

# Guide to File Naming

## Getting Started with How to Name your Records



[statearchives@sos.ri.gov](mailto:statearchives@sos.ri.gov)



401.222.2353



[www.sos.ri.gov](http://www.sos.ri.gov)



[@RIsecState](https://twitter.com/RIsecState)

This guide was produced by  
the Rhode Island Department of State



**Gregg M. Amore**  
*Secretary of State*

## Overview of File Naming

The State Archives and Public Records Administration oversees records management functions for all state and municipal agencies. This includes records management advice, assistance, and consultation. Records management is a comprehensive task encompassing all records, regardless of format or media. The State of Rhode Island creates and manages extensive digital information vital to the day-to-day work of state and local government offices. Government records provide a record of the decisions and actions needed for accountability and legal compliance.

This guide is to serve as a resource providing recommendations for creating trustworthy, identifiable, and meaningful records.

## Things to Know

### **Why use file naming?**

The amount of born digital records being created continues to grow at a rapid rate. This makes it imperative that files and folders be named consistently to aid in the retrieval and use of government records.

Adhering to a policy makes naming records simpler and staff will not have to reconsider the naming process each time a file is created.

### **How do I create file names?**

A good file name enables not just its creator but also anyone else to identify its content and context and to decide about its relevance without having to open the file itself.

To achieve this a file name should be:

- Objective
- Meaningful
- Concise
- Standardized

Just like paper files, born digital files need to be well-organized and labeled correctly so that they are identifiable and accessible.

### **How do I use my Retention Schedule?**

Incorporating your agency's Records Retention Schedule is an important element of your agency wide file naming conventions. If you currently use a folder structure in your file system which replicates an agency established file plan, then the names of folders should correspond to and/or incorporate the names and numbers used in your agency's Records Retention Schedules. This will assist in future identification and destruction.

If you are not familiar with your Records Schedule, contact the Public Records Administration, or refer to the Records and Information Management Service webpage at: <http://sos.ri.gov/divisions/frequent-filers/records-management>

## Before Starting


When developing a file naming policy, there are certain principles that should guide your decisions.

- **Ease of use:**
  - A plain-language, clear, and concise policy allows staff to easily adopt the file naming policy and name their born digital records logically.
  - This ensures that files are readily accessible by staff and the public.
- **Ease of administration:**
  - The policy should work with your computer/network infrastructure to manage the records and records series, gather metadata, and perform other administrative tasks in compliance with all legal requirements.
- **Uniqueness of Name:**
  - To avoid file names conflicting when they are moved from one location to another, each record's file name should be unique.



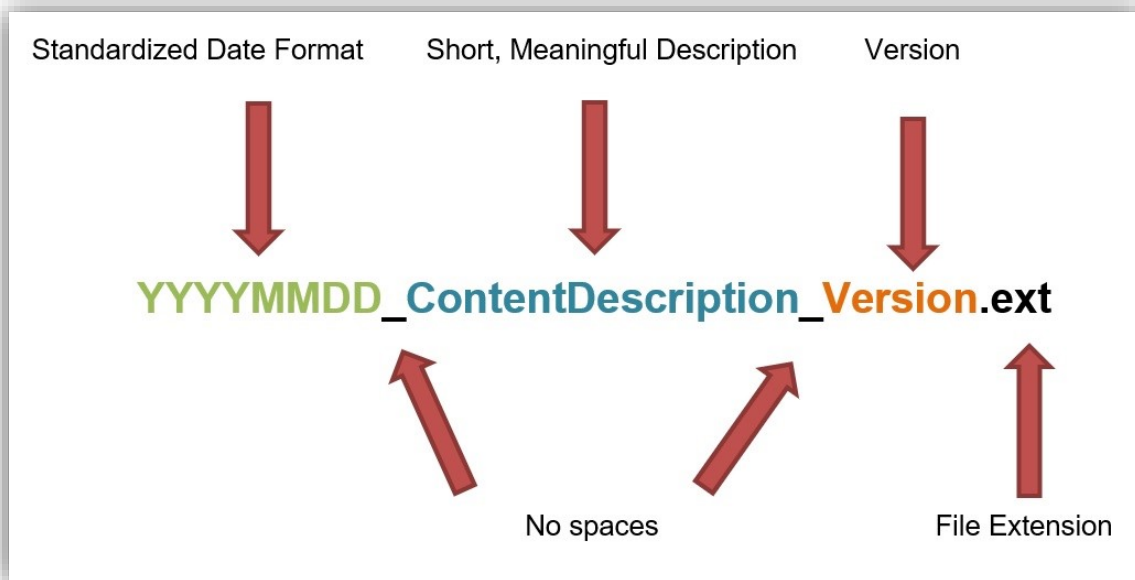
**Having multiple files with the same name is confusing with the additional danger of files automatically overwriting another file with the same name (ex. memo.docx).**

