

HOW DO YOU APPRAISE GOVERNMENT RECORDS?

Appraising government records and artifacts is one of the toughest jobs in historic preservation, as perhaps only 3-5% of all government records have permanent historical value. As a staff member of a government agency or historical society, it is your job to preserve those records that have permanent historical value, and to do so you will need the tools that can help you separate the few records with permanent value from the many that have no permanent value.

In this chapter you will learn the meaning of appraisal and the types of values government records can have. Useful procedures and tools that can help you get started appraising your own collections, whether your collections consist of paper or non-paper records, or both will also be discussed.

Keep in mind that the term *record* refers to information and not a physical object such as a piece of paper, a photograph, or a CD. For example, the information found in a birth certificate is considered the record, whether the certificate is on paper or on microfilm. When appraising government records, your appraisal should be based on the record, regardless of the medium the information is on, or format it is in.

What does appraisal mean?

When appraising government records, you are actually determining their value and eventual disposition. Should the records be destroyed immediately? Should they be retained? How long should they be retained? Should they be transferred to an archive? You might think that records are appraised only once: when you receive the records and need to decide whether or not to keep them. However, the values of records often change, and therefore, you need to appraise them more than once throughout their lifetimes. For example, before converting a paper record to an electronic record, you need to appraise the value of the record in both media formats to ensure that the record does not become less accessible, and therefore less valuable, after being converted to an electronic format.

As you appraise government records, you need to consider the many possible values records can have. Records are important for their administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical value. Records can also be important for their intrinsic value. With all these possible values, the necessary task of appraising records can sometimes be complex.

Why are records valuable?

Records have four primary values—administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical—and it is important to remember that a record often has more than one of these values at any time. In addition, records can also have intrinsic value.

Administrative Value

Records with administrative value typically pertain to the origin, development, activities, accomplishments, and functions of an agency. Examples of such records include:

- Annual reports from a county highway department
- Correspondence from a city clerk
- Minutes from a town board meeting
- Policy and procedures manuals for a school district

Fiscal Value

Records with fiscal value are often needed for audit purposes. It is necessary to consider federal and state requirements when determining retention periods for records with fiscal value. In Minnesota, the State Auditor requires that you retain local government fiscal records for a minimum of six years, while the Legislative Auditor requires you retain state government fiscal records for a minimum of four years. Examples of records that have fiscal value include:

- Accounting records
- Audit reports
- Budgets
- Grant agreements
- Ledgers
- Payroll records
- Vouchers

Legal Value

Legal value refers to the “usefulness or significance of records to document and protect the rights and interests of an individual or organization, to provide for defense in litigation, to demonstrate compliance with laws and regulations, or to meet other legal needs.”¹ Examples of such records include agreements, civil and criminal case files from district courts, contracts, leases, city ordinances, personnel records, land records from county recorders, township road records, and naturalization papers.

Historical Value

Records with historical value are important as they provide information about our past and help guide us into the future. They document the development of government and its policies, provide unique evidence of the lives and activities of people, describe social and economic conditions, and record the development of community and business. They are important to students, researchers, historians, citizens, and local governments. Some historical records must be retained permanently. Examples of records that have historical value include:

- Annual reports
- Birth and death records
- Selected correspondence

¹ Pearce-Moses, Richard. *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology: Legal Value*. Society of American Archivists. 2005. http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=256

- Hearing transcripts
- Meeting minutes
- Photographs

As a records custodian, it is important for you to remember that the definition of a historically valuable record can change dramatically over time, and you therefore need to appraise records continually. For instance, interest in women's, ethnic, and labor history has grown tremendously, making records that pertain to these subjects far more valuable today than they were perceived half a century ago.

Intrinsic Value

Records with intrinsic value have unique characteristics that make them interesting and worthy of retention. A record might have intrinsic value because of it's:

- Age or time period
- Association with a particular geographical location
- Association with famous people
- Unusual physical or aesthetic qualities
- Description of important or controversial issues
- Coverage of historical events
- Exhibit potential
- Unique or special content
- Creation under unusual circumstances
- Signatures or attached seals

Examples of such records include Minnesota territorial records, township citizen petitions, city council proclamations, school certificates, and hand-drawn maps from county surveyors.

