



File Naming Recommendations

October 2019

Just like paper files, electronic files need to be well-organized and labeled correctly so that they are identifiable and accessible to all appropriate users. This need applies especially to government records, which are subject to legal requirements concerning the availability, integrity, accessibility, and, if appropriate, the confidentiality of public records. Efficient management of electronic records begins with accurate file naming. For ease of explanation, the examples in these guidelines will focus primarily on documents; however, the standards outlined below apply to all file formats.

File renaming software can help to bulk rename documents, saving valuable work time. The Council of State Archivists, through the Program for Electronic Records Training, Tools, and Standards (PERTTS), provides some resources on how to use a few specific file renaming tools.

Recommendation #1: AVOID using special characters or spaces in a file name

`\ / : * ? " < > [] & $, . -` are frequently used for specific tasks in an electronic environment.

- **Example 1: Forward Slash/**
A forward slash is used to identify folder levels in Microsoft products.
- **Example 2: Colon:**
Mac operating systems use a colon to identify folder levels.
- **Example 3: Period.**
Periods are used in front of file name extensions to denote file formats such as .jpg and .doc. Using them in a file name could result in lost files or errors in file searches.
- **Example 4: Spaces**
Spaces are frequently translated in a Web environment to be read as `%20`. For example, **Naming tutorial.doc** would translate as **Naming%20tutorial.doc**. If it were available online, this alteration can cause confusion in identifying the actual file name.

Spaces in file names can also cause broken links because word processing tools like Microsoft Word and email clients like Microsoft Outlook recognize a space as an opportunity to move to another line.

Therefore a link to

`\\Archives\Intranet\naming conventions`

could become

`\\Archives\Intranet\naming
conventions`

Recommendation #2: Use underscores instead

Underscores are not used for specific tasks by either Microsoft or Mac operating systems. Thus, they can be safely used in place of periods and spaces in file names. For example, the underscores in the following example aid in the understanding of the file, without the operating system mistaking them for commands.

`SRC_Minutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc`

Recommendation #3: Format dates consistently

Having the relevant date associated with the file is essential. Although many operating systems store date information with the file, as users move the file among folders and computers, and as the file is re-saved as revisions are made, the dates change. A file could have dates that do not make sense to its original creator.

The best way to prevent confusion is to include the relevant date (the date that the file was created or revised) in the file name itself.

Some workgroups might find it more useful to have the date at the start of the file name, while others might prefer it at the end. Either way, the date is a useful sorting tool when files are organized. Just be sure to keep the structure consistent.

The best way to list the date is based on an international standard: ISO 8601. This standard specifies numeric representations of date and time to be used in electronic format. The international standard date notation is:

YYYY_MM_DD or YYYYMMDD

For example, April 5, 2011, is written as **2011_04_05** or **20110405**.

This format allows ease of sorting and comparing files by date and prevents confusion with other date formats (especially in other formats that use just two digits for the year).

For example, the meeting minutes of the State Records Commission from October 26, 2016, could be **2016_10_26_SRCMinutes** or **SRMinutes_2016_10_26**.

Recommendation #4: Strive for brevity while ensuring inclusion of basic elements

Another difference that is found among operating systems and software is the acceptable length of file names. Some systems allow up to 256 characters, while others allow far fewer. Generally, about 30 characters is a sufficient length to capture enough descriptive information for naming a record.

Recommendation #5: The file name should include all necessary descriptive information, independent of where it is stored

Records will be moved from their original location. Files are frequently copied to other folders, downloaded, and e-mailed. It is important to ensure that the file name, independent of the folder where the original file lives, is sufficiently descriptive. For instance, if the following files were pulled out of their appropriate folders, they would appear to be the same file: minutes.doc (the information before the final \ indicates folder location):

Appraisal\SRC\MINUTES\2011\minutes.doc

Appraisal\LGRC\MINUTES\2011\minutes.doc

While this is an organized way of storing records, it is only efficient as long as the files stay in their original folders in their original context. When multiple staff members work on a project, it is easy to misfile a document. As soon as "minutes.doc" is copied to another folder or e-mailed to another individual, the context provided by the folders in which the document is nested is lost. Context is particularly important in legal situations, because it supports authenticity and trustworthiness claims about a record. Losing the context of a record can possibly compromise its trustworthiness and, therefore, its validity or admissibility for court proceedings. Thus, the recommended names of the files above are

Appraisal\SRC\MINUTES\SRMinutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc

Appraisal\LGRC\MINUTES\LGRCMinutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc

where the names of the files are **SRMinutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc** and **LGRCMinutes_2011_04_27FINAL.doc**, respectfully.