- How you arrive at a unique file names will require careful thought and testing. Once you have developed a system, it is important to standardize, document it and be consistent in its application.
- **File name information order:**
  - Order the pieces of information or elements being used to create the file name in the most logical order based on retrieval methods. For example, if the records are retrieved according to their date, the date element should appear first.
- **Relationship to paper records and other formats:**
  - Determine how the names of your born digital records relate to the names of paper files.

- Born digital records may be part of records series which include paper records, your file naming policy for the born digital records should coincide with your paper records naming system.
  - **Record series:**
    - Government records will have an associated Records Schedule. The point of organizing an agency's born digital records is to enable accessibility not only by current users, but by future users as well.
- **Remember: Records control schedules are applied to born digital records just as they are to paper records.**
- Having the relevant date associated with the file is essential. Though many operating systems store this information with the file, as users move the file among folders and computers and as the file is re-saved as revisions are made, those dates change.
  - The best way to prevent confusion is to embed the relevant date (the date that the file was created or revised) in the file name itself.
- **Scalability:**
  - Consider how scalable your file naming policy needs to be and how many characters you need to allot for future growth.
  - If you want to include the project number, don't limit your project numbers to two digits, or you can only have ninety-nine projects, look at your projected document growth and allow enough digits for future expansion.
- **Version control:**
  - Before a final document is completed resulting in a record, working copies are often created. As the working copies are updated or revised, they should be retained with different version numbers to differentiate the documents and show the progression of the working records.
  - Version numbers are commonly placed at the end of the file title and should indicate if it is the finalized record.
  - Ensure each document file title is unique and includes the version

number to avoid conflicts in naming documents (ex.  
Example\_v01\_5.docx).

## Getting Started – Anatomy of a File Name



## Getting Started – File Naming Rules

### Overview:

- Rule 1: Keep File Names Short, But Meaningful.
- Rule 2: Use Only Alpha-Numeric Characters.
- Rule 3: Do Not Use Spaces.
- Rule 4: Put the Most Important Information First.
- Rule 5: Include Dates and Format Them Consistently.
- Rule 6: Include a Version Number.
- Rule 7: Use Leading Zeros When Using Sequential Numbering.
- Rule 8: Don't Overwrite File Extensions.
- Rule 9: Be Consistent.

## FILE-NAMING RULES

### RULE 1: KEEP FILE NAMES SHORT, BUT MEANINGFUL.

#### Correct

ShortandMeaningful.docx

#### Incorrect

FileNamesTooLongandConveysNoMeaningAboutContent.docx

#### Additional information:

- Limit the file name to 32 characters. **32CharactersLooksExactlyLikeThis.doc;**
- Avoid unnecessary repetition and redundancy in file names and file paths;
- Avoid using generic data file names that may conflict when moved from one location to another (ex. Memo.pdf);
- Use meaningful abbreviations. Use commonly known and understood acronyms, when appropriate; and
- When possible, identify the Record Series (i.e. SA1\_3) from the appropriate Records Control Schedule (General Records Schedule, State Agency Schedule, or Local Government Schedule).

### RULE 2: USE ONLY ALPHA-NUMERIC CHARACTERS.

#### Correct

AlphaNumeric123.docx

#### Incorrect

@lphaNumer!c?.docx

#### Additional information:

- Do not use special characters. Special characters may be interesting but visually confusing and awkward;
- Special characters are often reserved for use by the operating system; and
- Examples of special characters: ! # \$ % & ' @ ^ ` ~ + , . ; = ).

