

Archives Advice No. 8

Methods for Destroying Agency Records

Considerations for Government Officials

Why should agency records be destroyed?

The Georgia Records Act (O. C. G. A. 50-18-70 et seq.) requires that governmental entities maintain a Records Management Program. The destruction of records pursuant to approved record retention schedules is part of that Program. The Georgia Archives has made available the *Georgia Retention Schedule for State Government Records* and the *Georgia Retention Schedule for Local Government Records* to assist agencies in determining how long to maintain records. These publications allow governmental entities to authorize the timely disposal of temporary records no longer having administrative, fiscal, legal, research or reference needs.

Records should be destroyed to free up space, lessen the liability of litigation, and to be compliant with the law. Records should not be maintained beyond the required total retention unless litigation, audit, or an investigation necessitates their continuing maintenance.

How should agency records be destroyed?

The handling of confidential records eligible for destruction is different than handling other non-restricted records that are eligible for destruction. Confidential records pursuant to Georgia law [O. C. G. A. 50-18-95 (b)] are to be destroyed in such a manner that they cannot be read, interpreted, or reconstructed. Because confidential and non-confidential records are often mixed in agency files, your agency may decide to destroy all records in a confidential manner. The methods for effectively destroying records differ with various media. Below are listed the most common types of media used for records storage and their preferred method (s) of destruction.

MEDIA TYPE	METHODS OF DESTRUCTION						
	De-gaussing	Incineration	Landfills	Maceration	Recycling	Reformat	Shredding
ELECTRONIC MEDIA:							
Audio Cassettes	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
Computer Hard Drives	Poor	Poor	Poor	Poor	Good	Excellent	Poor
Compact Discs (CDs)	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
Digital Video Discs (DVDs)	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
Diskettes	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Excellent	Excellent
Magnetic Tapes	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
FILM MEDIA:							
Aperture Cards	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
Microfiche	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
Roll Film	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Good	Poor	Excellent
PAPER MEDIA:							
Books	Poor	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Poor	Excellent
Paper	Poor	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Poor	Excellent
Volumes	Poor	Excellent	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Poor	Excellent



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How does one ensure that information is destroyed?

As listed above methods of destroying records may include de-gaussing, incineration, and use of landfills, maceration, recycling, or shredding. Ensuring that information is destroyed is accomplished by having destructions witnessed and certified by your own staff and by a reputable company. Definitions and tips for using each method effectively are discussed below.

De-gaussing is the process of removing magnetism from magnetically recorded tape thereby rendering most of the information non-reconstructable. Depending upon the procedure used for de-gaussing, it is possible that all of the information could be rendered non-reconstructable. If restricted information is on this media type, then once de-gaussed, it should be shredded or simply pulverized or incinerated.

Incineration is an acceptable method of destruction for sensitive records because it renders the media and information non-reconstructable.

Landfills may be used, **but should be considered as a last resort**. This method allows for the natural decomposition of media, which in time will render information non-reconstructable. **This method should only be used as a last resort for confidential information**. If using a landfill, it is best to witness the records being placed in the landfill and buried to ensure the records do not blow around. **Government agencies should never place records in a dumpster or trash cans for local trash pickup**.

Maceration/emersion is a process in which documents are soaked in chemical liquid in order to decompose. This process is also referred to as pulping and renders the media and information non-reconstructable. Many recycling companies offer this service in addition to their regular services.

Recycling is a process that recovers the raw materials of a media allowing for the reuse of various media. Overwriting on magnetic media is a means of recycling. It should be done at least seven times for a complete magtape overwrite.

Reformatting is a process in which hard drives and floppy drives are reinitialized. This erases all the data on them.

Shredding is the use of mechanical cutting of the media thus rendering the information non-reconstructable. In general, when paper media is shredded, it is done using a crosscut method rendering the media non-reconstructable (Non-crosscut methods of shredding are not as effective). When other media is shredded, it is almost pulverized thereby rendering it non-reconstructable.

Further Information

The Georgia Archives is ready to provide assistance to state and local governments that have questions about records—paper, microfilm or electronic. Please call (678) 364-3790.