What is the recommended appraisal process?

Your organization's mission and collection policy define what records you are interested in collecting and retaining at your institution and identify priority subjects and the types of materials you believe are most likely to yield information of value for future use. Appraisal is guided by these policies and is the process by which selection is made.

At first, appraising your records might seem like an overwhelming task. For this reason, the Minnesota Historical Society has created a helpful tool that will make the appraisal job easier: the *Appraisal Checklist*². This checklist can be used for any quantity of records, from just a handful of documents to a basement vault filled with many types of records. This checklist provides a systematic way to arrange and identify records, making a large project easier to manage.

² Minnesota Historical Society. *Appraisal Checklist*. State Archives Department. March 19, 2003.
http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/docs_pdfs/recordservices/appchecklist.pdf

A summary of the appraisal process is provided here:

1. Separate records from nonrecords. When separating records you should keep track of records series, collect key record information, and weed out obvious duplicates. Records series refers to a group of records that were created, arranged, and maintained as a group because they relate to a particular subject or function. Examples of records series include:

- Town clerk record books
- Township invoices
- City council ordinances
- City manager correspondence
- County board minutes
- County auditor tax lists
- School superintendent correspondence
- School district permanent pupil cards

You should also collect key information as you separate records from nonrecords. Key information includes the:

- Department or office that created the records
- Arrangement of the records
- Physical condition of the records
- Media of the records (for example paper, microfilm, photographic, or electronic)
- Topics—especially those of special importance—covered in the records
- Date span of the records (earliest to most recent)
- Principal correspondents, if relevant
- Uniqueness of records

2. Group similar records together.
3. Create records retention schedules based on the value of the records.
4. Re-house the records. Use boxes and folders as necessary. Refer to Chapter 5 of these guidelines (*How do you preserve and store government records?*).
5. Compile a detailed inventory of the records. Refer to Chapter 5 of these guidelines (*How do you preserve and store government records?*).

What other appraisal considerations are important?

When you start looking at records appraisal issues within your organization, begin by considering the broader issues, asking questions such as these:

- Do you have a collection policy that provides guidance for appraising records?
- Do the records fit into your collection scope?
- How much will it cost to process and preserve the records?
- Are the records in a physical condition that allows them to be used?

After dealing with the broader issues, spend time on more specific issues by asking questions such as these:

- Does an appropriate records retention schedule for the records exist?
- Is the information in the records available in another location or format?
- Will restrictions on use lessen the value of the records?
- Are you in compliance with the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act? (See Chapter 6 of these guidelines [*How do you provide access to government records?*]).
- How may researchers use the records?

You should have an organizational mission statement and collections policy that specifies the nature of the records you wish to collect and preserve. Your collections policy should take into consideration the resources you have available for collecting and preserving records, such as staff, talent, available space, and funds. The Wisconsin State Historical Society has a practical and easy-to-follow manual³ that will help you create a collection development policy for your historical records.

How do you appraise non-paper records?

When appraising non-paper records, you need to understand and evaluate issues concerning technology. The two important steps in appraising non-paper records are:

1. Appraise the informational value of the records. It is important to remember that your appraisal should be based on records content, regardless of the media.
2. Analyze the technical nature of the records, including the cost of acquiring, processing, preserving, and servicing the records. Know if the records are dependent on particular technology, and determine if the records are best stored on their current media. Ask yourself such questions as these:
 - Are the records physically stable?

³ Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board Wisconsin Association of Public Librarians. *Creating a Collection Development Policy for Local Historical Records in Public Libraries*. April 1998.
<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/whrab/wapl.pdf>

- What are the storage costs?
- Will you be able to migrate records information from one medium or format to another one?
- Will the technology become obsolete making the record inaccessible?

For more information please review *Challenges in Managing Records in the 21st Century*⁴ produced by the National Electronic Commerce Coordinating Council (NECCC) Analysis of State Records Laws Work Group.

