Digital Decluttering

A Beginner's Guide to Organizing and Managing Your Digital Files

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I. What you'll learn from this program

I. Why you should declutter and organize your digital files

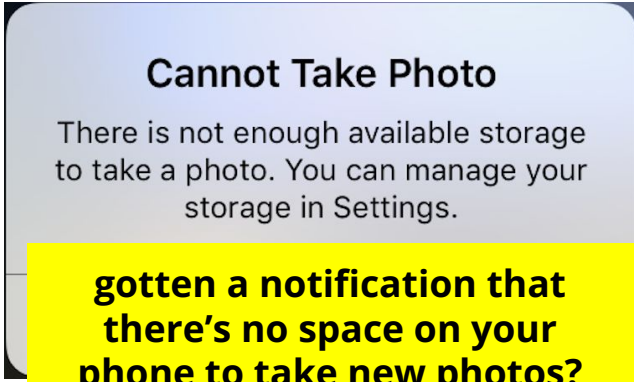
II. What to consider when organizing & storing your files

III. How to organize your digital file collection

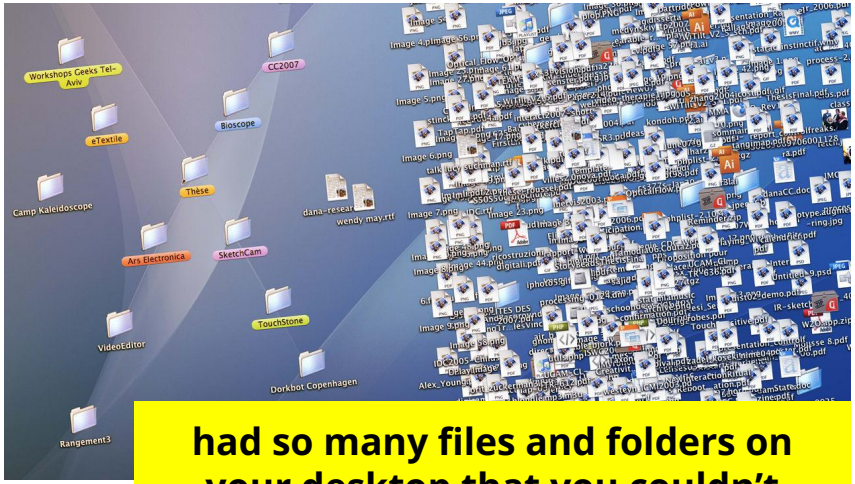
IV. How to keep your digital files safe for the long term

What we won't cover today: digitizing physical photos and documents, how to edit photos and other digital files

Have you ever…



gotten a notification that there's no space on your phone to take new photos?



had so many files and folders on your desktop that you couldn't actually *see* the desktop?

wanted to delete some of your old files, but were too scared to in case you deleted something important?

If so, you're not alone!

According to a survey conducted by Western Digital in 2021:

- 4 in 10 people said their digital desktop is as messy (or even messier) than their physical desktop
- 6 in 10 people never delete any old files from their devices
- Among those surveyed, photos and videos took up 44% of their digital storage, documents took up 41%, and screenshots took up 38%
- The oldest files stored on people’s devices (on average) were four years old.

Why do people not delete old files?

43% said they don’t delete files because they’re precious memories

43% said they feel guilty deleting files

36% said they thought their files would be valuable in the future

32% said they don’t have time to delete old files

31% said they want to be able to show people their files

II. Why organize your digital files?

1. Preserve your files for future use

- Digital photos are especially important to organize→ most people have lots of them and want to be able to preserve them for family and friends

- Emails→ can be important for record keeping (especially business/legal emails or emails related to financial transactions); attachments from emails can also be valuable to preserve

- Social media files→ videos, photos, and direct messages you've shared on social media, as well as blog posts & personal website pages, can be important to preserve for friends & family and also for record keeping

II. Why organize your digital files?

2. **Easier to access and share files once you've organized them**

- Once you've organized your digital files, you won't have to do as much searching find specific ones
- Having files organized in one place can make it easier to share multiple files all at once
- If you use a cloud storage service for storing your files, it's very easy to share your files (especially photos and videos) with other people through email, text message, social media posts, etc.