### RULE 3: DO NOT USE SPACES.

Correct	Incorrect
Do_Not-UseSpaces.docx	Do Not Use Spaces.docx
<b>Additional information:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spaces are poor visual delimiters and some search tools do not work with spaces;</li> <li>• Spaces in the file names are invalid in some systems and may cause confusing line breaks in reports and email messages; and</li> <li>• Instead of spaces use: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Underscores, e.g. file_name.xxx;</li> <li>○ Dashes, e.g. file-name.xxx;</li> <li>○ No separation, e.g. filename.xxx; and</li> <li>○ Camel case, where the first letter of each section of text is capitalized, e.g. FileName.xxx.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<b>RULE 4: PUT THE MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION FIRST.</b>	
Correct	Incorrect
2018_BudgetAsEnacted.xls	budget.xls
<b>Additional information:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elements of a file name should be ordered logically, in the order that you would normally search for a file; and</li> <li>• Include all relevant data so the file name would be understandable if it is moved from its file and folder structure.</li> </ul>	
<b>RULE 5: INCLUDE DATES AND FORMAT THEM CONSISTENTLY.</b>	
Correct	Incorrect
2018_08_03_Very_Important_Report.pdf	Very Important Report Aug. 3, 2018.pdf
<b>Additional information:</b>	



- Dates should follow the standard (ISO 8601) of YYYY\_MM\_DD or YYYYMMDD;
- This format standard allows for 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);
- To ensure that files are sorted in proper chronological order the most significant date and time components should appear first followed with the least significant components; and
- If dates of creation, closure or termination are used and are used as cut off dates in your retention schedule, then disposing of the records will be easier.

#### RULE 6: INCLUDE A VERSION NUMBER.

##### Correct

SA\_Schedule\_v11\_5.docx

##### Incorrect

SA Schedule Edits with comments.doc

##### Additional information:

- Use ordinal numbers (1,2,3, etc.) for major version changes and a decimal for minor changes;
- The “v” helps denote that the element pertains to a version number;
- A minimum of 2 digits with a leading zero is required to ensure that search results are properly sorted and avoid the situation where for example, a filename with a “v1-13” will wrongly appear before an identical filename with a “v1-2” version number when sorted in ascending alphabetical/numerical order; and
- Avoid using words in the file name such Final, Draft or Review as they affect the sort order.

#### RULE 7: USE LEADING ZEROS WHEN USING SEQUENTIAL NUMBERING.

##### Correct

File\_Name\_01.pdf

##### Incorrect

File\_Name1.pdf

##### Additional information:

- A minimum of 2 digits with a leading zero is required to ensure that search results are properly sorted when sorted in ascending alphabetical/numerical order;
- For a sequence of 1-10: 01-10; and
- For a sequence of 1-100: 001-010-100.

#### RULE 8. DON'T OVERWRITE FILE EXTENSIONS.

Correct	Incorrect
File_Extension.pdf	File_Extension

#### Additional information:

- A file extension is a short identifier for the type of the file after the name, separated by a dot. For example, in dog.jpg, jpg would be the file extension;
- The file extension is used by programs to interpret the type/content of the file without having to read anything inside the actual file; and
- A file extension can also be useful for searching for specific types of files.

#### RULE 9: BE CONSISTENT.

Correct	Incorrect
2018_ProjectConsistent_v02.pdf	v.1.5_ConsistentProj-2018.docx

#### Additional information:

- A file naming convention breaks down if not followed consistently; and
- Be sure that everyone who needs to use the file naming convention is aware of it and knows how to apply it.

## Going Forward

### **When do I institute file naming?**

The agency will need to change its workflow to address file naming going forward. If possible, review previous file and re-name them according to the newly established policy.

### **When do I contact the State Archives/Public Records Administration?**

Contact the State Archives and Public Records Administration once the agency or municipality is ready to institute a file naming policy and they will provide guidance and training, as needed.

## Helpful Resources

- Public Records Administration promulgated regulations.
  - <https://rules.sos.ri.gov/Regulations/Part/100-50-00-1>
- Approved Records Retention Schedules
  - <http://sos.ri.gov/divisions/frequent-filers/records-management>