What factors should you consider when appraising certain types of non-paper records?

All types of records have their own specific appraisal issues that you need to be aware of. Here we discuss specific appraisal issues associated with audio and video tapes, electronic records, microform, motion picture film, oversized documents, and photographic materials.

Audio tapes

Audio tapes often have unique value because of the informational, artistic, and cultural nature of their content. You might find that selecting the tapes you want to retain is a difficult and time-consuming task.

Video Tapes

Video tapes often have value because of the informational, artistic, and cultural nature of their content. You might find that selecting the tapes you want to retain is a difficult and time-consuming task.

Electronic Records

When appraising electronic records, you need to consider the information system that created, stores, displays, and processes the record. Also, be aware that the cost of preserving electronic records can be high because of the need to migrate data and to periodically upgrade hardware and software. You will need to decide who will manage the records and where you will store the official copies. Documentation, such as computer system manuals, metadata, and in-house procedures, must be kept to assist in reading and using the electronic records. You will also need to determine the format of the official record copy.

Microfilm and Microfiche

The cost of preserving and storing microfilm and microfiche can be high, and if you wish to do so, you will need to purchase and maintain an appropriate microfilm reader. When appraising this type of record, you will need to consider the readability of and any damage to the microfilm.

⁴ National Electronic Commerce Coordinating Council (NECCC). *Challenges in Managing Records in the 21st Century*. NECCC Analysis of State Records Laws Work Group. 2004.
http://rpm.lib.az.us/papers/Challenges_in_El_Records.pdf

Motion Picture Films

Motion picture films often have unique value because of the informational, artistic, and cultural nature of their content. Reviewing and selecting films for retention might be difficult and time-consuming.

Oversized Documents

Oversized documents, such as maps and architectural drawings, can be inconvenient to preserve and store. They have more value when they provide unique information and when they are accompanied by related documents such as correspondence, reports, and specifications. Final drawings are preferred over preliminary drawings.

Photographic Material

Photographs and negatives often have more informational than evidential value. Proper exposure, clear focus, good composition, and complete identifying information (such as subject, photographer, date, and location) have an important impact on your appraisal. Refer to your collections policy to help you decide what photographic materials to keep. It is important to remember that photographic materials will disintegrate over time, and camera negatives and first-generation prints are always preferred.

What tools can I use to appraise government records?

The State Archives has several tools readily available to help you appraise government records including worksheets, forms, and information leaflets. A select few are discussed below.

Appraisal Checklist⁵

As described earlier, a practical and an easy-to-use tool is the *Appraisal Checklist* available from the State Archives.

Electronic Records Inventory Worksheet⁶

A tool to help gather and identify general information about electronic records as well as information surrounding records management concerns and hardware, software and media information of the record set in question.

Records Retention Schedules and Forms⁷

Records retention schedules provide you with a plan for managing government records. General records retention schedules give you minimum retention periods for records based on the records' administrative, fiscal, legal, and historical value. It is important to remember that the retention period pertains to the content of the records, regardless of the records' media or format.

⁵ Minnesota Historical Society. *Appraisal Checklist*. State Archives Department. March 19, 2003.
http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/docs_pdfs/recordservices/appchecklist.pdf

⁶ Minnesota Historical Society. *Electronic Records Inventory Sheet*. State Archives Department. June 10, 2004.
http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/docs_pdfs/ErecsInventory.pdf

⁷ Minnesota Historical Society. *General Records Retention Schedules Available Online*. State Archives Department. August 24, 2009. <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/retentionsched.html>

The State Archives maintains a website⁸ of retention schedule information, including schedules for Minnesota counties, cities, townships, school districts, district courts, human resources schedules for state agencies, and financial schedules for state agencies. Following these schedules can help you dispose of records according to state law. (Review the records management statute M.S. 138.17⁹.)

