

We all have papers in our homes – certificates, family letters, ephemera or artworks – that we wish to preserve. Paper-based materials can be vulnerable, but by adopting some simple precautions we can prevent a great deal of damage to these collections.

Causes of damage

Paper is generally cellulose fibre, often from wood pulp with varying degrees of refinement and long-term stability. Papers range in quality from ground-wood newsprint, which yellows in a matter of days, to high-quality cotton rag papers that keep well for centuries.

One of the main enemies of paper is acid, either inherent in the fibre, introduced during manufacture or from subsequent contact with acidic materials such as wood, cardboard or atmospheric pollutants.

Heat, high humidity and over-exposure to light, either artificial or direct sunlight, will accelerate chemical reactions that cause papers to deteriorate and degrade. Some inks and other pigments will fade if exposed to light, especially ultraviolet (UV) light present in normal daylight and from fluorescent bulbs. UV light also damages the cellulose in paper, causing it to become yellow and brittle. This effect is exacerbated by higher temperatures and moisture.

Dust tends to absorb moisture, providing a suitable environment for mould growth and insects. Stains caused by mould and pests are not easily treatable. Both problems are exacerbated by humidity, so it is important to keep papers in a relatively dry environment with adequate circulation of air.

Handling originals and copies

Ensure that hands and surfaces are clean when handling paper. Surface dust may be gently removed with a soft brush or cloth, but any intensive cleaning can cause more problems than benefits. Use only soft lead pencils when annotating documents. Remove paperclips, staples, or post-it style notes.

Original papers that are frequently referred to can be carefully copied and then put away. Repeated photocopying or prolonged exposure to photographic lights is damaging, so additional copies should be taken from the duplicate.

Do not make copies on thermal fax paper, as this material is unstable and the print will fade.

With ordinary photocopies, polymer resins are fused to the paper surface to create the print. They can react with polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or other commonly used plastics, causing the image to transfer onto the plastic. To avoid this, do not use poor quality plastic sleeves or folders.

Storage methods and materials

Ideal conditions are difficult to achieve in the home environment, but minimising exposure to light, dust, heat and damp will help to preserve your documents. Sheds, roof-spaces and damp areas are not suitable for storing papers.

Sheet protectors and display books are convenient for storing originals or duplicates, but look for polypropylene or polyethylene products which are chemically inert. For delicate items, use an acid-free paper or card support, especially when inserting or withdrawing from envelopes.

Avoid laminating, which is an irreversible process of embedding a document in plastic and permanently alters unique items. Do not use pressure-sensitive adhesive tapes on tears, as they can cause bad stains and irreversible damage. In good housing, small tears can be lived with; otherwise, consult a conservator.

Archival storage containers with close-fitting lids provide a stable microclimate. They will keep out dust, light and pests and reduce fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Containers should be designed to fit the object so that it need not be folded or otherwise adapted to fit. Storage boxes need to be sturdy enough to withstand handling and the weight of the contents.

Large format material is best stored in a plan cabinet with shallow drawers. Interleave with strong acid-free paper and do not overfill drawers. Portfolios are suitable for smaller collections, if housed horizontally. Avoid rolling large items (e.g. maps); but if this is unavoidable, it is safer to roll around a large diameter tube which is then covered with a sturdy material and clearly labelled.

Mounting and framing

Prints and drawings, whether framed or not, should have a window mount. This protects the work from damage during storage and from fingerprints during handling. It also protects the work from contact with glazing, preventing condensation and mould growth.

Use good quality materials for mounting. Specify museum-quality or conservation-style mounts with separate front and backboard joined with cloth tape. Artwork is hinged to the backboard. This allows it to hang freely in the mount and react to changing atmospheric conditions. When commissioning picture framing, ask to see examples of the proposed style or consult a conservator who may be able to do the treatment or offer professional advice. For more information on framing works of art, see Framing artworks on paper.

Further information

Visit the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials website for more information about commissioning a conservator.

For advice, please get in touch with our Ask a librarian service at www.slv.vic.gov.au/visit/ask-librarian.

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