II. Why organize your digital files?

3. Gives you a better idea of what files you actually have

- Until you actually organize your files, it's hard to figure out what you actually have and how big your digital collection is (especially if you have files stored in multiple places/services)

4. Helps free up space for other files

- As you organize your files, you're likely to find duplicates and/or files that you no longer need or want to keep

- Transferring and backing up files that you have stored on your phone or other mobile devices can free up space and help your devices run better

II. Why organize your digital files?

5. Helps protect your cybersecurity

- The more digital files you have sitting around, the more likely some of those files may include sensitive information that you wouldn't want compromised (esp. if you hoard data related to your job)

- If you don't know what all you have stored on your computer or in the cloud and your data is hacked, can be hard to figure out what was leaked

- The more digital files you have, the more effort it takes to make sure those files are secure

- You wouldn't leave your banking information and social security card lying out in the open on a desk—- so why would you leave that information lying unsecured on your computer?

III. Things to consider when organizing & storing your files

1. **What files are most important to you?**
    - Which of your files are most important to you personally? Which files might be of interest to other people (your family, your job, organizations that you're a part of, etc)?

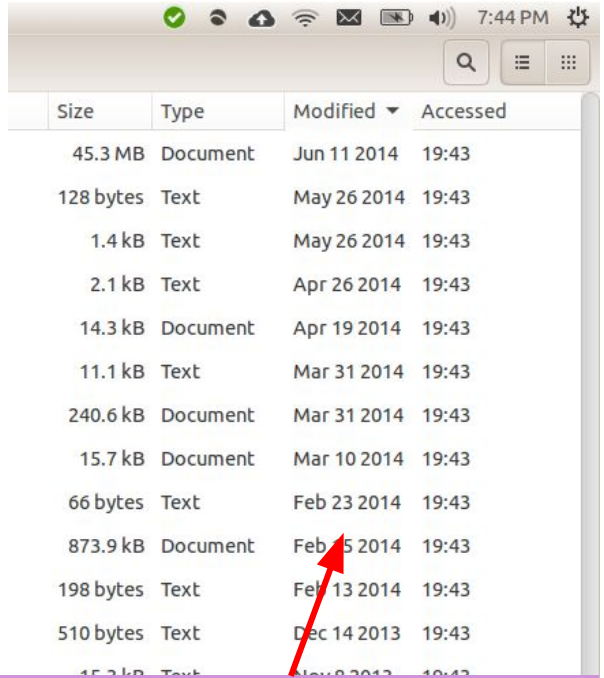
    - Are any of your files currently at risk of being lost (because of the media they're stored on is obsolete, because the storage services they're stored on are running out of space/outdated, because they're buried amidst lots of other files)?

    - You don't need to organize all your files all at once→ start off small and work in incrementants, organize the files that are most important to you first

III. Things to consider when organizing & storing your files

2. What files are NOT important to you?

- Do you have multiple copies of the same file? Are there any files that can no longer be used or opened?
- How old are your files? Are there any files you've kept that you haven't used or accessed in a long time?
- Do you have a lot of routine emails or text messages that don't contain information you might need later (EX: emails with advertisements or coupons that have expired, work emails with outdated information or that are no longer relevant)?
- Do you have a lot of files in .ZIP, .7z, or other "compressed" format?
- Do you have a lot of old "draft" files of projects that are now finished? If you take a lot of photos or videos, are some of the files you've kept blurry or poor quality?



Looking at the last time you modified or accessed a file can help you figure out if it's worth keeping

III. Things to consider when organizing & storing your files

3. Where are your files currently stored?

a. Do you have a lot of files stored on USB drives? Stored directly on your computer? Do you already use a particular cloud storage service (iCloud, Google Drive, Dropbox, etc) for storing digital files? Are there a lot of important attachments you've saved in your email? Do you have digital photos stored on a camera SD card that haven't been saved elsewhere yet?

b. Asking yourself these questions gives you an idea of where you'll need to download and import files from in order to properly organize and preserve them

c. Also helps you figure out what files are at risk of being lost (because they're stored on outdated media like floppy disks, or on media that has a high risk of degradation and corruption like USBs).

d. If you already have a lot of files saved on one particular device (like a single external hard drive) or in a particular storage service, might be easier to put the rest of your files in that device/service as well

III. Things to consider when organizing & storing your files

4. How many digital files do you have (size of your collection)?

a. Thinking about how many digital files you have, and what format(s) they are (photos, videos, PDF documents, etc) will help you figure out how much storage space you might need

b. Also think about how big your digital collection might be in the future→ if you're someone who takes a lot of digital photos/videos, or if you plan on digitizing a lot of your old photos and videos, you'll probably need more storage space down the line

