

# How do we decide how long records are kept?

Have you ever wondered how records end up in the National Archives?

Here's how the National Archives and Records Administration works with agencies to determine how long federal government records must be kept.

## Here are some things to know:

### 1. A record is born

A record is born when an agency documents its work.

Agencies in the federal government are required to create records documenting their organization, policies, decisions, and activities.



### 2. Records are created in many formats

Records are created and captured in many formats: in information systems, on websites, as emails, social media posts, documents, maps, images, recordings, designs, and data, in almost any format you can imagine.



### 3. Records serve many purposes

Records help us hold the government accountable and understand our history. Agencies must capture the information needed to protect the legal and financial rights of the government and of persons directly affected by the agency's activities.



### 4. All federal records have a plan

All federal records must have a plan called a records schedule. A schedule describes how long each type of record must be kept.

Records schedules are reviewed and approved by the National Archives.



## Here's how records schedules are developed:

### 1. Agencies identify business value

Agencies analyze their business processes, legal needs, and audit requirements, looking at how, where, and when they use the records and information.

Each agency drafts a records schedule proposing how long each type of information is to be kept.



### 2. NARA evaluates historical value

Agencies submit draft records schedules to the National Archives & Records Administration. NARA evaluates the schedule and also determines whether the records have archival (historical) value. Records with historical value will live forever in the Archives.



### 3. Everyone has a say

Archivists, agency staff, and even members of the general public have a chance to review and comment on agency records schedules. The goal is to determine the best retention time for each type of records. Most records are ultimately deleted at the end of their official retention times. Historical records become part of the National Archives.



### 4. Archivist approves, agency implements

Once the final schedule is approved by the Archivist of the United States, the agency begins applying the schedule to the records. The Archivist's approval gives the agency the legal authority it needs to manage the records.

Agencies review and update records schedules regularly.



## Here's how you can help:

### 1. Talk to your records manager

Each agency has a designated Agency Records Officer and records management team. Find your records management points of contact and reach out to them with your questions and concerns.

When you identify or create new types of information systems, documents, or other records, contact your records manager to ensure that the records will be covered by an approved records schedule.

### 2. Answer records, FOIA, and data calls

If your records management, Freedom of Information Act, legal counsel, and information management teams reach out to you with questions about the records your program holds, work with them to ensure that all the information is identified, inventoried, captured, stored, and preserved.

### 3. Follow your agency's records schedules

Keep records for the amount of time specified in your agency's official records schedules.

If you believe the records schedules need to be changed or updated, contact your agency's records management team.

Follow your agency's records management procedures. Do not destroy or remove records from the agency without permission.

### 4. Remember: You play a key role

We can all help our agencies ensure that records are kept for the right amount of time.

Our history, accountability, transparency, and ability to serve our country effectively and efficiently depend on the steps you take to capture and manage your program's records.

