



Comparison of Microfilm and Digital Preservation Technologies

For more than fifty years, microfilming has proved to be the most cost effective way to preserve a large amount of records for informational content. Today there are logical reasons for continuing to create preservation microfilming, but scanning of documents and maintaining and accessing them electronically is

becoming more feasible, practical and cost effective. Ultimately, each congregation will have to determine how much time, money and expertise they are willing to commit for long-term preservation of their records.

Microfilming

Advantages

Disadvantages

Accessible using light and magnifying sources.	Image capture: retakes needed if there is a mistake on the film. Image quality can range
Polyester film estimated to last 500 years, acetate film estimated to last 100 years.	Filming is labor intensive.
Multiple patron use of a durable format; easier to store than paper.	Limited search capabilities.
Film can be converted to electronic format to be accessed using a computer.	Original negatives need to be stored offsite. Use copies can deteriorate over time.
Meets recognized archival standards.	Equipment needed: reader/printer.

Digitizing

Advantages

Disadvantages

Commercially available to anyone.	Software technology changes and scanned images need to be migrated to latest versions.
Images may be manipulated for better clarity, quality.	Scanning can be labor intensive and scans need to be indexed for document retrieval.
Search capabilities are extensive with OCR indexing or key-word searching.	Initial financial investment in equipment can be expensive.
Efficient delivery to researchers: including via the internet.	Equipment/hardware always changing.
Multiple patron use, discs are fairly durable and easier to store than paper.	Standards still evolving.
Electronic files can be backed up the same as data files for disaster protection.	

Microfilm and digitizing (scanning) can work in a complementary way and may not be an either/or situation. Microfilm may work best for less frequently accessed records that are still legible. Scanning will work best for material that has lasting value and needs to be immediately accessible to a number of people and/or would be more readable using digital enhancement capabilities. This hybrid approach is typical and may also be based on available funds.

Three Preservation Approaches

Option 1 - Photocopying

Photocopy valuable records on to acid-free paper. Do not copy records that could be destroyed during photocopying process. Determine safe storage on-site in archives or other protected area and in archival containers. Determine off-site storage for copies of original records in archival containers.

Option 2 - Microfilming

Microfilm valuable records using 35mm, silver-based film that meets archival standards. Make sure “three generations” of film

are created, by making a second copy negative at the time of processing. Store the original microfilm negative off-site and only use it to make other copy negatives. Keep the copy negative closer at hand and use to make reference or positive copies. Use positive copies of films and store the original paper records in archival containers. Paper copies should be retained unless the paper is no longer usable even as an artifact, that is for short-term displays and special occasions. Since you can transfer microfilm to digital formats, you still have that option.

See the document “Guidelines for Preparing Records for Microfilming.”

Option 3 - Scanning and Digital Photography

Scan or digitally photograph valuable records using highest current quality standards. Store backup discs/tapes off-site, but also maintain the original paper version. Ensure that software is supported into the future, i.e., migrate digital information forward through technological changes of software and hardware. Convert to microfilm if that is a more accessible medium and/or supporting the digital form is no longer possible.