, inform their decisions on retaining or destroying records.

1. Appraisal and disposition function. All state and local government agencies—or any institution, enterprise, or organization—should appraise their records and authorize proper disposition through records disposition schedules. Public records commissions must approve these schedules for public records.

2. General principles of appraisal and disposition. Apply the following principles to the appraisal of all state and local government records:

- If a legislative mandate requires permanent or temporary retention of any record, set of records, or class of records, then the specified record(s) must be kept at public expense for at least so long as the mandate requires. All county archives should refer to the County Technical Assistance Services (CTAS) manual for retention regulations for all county records.¹
- The creating agency should retain active records as long as they are useful for the performance of its routine functions.
- If an agency decides to retain records beyond their active usefulness or legislative mandate, it must ensure they remain accessible for public examination. This decision requires a commitment of resources for continuous care and custody for the entire retention period.²
- Choosing permanent retention means committing to perpetual care.
- Records should not be kept beyond their useful life in the public interest.
- No record essential to the public interest should be destroyed.

¹ <http://eli.ctas.tennessee.edu/reference/current-retention-schedules>

² Careless and negligent “warehousing” of records does not satisfy this requirement.

The following types of records may have archival value for permanent retention:

- **Essential Records:** These records are needed to resume or continue operations, recreate legal and financial status after disaster, or protect or fulfill obligations.
- **Records with Lasting Value:** These provide legal and fiscal evidence of responsible government
- **Records of High Evidential and Historical Value:** These records contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the political, social, economic, and historical context of government and culture and can be retained at public expense.

3. Definition of terms:

- **Active record** is any record currently in use or retained by an operating agency for conducting current business.
- **Archives** is a secure repository for permanently valuable records that ensures their retention, maintenance, and public inspection. (Note: This is not a “records center”, which is described below.)³
- **Essential record** is any public record needed for resuming or continuing government operations, recreating legal and financial status, or fulfilling obligations to citizens.
- **Inactive record** is any record that is not active. We must decide whether to retain it for future reference at public expense or destroy it.
- **Records appraisal** is the examination of records to determine their value and decide how long to retain and maintain them at public expense in the public interest. This includes the conclusions drawn from such examinations.
- **Records center** is a central repository for temporarily storing inactive records that have not yet reached the end of their retention under agency control.
- **Records disposition** is the final action taken on records, which can include destruction, transfer, or permanent retention.
- **Records disposition authorization (RDA)** is the formal, recorded approval of a decision to retain or to destroy a record or set of records. This includes approvals of records schedules and the justifications for these decisions. It is also the official document an agency head uses to request authority for the disposition of records.
- **Records disposition schedule (RDS)** is a list of specific records or record series, along with the retention terms for each. It outlines how long the originating agency must keep the records before transferring them to the archives or destroying them, according to the appropriate records disposition authority.

4. Public records value. The value of a public record lies in its usefulness to the government and its citizens. This value justifies records retention authorizations and may be expressed as:

- **Administrative value:** the usefulness of a record to the current operations of a government agency.
- **Evidential value:** the inherent usefulness and reliability of a record as legal, fiscal, or historical evidence.

³ The functions of an archives and a records center are different and should not be confused.

- **Informational value:** the useful content in a record that provides information beyond its administrative value.
- **Intrinsic value:** the inherent usefulness of a record as marketable property, historical artifact, or cultural relic.
- **Permanent value:** a record has enduring usefulness that justifies the public cost of retaining and preserving it as a reliable and authentic record, while also managing its future use for public inspection indefinitely.

The value of a public record may also be expressed as any of the following:

Archival value	[See “permanent value”]
Commercial value	[See “intrinsic value”]
Enduring value	[See “permanent value”]
Fiscal value	[See “evidential value”]
Historical value	[See “evidential value”, “informational value”, and “intrinsic value”]
Legal value	[See “evidential value”]
Market value	[See “intrinsic value”]
Monetary value	[See “intrinsic value”]
Operational value	[See “administrative value”]

5. Commentary on the principles. Where there is no compelling agency need or legislative mandate, agencies must find a justifiable reason to keep records for future reference at public expense. The justifiable reason comes from balancing the cost of retention against the public benefit gained. This assessment is not always an economic, rational calculation, as public benefit can be difficult to measure. However, the associated costs⁴ are real and the authority responsible for the decision must accept this responsibility.

⁴ That is, the costs of maintenance if the records are kept and the costs to historical knowledge if they are destroyed.

The following questions help guide the process.

- If the answer to a question is “**YES**”, then retention is justifiable, but not proven.
- If the answer to a question is “**NO**”, then the need to keep the record may be questioned.
- The more “**YES**” answers to these questions, the easier it is to justify retention at public expense.

YES

NO

1. Are the records likely to be needed for historical research?

2. Are the records likely to be needed for historical research into topics associated with agencies represented in the record(s)?

3. Are the records likely to be needed for historical research into the histories of agencies represented in the record(s)?

4. Are the records necessary for public understanding of the past to make informed decisions for the future?

5. Can the records be kept in good condition for future use?⁵

6. Can the records be kept in good condition for a reasonable or affordable cost?

7. Can the responsible authority afford to keep these record(s) organized and accessible for public inspection?

⁵ There are cases, for instance, where the inherent deterioration of the records is so far gone that retention is futile; in which case, restoration, copying, or other means of preservation must be taken into consideration as a cost of retention.