State or local government agencies may create their own records retention schedules, but each schedule must be reviewed and approved prior to use. To create your own records retention schedule, you must first submit three signed copies of your proposed schedule to the State Archives of the Minnesota Historical Society¹⁰. The State Archives will review the schedule, and then submit it to the Records Disposition Panel for final review and approval. Once the schedule is approved, a copy will be returned to your agency. A blank records retention schedule form, with instructions, is available on the State Archives web site¹¹.

Application for Authority to Dispose of Records Form

The *Application for Authority to Dispose of Records*¹² form is a means of disposing records that are not covered in any records retention schedule. It is your responsibility to fill out the form completely and submit it to the State Archives. The State Archives will then secure the signatures of the Records Disposition Panel members and return the form to you.

Government Records Information Leaflets

The State Archives provides government records information leaflets that identify the most historically valuable records created or preserved by local government units. The following leaflets are available on the State Archives web site.¹³

1. *Township Records*
2. *School District Records*
3. *Records of the County Superintendent of Schools*
4. *Municipal Records*
5. *Law Enforcement Records*
6. *County Auditor Records*
7. *Public Library Records*
8. *Records of Public Health Care Facilities*
9. *Records of Heritage Preservation Commissions*
10. *Watershed District and Soil and Water Conservation District Records*

⁸ Minnesota Historical Society. *General Records Retention Schedules Available Online*. State Archives Department. August 24, 2009. <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/retentionsched.html>

⁹ Minnesota Office of the Revisor of Statutes. *2008 Minnesota Statutes: 138.17 Government Records; Administration*. <https://www.revisor.leg.state.mn.us/statutes/?id=138.17>

¹⁰ Minnesota Historical Society, 345 Kellogg Boulevard West, Saint Paul, MN 55102-1906

¹¹ Minnesota Historical Society. *Record Services: Forms*. State Archives Department. September 2009. <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/recser.html#forms>

¹² Minnesota Historical Society. *Application for Authority to Dispose of Records*. State Archives Department. June 1997. http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/docs_pdfs/PR1form.pdf

¹³ Minnesota Historical Society. *Record Services: Related Links*. State Archives Department. March 10, 2009. <http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/recser.html#info>

Where can you get more information on appraising government records?

Minnesota Historical Society, State Archives, Appraisal Checklist¹⁴

The State Archives developed an *Appraisal Checklist*, which should be used to make the appraisal process easier.

Council of State Archivists (COA). Archives Resource Center.¹⁵

COA maintains a website devoted to providing archivists with information on useful information about state archives and record management programs.

National Association of Government Archives and Record Administrators (NAGARA)¹⁶

NAGARA provides a searchable library on various topics related to records management in the government setting including appraisal.

National Archives and Records Administration¹⁷

This web site has useful information about all aspects of government archives, and includes T.R. Schellenberg's book, *The Appraisal of Modern Records*¹⁸, which provides an excellent foundation for appraising modern American government records.

Society of American Archivists (SAA)¹⁹

The following resources as well as others are available in print from the SAA bookstore:

Boles, Frank. *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*. Archival Fundamentals Series II. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005.

Cox, Richard J. *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal*. Scarecrow Press, 2004.

Craig, Barbara L. *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice*. KG Saur, 2004.

¹⁴ Minnesota Historical Society. *Appraisal Checklist*. State Archives Department. March 19, 2003.
http://www.mnhs.org/preserve/records/docs_pdfs/recordservices/appchecklist.pdf

¹⁵ Council of State Archivists (CoSA). *ARC: Archives Resource Center*. May 30, 2009.
<http://www.statearchivists.org/arc/index.htm>

¹⁶ National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (NAGARA). Resources Home.
<http://www.nagaresources.org/>

¹⁷ The National Archives. *Home Page*. <http://www.archives.gov/index.html>

¹⁸ The National Archives. *The Appraisal of Modern Records*. Archives Library and Information Center (ALIC). 1999. (Based on Schellenberg, T.R. *The Appraisal of Modern Records*. October 1956.)
<http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/archives-resources/appraisal-of-records.html>

¹⁹ The Society of American Archivists. *Home Page*. <http://www.archivists.org/>