



Guide to Machine-Implementable Disposition Instructions

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About This Guide

This guide is for agency records management staff and records appraisers to assist in understanding and preparing machine-implementable disposition instructions, or disposition instructions that can be automated.

What Is a Machine-Implementable Disposition Instruction?

Machine-implementable disposition instructions allow a computer application to implement record disposition. Systems can automate disposition either by automatically disposing of records or by notifying a records manager that records are eligible for destruction or transfer to NARA.

Not all disposition instructions are translatable. The more complex the instruction is, the harder it is to implement.

A machine-implementable disposition instruction has four parts:

1 - The Disposition

This will tell the system what to do with the record when retention is met. The disposition will be either Temporary or Permanent.

2 - The Retention Type

The retention type identifies if retention is based on the age of the record (age-based) or it starts when an event occurs (event-based). It identifies when the retention starts: either the creation date of the record or an event.

A creation-based or age-based disposition instruction would be "Destroy when 3 years old."

An event-based disposition instruction would be "Destroy 7 years after case closes." The event is the case closure.

Machine-implementable disposition instructions can be simply expressed as "Creation+retention" or "Event+retention."

3 - The Event Type

Creation-based disposition instructions do not have to specify an event because it is always the creation date of the record.

Event-based disposition instructions need to specify the event that starts retention. These events are usually based on a work process or actions that occur to the record throughout its lifecycle. These types of events are identified as “Event Types.”

Examples of events that appear in disposition instructions include:

- End of the Fiscal or Calendar Year
- When the records are superseded or obsolete.
- The final action is taken on the record, such as close of a case file, final modification date, possibly even the date the record was tagged.

Events can rely on human decision-making or be automated. Events that require human action include when a record is obsolete or no longer needed. Automated events include when the record reaches a certain point in an automated business process or a specific point in time like the end of the Fiscal Year. Many events can be automated.

When aggregating items it is critical that all records in the item have the same event type. This means that you cannot combine records with a creation-based retention period with records that are event-based. A machine-implementable instruction can only have one event type.

An aggregate item can include records that have different event-based instructions, provided that the retention period is always going to be the same period of time after the event. The event may need to be defined on the retention schedule or in the crosswalk (especially if the final event is different for each series).

4 - Retention Period

The retention period identifies how long after the event (the cutoff) the records are eligible for destruction or transfer.

Retention banding does not work well with machine-implementable instructions because the system needs a single retention period. An agency that makes use of banding would need to create individual retention labels for each option available in the band, and then define where each option is used. It is much simpler to define a single retention associated with each disposition item.

How to Write Machine-Implementable Instructions on Records Schedules

When writing the disposition instruction for the records schedule, it should be human readable, for example, “Destroy when 3 years old” or “Transfer 15 years after case is closed.”

Machine-implementable instructions can be written with specific or implied cutoff instructions. The cutoff instruction is the same as the event type.

Example:

Cut off when the case is closed. Destroy 3 years after cutoff.

Is the same as

Destroy 3 years after the case is closed.

Is the same as

Event type: Event_age
Specific event: Case is closed
Retention: 3 years

Machine-implementable disposition can occur any time in the year as soon as the record is eligible for disposition. Disposition can also wait until the end of the Fiscal or Calendar Year if that is the agency’s preference. It all depends on the instructions provided to the computer.

Example:

Cut off at the end of the FY in which the case is closed. Destroy 10 years after cutoff.

Is the same as

Destroy 10 years after the end of the FY in which the case was closed.

Is the same as

Event type: Event_age
Specific Event: Case is closed
Retention: 10 years

But the system would need to be set up to only dispose of records that meet the criteria at the end of the FY.

Examples of Machine-Implementable Disposition Instructions and How to Translate Them

ERA does not provide schedule information in a machine-implementable format. You can download schedule data as a CSV file and translate it to meet your agency's needs. The first step is to make sure that your disposition instructions are translatable.

Instruction on schedule in ERA	Translation
Temporary. Destroy when 3 years old.	Disposition: Temporary Event Type: Creation_age Retention: 3 years
Temporary. Destroy 7 years after final action.	Disposition: Temporary Event Type: Event_age Specific Event: Final action (this might refer to any number of final actions that might be taken on records covered by the item, but it should be clear for all records that a final action does exist) Retention: 7 years
Temporary. Destroy when superseded or obsolete.	Disposition: Temporary Event Type: Event_age Specific Event: Superseded or obsolete Retention: 0 years (disposition is immediately after the event)
Permanent. Cut off at the end of the FY and transfer to NARA 15 years after cutoff.	Disposition: Permanent Event Type: Event_age Specific Event: End of FY record was created Retention: 15 years

Permanent. Transfer to NARA 15 years after close of case.	Disposition: Permanent Event Type: Event_age Specific Event: Close of case (this may or may not be metadata captured in the system) Retention: 15 years
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For more examples, see the GRS CSV transmittal file available [here](#).

Disposition Instructions That Are Not Machine-Implementable

Below is an example of a disposition instruction that cannot be translated into a machine-implementable format:

Destroy when 3 years old or after superseded or obsolete, whichever is appropriate.

This instruction is both creation-based and event-based, so it has two retention types. It's hard to tell whether the instruction says to destroy when 3 years old or 3 years after superseded or obsolete, or when 3 years old or immediately after the record is superseded or obsolete.

The solution in this case is to either pick one disposition instruction or the other. If that will not work for all records covered by the item, it may be necessary to split the item.