

Organize Your Photo Collection in 5 Simple Steps

Planning a photo project such as a personal documentary or a year-end family album is a good motivator for organizing your photo collection. It's even easier and more fun when family members work together and share this responsibility. If you don't already have a working system for tracking and storing your photos and memorabilia, these simple strategies will help you organize your collection without getting overwhelmed and make it easy for you to maintain it over time.

Step 1: Gather your Collection

Regardless of project plans, it's important to keep photos and related memorabilia (including media) in one place. A designated home makes it easier to get photos put away and for others to access and retrieve items when needed. If you already have your photos collected in one location, great! If not, plan a day when you have at least an hour to spend on this first step. Write it on your calendar so you commit the time and prioritize this important project. To make the best use of this time, make a quick list beforehand of places in your home where you store (or stash) photo albums, home movies, boxed photos and loose photos. Designate a collection spot (temporarily) and start gathering! Quickly retrieve all collections from the places noted on your list (and stay focused so as not to be distracted by other things you find). Bring items to your temporary gathering spot (folding table, corner of room, closet shelves, book case). Make sure your collection spot won't impede other functions in that space.

****Step 1 Organizing Tip****

Have these helpful items on hand before you begin the next step: photo-safe labeling pencil, index cards, post-it notes, a few empty photo or media boxes, and a supply of large envelopes or file folders. This arsenal will help you in the sort phase (next) and you can later upgrade to better quality storage products once you've sorted your collection.

Step 2: Sort Photos by Theme

The easiest way to begin sorting your photos is to select a theme and use it consistently as you sort. Some examples include sorting by year, subject (person), or event (trips, etc). I've found that sorting chronologically offers the most systematic approach and allows for easy categorizing at a later time, if desired. Use a large surface such as a table, desk or section of floor for staging your sort. Start with your loose photos and, working quickly, create piles in chronological order. Place a post-it note or index card labeled with the year in front of the pile for easy identification. If sorting photos by individual year is difficult (date unknown), sort by decade as an alternative. Create a pile for photos with unknown dates for review at a later time. Continue this process with the remaining collected photos. Entire albums can be reviewed for dates and labeled on the outside with post-it notes or other adhesive label. Keep photos in albums except for those that show signs of deterioration (yellowing pages). Photos from these albums should be removed to prevent further damage.

Step 2 Organizing Tip

Older photo albums with adhesive pages covered by plastic sheeting are not archival safe and will damage photos over time. Photos can stick to the pages and tear when removed. To remove photos without damaging them, carefully slide a piece of dental floss (waxed) between the page and the photo. This requires patience but it is very effective!

Step 3: Document Important Information

Once photos are sorted, document important information about your photos. Note names, relationships, places, events, and dates. Use photo-safe pens or pencils to record information on the back of photo, or attach an index card with additional descriptive information. Accurate information on the subject or event is critical for most ancestry projects and is the catalyst for gathering additional background stories on subjects of interest. If possible, journal a short description about your experiences and event details to include with the photos for use later in a scrapbook or documentary project. To fill in gaps about family history, work with a family member who is knowledgeable about relatives and ancestors, or note questions as you work to ask at a later time.

Step 3 Organizing Tip

Label pictures as you first receive them with the date and subject for easier identification later on. Create separate pocket or string folders labeled by year to store memorabilia associated with an event and note special details. Keep labeled memorabilia stored with your sorted photos.

Step 4: Contain Photos to Protect and Preserve

Protect your photos from exposure to light, dust and humidity by using products designed to maintain the photo quality and keep them organized. Photos sorted and documented by theme can be safely stored in many ways given the variety of archival products on the market today. Use acid-free photo, document, or media boxes sized for your pictures. Use pvc-free clear plastic photo sleeves, envelopes or expandable accordion files (letter or legal size) for large-size photos, memorabilia or negatives. Label all containers or subdivided tabs with the year or subject for easy reference and retrieval. Avoid storing boxed photos and memorabilia in areas of your home that experience temperature fluctuations, such as attics, basements and garages. Keep your collection stored in hallway, bedroom or office closets or on bookcases located in main living areas to reduce exposure to humidity and moisture.

Selected online resources for high quality photo storage products:

Exposures: www.exposuresonline.com, Archival photo storage supplies and resources.

