

# What we keep: Principles for selecting the Australian Government's national archives

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*The National Archives of Australia (the Archives) assists in the efficient and effective management of Australian Government information by ensuring that the most valuable information is kept permanently and preserved for future generations, and other information is kept only for as long as needed for business, legal and evidentiary purposes.*

*The Australian Government creates and receives vast amounts of information every year in conducting its business. Digital technologies and business processes, while improving government efficiency, have contributed to rapidly increasing volumes of digital information being produced and stored by the Australian Government.*

## Purpose and scope

The purpose of this statement is to detail the selection principles and associated considerations that underpin the Archives' decisions when selecting Australian Government information for inclusion in the national archival collection. This statement does not cover how Government information should be managed or provide details on the overall appraisal methodology used by the Archives.

This statement applies to Australian Government information i.e. those records that provide evidence of government business and decisions. It is intended for use by all interested stakeholders including Australian Government agency staff, archives and information management professionals, Archives' staff, researchers and members of the general public.

## Our role

The Archives is responsible for:

- selecting and preserving the most valuable information of the Australian Government and facilitating its use by the public, regardless of format or technology dependency; and
- promoting good information and records management by Australian Government agencies.

The *Archives Act 1983* provides the authority for the Archives to select and retain Australian Government information of permanent value. The Archives also authorises the destruction of information that is not required to be kept permanently.

## What we keep

The Archives only keeps Australian Government information that is identified as being of permanent (or continuing) value. That is, information of national significance or public interest that will

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continue to have value to the Australian Government and the community for generations to come. The material we select for permanent retention is known as 'national archives'.

We use selection principles to help determine what information to retain as national archives. Our selection principles are considered in conjunction with a number of additional factors which may impact on the ability to preserve or make information accessible.

Our selection principles are:

1. Government authority, action and accountability
2. Identity, interaction and rights and entitlements
3. Knowledge and community memory

## **Why we keep Australian Government information**

Australian Government information provides a unique source of evidence about the decisions and activities of government. The creation, maintenance, preservation and accessibility of information is essential for the performance of Australian Government business.

It also:

- enables the community to access and understand the decisions and actions of government;
- supports public accountability and openness in the decisions and activities of Australian Government agencies;
- protects the rights, entitlements and interests of Australians and others who interact with the Australian Government;
- contributes to the historical record of Australia and provides source material for individual and academic research; and
- enables information to be re-used to benefit the community, including as an asset to support the digital economy.

The Archives holds information for use by the Australian Government and for research and re-use by the public. We facilitate access to this information to enable Australians, and others, to understand our heritage and to support government transparency and a strong democracy.

## **Who decides what we keep?**

The Archives, together with the agency that created or controls the information, decides which information will be kept permanently and authorises how long other information needs to be kept. The Archives undertakes detailed reviews of the information each Australian Government agency creates and receives to decide what will be kept permanently. We consider who will likely be interested in the information and its potential long term value.

## Why not keep everything?

Only a small proportion of all information created or received by Australian Government agencies is retained by the Archives. It would be impractical as well as costly to keep everything indefinitely, nor does everything have permanent value.

Information in physical formats, such as paper or film, is expensive to store and transport. In comparison, digital information is easy to create, duplicate and share, and relatively inexpensive to store in the short term. However there are significant preservation costs and complexities in keeping digital formats current and accessible over time in a manner that maintains their integrity. Moreover, the volume of digital information generated can make it difficult to find and retrieve specific digital records.

It is important that only the most significant information is selected to be retained permanently. The Archives makes informed risk-based decisions on what to keep. We assess the likely degree of the information's future usefulness and public interest against the cost of maintaining and providing access to the information, and use our selection principles and related considerations to determine what we need to keep. Australian Government information is retained permanently where it can be demonstrated that it will be of significant permanent value to the government or the community.

## Selection principles

There are three principles that determine which information should be selected as national archives. To be selected, the information will need to meet one or more of these principles. The principles apply to information in any format.

### Defining 'significance'

Significance refers to the value or importance of the information. We assess the significance of functions, programs, issues and associated decisions and actions as to how critical, important or memorable they are, or were, in relation to the administration of the Australian Government. We also consider their actual or potential impact on Australian and world affairs. We select to preserve necessary evidence of Australian Government activity and other purposes including meeting research and community needs.

## 1. Government authority, action and accountability

*To keep information that provides evidence of the authority for the establishment and structure of the Australian Government and its agencies, and evidence of the deliberations, decisions and actions taken by the Australian Government and its agencies relating to key policies, functions and programs and significant issues faced in governing Australia.*

This includes information that:

- underpins the establishment of the Australian Government jurisdiction and its agencies and defines the nature and extent of their functions, operations, obligations and powers;

- provides a source of authority for the government's ability to take action;
- demonstrates how the government was structured at a high level to implement policies, functions and programs;
- documents significant judgements or rulings made in relation to jurisdiction and powers;
- provides evidence of the development and implementation of major policies, functions and programs of the Australian Government and its agencies, including those which are controversial, innovative or of considerable public interest;
- provides evidence of major decisions and activities in relation to a function, particularly those made on behalf of the nation or with national or international implications, that signal a new or changed policy position, or involve substantial expenditure;
- documents responses to major threats, issues or challenges facing Australia; and
- comprises unique, irreplaceable information that is needed by governments now and in the future for effective planning, decision making and transfer of knowledge.