5. How important are access and sharing to you?

a. Do you want to be able to easily access and share your files? Do you want to store your files securely so that only you have access to them?

b. If sharing is a priority, services like Dropbox and Google Drive work well for storage→ designed with built-in sharing features so you can easily share individual items or multiple items/folders through email, text, or social media

c. If security is a priority, look for cloud services that use zero-knowledge encryption (storage company does not keep a copy of your encryption key, so even if servers are accessed illegally or government issues warrant, your files would only be accessible by you), or use encrypted external hard drives

IV. Types of digital storage

1. **Internal Storage:** Storage that's built-in to your PC or mobile device

    a. Very limited amount of storage space

    b. If you have store a lot of files (especially larger files like videos and photos) it can slow down your device a lot

    c. If you don't have backup copies of your files saved elsewhere and something happens to your computer, you'll most likely lose those files

    d. If the operating system for your computer becomes outdated/is no longer supported, you might not be able to access your files

IV. Types of digital storage

2. **External storage**: storing your files on an external storage device (USB flash drive, external hard drive, writable CD)

ADVANTAGES:

- More storage space than internal storage
- Easy to transfer files from computer to external storage
- Frees up space from your computer and other devices
- Cost of external storage continually decreasing (can purchase good quality hard drive with 4TB of storage space for under $100)

IV. Types of digital storage

2. **External storage**: storing your files on an external storage device (USB flash drive, external hard drive, writable CD)

DISADVANTAGES:

- If you store all your files on only one external storage medium and something happens to it, you'll lose your files
- Not all external storage is created equal
  - CDs, DVDs are vulnerable to deterioration and many computers no longer have built in drives to read them
  - Flash drives are easy to break and very easy to corrupt or hack
- If the hardware or software needed to access files on your external storage is no longer available, you may lose access to your files (EX: floppy disks)

IV. Types of digital storage

3. **Cloud storage:** Storing your files through an online storage service like Dropbox or Google Drive (your files are stored remotely “in the cloud” on their storage servers, rather than on your own device or external storage)

ADVANTAGES:

- Convenient (don’t have to worry about taking up storage space on your device, can access your files from any computer with internet access)
- Generally affordable (EX: 2TB of storage with Google Drive is $10/month)
- Make it easy to share your files (built in features for sharing to social media and email)
- Can access your files from anywhere as long as you have an internet connection (good for working remotely)

IV. Types of digital storage

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DISADVANTAGES:

- If something happens to cloud server, you could lose access to your files
- Hard to access your files when you're not connected to the internet
- Storage can get pricey if you've got a lot of files
- Some security and privacy issues
    - Many cloud storage providers (like Google) reserve the right to collect data from users about how you use their services, and use automated systems to analyze your data and recommend ads for you
    - Your cloud storage is only as secure as you make it: use strong password, 2-factor authentication, only share files & data with people you trust, make sure files are encrypted in the cloud

V. How to organize your files

1. Best naming practices

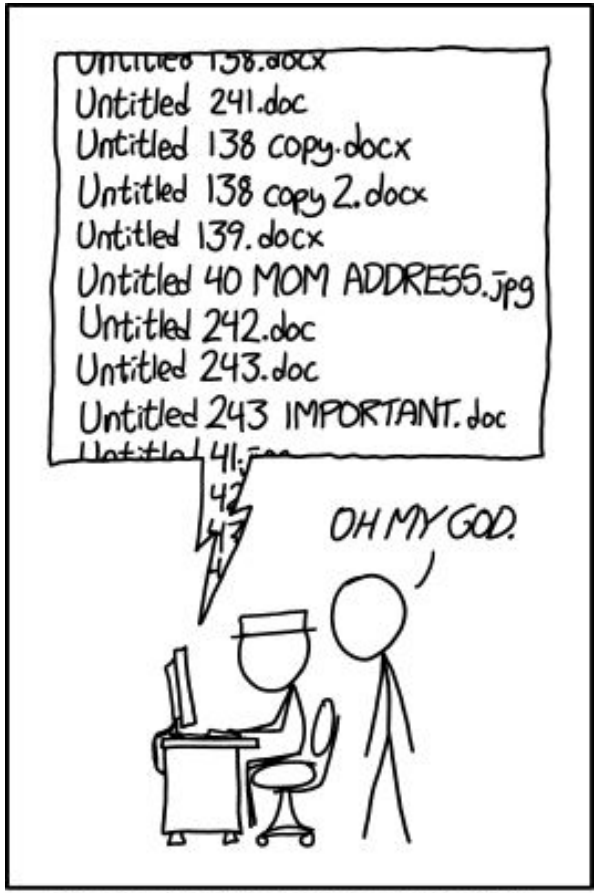
a. Very important: properly naming your files makes it easier to find and organize them, and file names can also provide context about the file for other people who might access it

