

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about GRS 5.5, Mail, Printing, and Telecommunication Service Management Records

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INTRODUCTION

1. What is the purpose of GRS 5.5?

This schedule provides disposition authority for records agencies create and receive in the course of administering and operating mail rooms, printing/duplication services, and radio/telecommunication services.

2. Whom do I contact for further information about this schedule?

Please contact NARA's General Records Schedules Team at GRS_Team@nara.gov with questions about this schedule.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

3. Why does this schedule combine records of disparate communication methods, such as hard-copy mail, telephone, and radio, into unified items? Aren't these records fundamentally different?

Communication methods may differ and message formats may be wildly divergent. But at root, they all accomplish the same business process: they transmit information from point A to point B. What unifies these records is that they all relate to the same function: managing services that transmit information.

4. Why does this schedule specifically exclude actual information relayed by hard copy mail, packages, and telephone, email, text, or radio messages?

This schedule does not cover messages agencies send or receive by various communication services because agencies should be scheduling the messages themselves under schedule items covering messages' subject matter. GRS 5.5 covers records of how the agency manages the means of transmitting information (think: envelope) but does not cover the information itself (what is inside the envelope).

5. Why are records of agencies that provide printing and radio/broadcasting services as part of their mission activities not covered by this schedule?

A few agencies of the Federal Government—the Government Printing Office, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, and Armed Forces Radio and Television Service are primary examples—provide communication services as their mission. Agencies must always schedule mission records in agency-specific schedules. This GRS covers records agencies create in the process of consuming communication services rather than those created in providing those services.

6. Why are you rescinding GRS 12, item 3b?

GRS 12, item 3b, covered “copies of incoming and original copies of outgoing messages, including Standard Form (SF) 14, Telegraphic Message *maintained by communications offices or centers*” (emphasis added). This description boils down to hard copy telegraph messages retained by the office whose only part in the process was tapping dots and dashes to formulate a telegram or decoding incoming dots and dashes to print a telegram. Western Union ceased telegram service in the United States on January 27, 2006. The last telegram in the world was sent in India on July 14, 2013. The very short two-month retention of these records means that none should now exist. None will ever again be created and the SF 14 no longer exists. So there is no longer a need to include this item in the GRS.

QUESTION RELATED TO ITEM 010

7. The disposition instruction gives two variant retention calculations to be used “as appropriate.” How do I determine what is “appropriate”?

Some records covered by this item concern agreements, which have start and end dates. The retention for these records is 3 years after the agreement ends by expiration or cancellation. Records not linked to an agreement may be destroyed when simply 3 years old. Both instructions reflect a common records management ground rule: the retention clock starts ticking only when a record is closed. Countdown to destruction is on hold while a record is active, so the appropriate instruction is the one that applies to the kind of closure involved.

QUESTION RELATED TO ITEMS 010 and 020

8. What’s the difference between “telephone and mobile device use records” (item 010) and “telephone message registers and logs” (item 020)?

“Telephone and mobile device use records” (item 010, third bullet) document use of a particular instrument; the phone bill is one common example. “Telephone message registers and logs” (item 020, last bullet) are records of messages taken over the phone by third parties and forwarded to those with a need to know, or notes and logs a recipient makes to track their telephone messages. These registers and logs generally apply to multiple telephones.

QUESTIONS RELATED TO ITEM 020

9. Why does the crosswalk show GRS 12, item 8, as only partially superseded by this item? What else supersedes it?

Superseded GRS 12, item 8, “Postal Irregularities File,” covered “memoranda, correspondence, reports and other records relating to irregularities in the handling of mail, such as loss or shortage of postage stamps or money orders, or loss or destruction of mail.” Retention: 3 years after investigation completion. Despite this item being in GRS 12, “Communications Records,” its true function is investigative. Therefore, many of these records will be covered by item 050 of GRS 5.6 (Security Records) when it is issued.

Mailrooms create records documenting incidents of mishandled mail. Some incidents are minor and may require no more attention than re-delivery to the correct address or apology for late delivery. Other incidents—particularly if intentional mishandling is suspected—may be passed along to an investigative office. Mailrooms must retain *some* information about these more serious incidents in

order to completely document their own business. Under item 020, a mailroom may choose to destroy records of all incidents—regardless of severity—when 3 years old, thus using the same retention as superseded GRS 12, item 8. The investigative office to which the mailroom forwarded a copy of an incident case file retains records documenting the investigative work for 6 years under GRS 5.6, item 050. When different offices retain identical documents for different business purposes, they may require different retention.

10. Why are records tracking shipment, etc. (item’s first bullet), and reports of loss, etc. (third bullet), not covered by this item if held by the United States Postal Service (USPS)?

Tracking mail and package shipments and investigating reported losses are mission functions of the USPS. The GRS does not cover agency mission-specific records; the USPS must schedule records documenting its mission under an agency-specific schedule.

QUESTION RELATED TO ITEM 030

11. Why are metered mail records kept for so much longer than other mail control records, which are covered by item 020?

Metered mail records document an agency’s financial activity. We do not include them in GRS 1.1 because they relate more to the communication line of business than the financial management line of business. But because they are eligible for audit just like any other record documenting an agency’s finances, they must be retained for 6 years just like auditable records in GRS 1.1, item 010.

QUESTION RELATED TO ITEM 040

12. This item cites the Government Losses in Shipment Act. Why isn’t the Act shown as a legal citation, as is done in so many other GRS items?

The GRS cites the Code of Federal Regulations, the United States Code, and Public Laws as “legal citations” only when the law specifically addresses records retention. The Government Losses in Shipment Act (40 U.S.C. 17301-17309) describes in detail the process whereby shipment damages are requested and adjudicated, but says nothing about how quickly a claim must be filed, or how long records must be retained after final adjudication. Since the U.S. Code is silent on these questions, item 040 sets retention to match the statute of limitations for commencing legal action in a contract dispute with the Federal Government (28 U.S. Code 2401(a)). The statute of limitations, however, does not technically apply to claims regarding shipping damages because their final arbiter is not the courts, but rather, the Secretary of the Treasury (40 U.S.C.17304). We have nevertheless set the retention for records covered by item 040 to sync with the statute of limitations because the business process of pursuing settlement is essentially identical regardless of who adjudicates the case.