Creative Memories: www.creativememories.com, Photo organizing and scrapbooking supplies.

The Container Store: www.containerstore.com, Archival document, photo and media storage products.

Bags Unlimited: www.bagsunlimited.com, Archival storage products for collections and memorabilia.

Light Impressions: www.lightimpressionsdirect.com, Archival photo storage supplies and resources.

Step 4 Organizing Tip

Many of us plan to make albums for special events or to document a child's early years. If you have children of school age, create an expandable file (archival safe) for each child to store school-related photos and memorabilia. Label each section with the year and grade. Keep the file accessible so photos and important documents get stored as you receive them. When you are ready to start your project, everything will be at hand to begin your layout. This method works well to organize other theme projects, such as trips, weddings or other life events.

Step 5: Maintain your Photo Organizing System

To easily keep your photos organized, set aside 30 minutes once or twice a month to gather acquired prints or memorabilia (holiday card photos, recently processed photos, school pictures, etc.). Keep a current-year photo storage box or accordion file easily accessible for putting photos away promptly. Subdivide the box or file using labeled dividers or folders to designate dates and specific subjects.

Step 5 Organizing Tip

To process a backlog of photos, or to get started on a special project, mark a date and time on the calendar when you can spend an hour or two on this task, and repeat as necessary. Enlist help from a friend, family member or professional organizer to get more done and to help keep you focused.

Gone Digital?

Below are 5 additional tips for organizing and protecting your digital photos.

Digital Organizing Tip #1: Gather

Gathering digital photos requires searching your computer for photo files that you have uploaded, downloaded or scanned. Many operating systems come equipped with established media folders in the document directory. If your computer does not already have a primary folder entitled "Photos", create one for your use. All photo files should be moved to this primary directory for easy identification and retrieval. Be sure to use this folder to house all future photo uploads, downloads and scans. Set up your camera software to automatically upload files from memory cards to the designated folder. Collect memory cards and be sure photos files contained on them have been copied to your computer. Refrain from copying files to your desktop or into your main documents folder.

Digital Organizing Tip #2: Sort

Within your designated photo folder, create subfolders by theme, such as date, subject or event. The easiest way to track photos for later retrieval is to sort by year and then by month, if possible. Many digital camera software programs automatically upload files based on date, so be sure your camera settings are accurate. Once subfolders are created, drag files into the

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corresponding folder. Sorting photos by date helps to organize photos for processing, since many people upload photos in batches.

Digital Organizing Tip #3: Document

Most computer and online photo software programs have features that enable you to edit and enhance your photos. You can also use these tools to document information about your subject by adding titles, names, dates and other descriptive text. Take advantage of these applications at the time you upload photos to quickly add details. This will save you time later when you work with the photos.

Digital Organizing Tip #4: Backup

To reduce the risk of accidental loss of your digital photos, backup your files on a regular basis. Photos can be either burned onto high-quality CDs or copied to secondary storage devices such as flashdrives, portable hard drives or uploading to an online backup system such as *Carbonite* (www.carbonite.com). Doing both is also recommended since CDs can deteriorate over time. Look for high-quality gold CDs and store CDs in anti-corrosion protective sleeves to lengthen the life of the CD. Contain CDs in covered CD boxes and store with your print and media collection.

Digital Organizing Tip #4: Maintain

Upload photos to your computer on a regular basis to reduce the risk of damage or loss to your camera's memory card. Perform a secondary backup as necessary. If you use an online viewing, sharing and processing service, print photos at regular intervals to reduce the need for time consuming uploads and high processing costs. Take advantage of pre-paid processing services from vendors such as *Snapfish* (www.snapfish.com) to save money on per-print charges. Move digital photo files that have been printed from your main computer's hard drive to a secondary backup drive to free up memory.

Selected online resources for managing digital photo files:

DigMyPics: www.digmypics.com, Photo scanning and archival services.
Flickr: www.flickr.com, Photo management and sharing application.
Faststone Image Viewer, www.faststone.com, Freeware and shareware to edit and view pictures.

If you would like to discuss specific photo organizing goals or need help with getting started, contact Clearing House to schedule an organizing session. We will help you design and implement a system that meets individual needs.