b. DON'T rely on default file names that are generated automatically when you download a file (can be vague or random)

c. Try to keep your file names short and descriptive, and avoid spaces and special characters like !$&#*](_-

d. Including the date a file was created/date associated with the file in its file name is a good practice

e. However you decide to name your files, try to use the same naming system for all of them



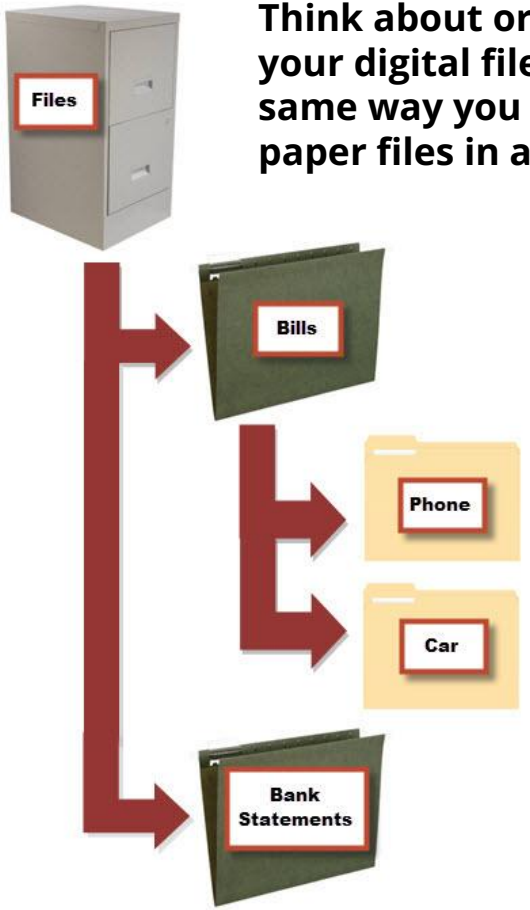
V. How to organize your files

2. Folder structure

a. Try to organize your folders in a way that makes sense to you (grouping and naming folders by date, by file type, by subject, event, etc)

b. Helpful to have one main folder and then create subfolders within that main (root) folder that follow your organizing scheme

c. Most important thing is to be consistent: use the same organization scheme for all your files, so that your files will always be where you expect them to be (also makes it easier for anyone trying to sort through your files in the future)



Think about organizing your digital files the same way you would paper files in an office!

V. How to organize your files

3. Metadata

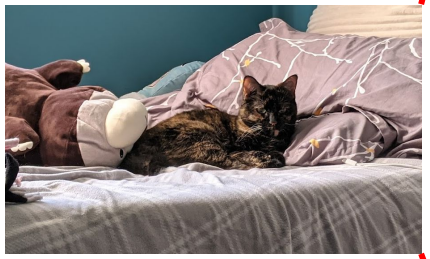
a. Metadata = data about data
(Descriptive info about an image or file-->location it was taken, keywords that describe the file, caption of photo, etc)

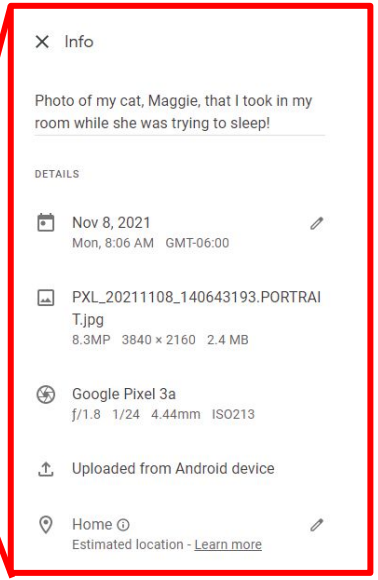
b. Including metadata with your files is helpful not only for organizing them, but can also help anyone who might access your files in the future (like your grandkids) understand them better

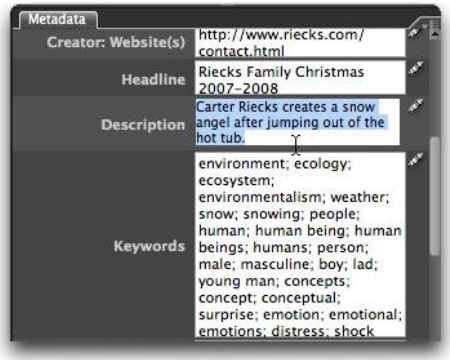
c. Doesn't have to be fancy or complicated: can be as simple as a text file called "INFO–PLEASE READ" that contains information about the files in a particular folder

d. You can use the free software Adobe Bridge CC to add metadata to documents, photos, and videos (will need to create free Adobe account to download software)

e. Good file names are also part of the metadata for your files!