Examples of the types of information selected include:

- proposed bills and explanatory memoranda;
- datasets such as meteorological or population datasets;
- establishment and findings of major review bodies such as Royal Commissions or Boards of Inquiry;
- authorisations to establish, merge or dissolve the functions and operations of Australian Government institutions or a major office;
- intergovernmental agreements; and
- evidence of the performance of significant policies and programs.

## **2. Identity, interaction and rights and entitlements**

*To keep information that for individuals and communities: reflects identity and the condition and status of Australia and its people; provides evidence of ongoing rights and entitlements; or shows the impact of Australian Government activities on individuals and communities as well as their interaction with government. We select information with the greatest capacity to illustrate the impact of major government actions and decisions on individuals and communities.*

This includes information that:

- provides evidence that an individual and their descendants have an ongoing right to a benefit or an entitlement;
- demonstrates the effect of major government functions, programs and policies on individuals, or groups;
- shows the nature and extent of people's interaction with the Australian Government particularly where it is evident that government functions and programs were, or are, of great significance in the government or development of Australia, or the community;
- confirms individual rights to participate in public affairs, or contributes to an understanding of their sense of identity; and

- identifies persons or groups affected by the implementation of policy decisions and the outcomes of those decisions.

Examples of the type of information selected include:

- citizenship applications;
- native title determinations;
- active service and repatriation of service personnel case material; and
- approvals for recipients of notable honours and awards.

### **3. Knowledge and community memory**

*To keep information that has substantial capacity to enrich knowledge and understanding of Australia's history, society, culture and people. We select information with the highest significance and value to communities and society.*

This includes information that:

- enables connections across generations or communities, including sources that provide a rich source of genealogical or cultural information;
- has aesthetic qualities that resonate, move, inspire or educate, such as sources that provide a pictorial representation or narrative of the way Australians have lived and thought, or have had a major influence on Australian thinking, behaviour and attitudes;
- has scientific, research or technical value such as sources that demonstrate Australian involvement in notable scientific and technical areas;
- contributes to an understanding of Australia's history and the development of its society such as sources that provide information about the impact of important events, issues, persons, places and themes on local communities, Australia and the world; and
- can be re-used and re-purposed by the community, such as Australian Government datasets which may have uses for the community beyond the Government activity they originally documented.

Examples of the type of information selected include:

- passenger arrival documentation;
- records of Australian Government-owned heritage listed properties;
- patents for Australian inventions;
- images that depict Australian characteristics, thoughts and beliefs such as significant trade and tourist promotional material; and
- television programs created by Australian Government broadcasters.

See [what's in the collection](#) and our [fact sheets](#) for more examples of types of information selected as national archives.

## Other considerations

In addition to the selection principles, there are several factors that we consider when selecting information as national archives. These considerations do not determine the value of the information; rather they influence and enable informed decisions about what we keep. They relate to the quality and accessibility of the information, as well as the resources needed to preserve it and make it accessible.

***Integrity, reliability and completeness*** – where possible only the most complete, accurate and reliable versions of information should be kept as archives. That is, information which has been securely maintained to prevent unauthorised access and deliberate or accidental alteration or removal of information. The content, context and structure of the information should be intact.

***Relationships and dependencies*** – the meaning of some information depends on the existence of metadata which describes, contextualises and provides a history of the information. It may also depend on other information or materials to provide context or make it accessible. For example, where a dataset is kept as a national archive the supporting documentation about the dataset (eg data dictionaries), will also be kept.

***Best available source*** – where several sources of the same information are available we will keep the best available source. That is, the content of the highest value in the most concise form. For example, the best available source may be a register or dataset that summarises the significant information or it may be a complete run of case files, whichever most effectively provides the best value information. In some instances we may choose to keep more than one source of information.

***Accessibility and useability*** – information should be in formats that can be accessed and readily used, or be capable of conversion to accessible formats. Examples of information that may not be accessible or useable include: password protected or encrypted files where the passkey is not known; obsolete digital file formats; digital records that require highly specialised/expensive proprietary software; corrupt or damaged digital media. In such cases the Archives may investigate solutions for retrieving the information if it is deemed to be of uniquely significant value.

***Preservation feasibility*** – the survival of information depends on whether it is technically possible to prevent or control unwanted alteration or deterioration. It is desirable that digital file formats be capable of being migrated to more durable, long-term preservation formats.

***Ongoing costs*** – deciding what to keep involves weighing up the uses or value identified for the information against the cost of retaining it. There are a number of different costs that may need to be considered including: storage; retrieval, maintenance and accessibility, and preservation requirements.

The three selection principles, combined with these considerations, guide decisions on what is to be kept as national archives.