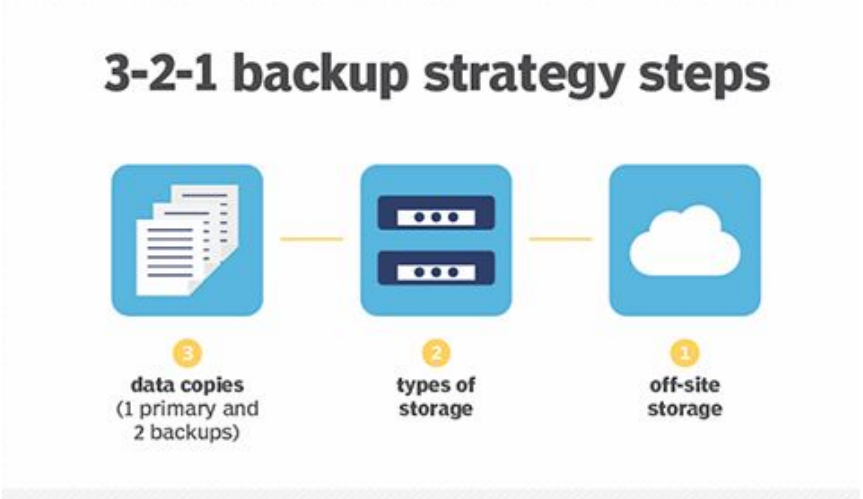


VI. How to keep your files safe for the long-term

1. **LOCKSS (Lots of copies keeps stuff safe)**

    a. Don't just rely on storing all your files in one place and expecting it to be safe there indefinitely

    b. 3-2-1 Rule: Keep at least 3 copies of your files, 2 of which are in different types of storage (EX: One copy on external hard drive, one copy in cloud storage), and at least 1 of which is stored in a physically different location than your other copies)



VI. How to keep your files safe for the long-term

2. Be active in maintaining and preserving your files

a. Periodically checking to make sure your files are still usable is important for their long-term preservation

b. Try to do a “digital audit” every few years to make sure you can still open them and to see if there are files you no longer want to keep

c. If you’re using external hard drives to store your files, try to migrate your files to a new device every 5 to 7 years (after this timeframe devices tend to be at an increased risk of degradation)

Take things one step at a time!

- Organize your files a little bit at a time: good to start by organizing the files that are most important to you, or by organizing your oldest files first
- Break the organizing process into chunks (EX: Focus on deleting old files on one day, backing up files to external or cloud storage on another day)
- Make organizing your digital files part of your routine: set aside time once a week or even just once a month to look through your files and declutter

Take things one step at a time!

- Treat your digital files the same way you would your physical files
- Be conscientious as you create new digital files or add new files to your "collection"

Taking a "KonMari" approach to managing your digital files can do a lot to help reduce your digital clutter!

  - Will you need to preserve these new files for the long term? Are there other files you can delete to make space for new files? How do these new files fit into your existing digital collection?
  - Unsubscribe from email subscription lists you no longer read & uninstall apps you no longer use to reduce your digital clutter
  - Review & organize new photos, documents, and other files as you create them, rather than setting them aside to go through later

Resources for digital decluttering

- Personal Archiving with the Library of Congress (http://digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/)
  - Guides, videos, and checklists for preserving and managing all types of personal data—not just photos but also videos, emails, audio, etc
- Personal Digital Archiving: The Basics (http://guides.lib.purdue.edu/PDA)
  - Guide created by Purdue University to help people get started with preserving digital files that are importing to them
- 30 Day Digital Declutter Challenge (https://bit.ly/3u33Qy7)
  - Assigns a different digital decluttering task every day for 30 days; good practical approach to breaking down the decluttering process
- Digital Decluttering Checklist
  - National Cybersecurity Alliance's list of digital decluttering tasks you should do to protect your cybersecurity