

CHAPTER 6

FILES OPERATIONS

1. **TYPES OF FILES.** There are various types of records which should be arranged separately for ease in filing, finding, and eventual disposal. The basic types of files are as follows:
 - a. **Case or Project Files.** Records, regardless of media, documenting a specific action, transaction, event, person, place, project, or other matter. The papers may cover one or many subjects but will always be filed by a name or number contrary to general correspondence which is filed by subject. A case file documents a transaction or relationship from beginning to end (for example, purchase orders, contracts, audits, research projects). A project file is a case file that relates to a specific project or study and is more voluminous than a case file.
 - b. **Case Working Papers.** Case working papers include background and working materials such as reference materials, data analyses, summaries, drafts, and other preliminary papers leading to final results or findings. For example, routine requests for case reports or data, routine correspondence about the project or case file, and extra documents or reference material, would be considered short-lived and should be separated from the essential papers by fastening on the opposite side of the folder or filed in a separate folder behind the essential papers.
 - c. **General Correspondence Files.** Records arranged and filed according to their general informational, or subject content. Mainly letters and memoranda but also forms, reports, and other material, all relating to program and administrative functions, not to specific cases. Also called central, correspondence, or subject files.
 - d. **Transitory Correspondence Files.** Correspondence relating to matters of short-term interest, such as acknowledgments for publications received, routine inquiries for publications, and routine announcements of savings bond campaigns, in contrast to administrative and program correspondence making up the general correspondence files. Transitory material should be filed by date and should not be kept for more than 90 days for reference.
 - e. **Convenience Files.** Nonrecord copies of correspondence, forms, and other documents kept solely for ease of access and reference. They include suspense, sometimes referred to as pending or tickler files, and reading files containing extra selected instructions copies of outgoing material. They also are policy reference files of documents reflecting current policies, precedents, procedures, and governing the performance of the mission and operations of the

office, and used to
arranged by date

orient new personnel. Reference files of any kind should be
and cleaned out periodically to avoid clutter.

- f. **Technical Reference Files.** Nonrecord copies of articles, periodicals, reports, studies, vendor catalogs, and similar materials that are needed for reference and information but are not properly a part of the office's records.
- g. **Special Files.** Files maintained separately from textual/paper files because their physical form or characteristics require unusual care and/or because they have nonstandard sizes. Varieties are listed below:
 - (1) Electronic files.
 - (2) Audiovisual files.
 - (3) Micro form files.
 - (4) Cartographic and remote-sensing imagery files.
 - (5) Printed files.
 - (6) Card files.

2. PLANNING AND ARRANGING FILES.

- a. **General.** Records should be filed on a regular basis, preferably daily. Additional primary, and numerical secondary or tertiary breakdowns within the filing system are not to be created by individual offices. Offices will submit their requests for additional file categories through appropriate channels to the Forms, Issuances, and Records Management Services Center (FIRM). The purpose for requiring the FIRM's approval is to ensure the application of records retention schedules. Records not appearing in this schedule will be submitted to National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) for approval. As a normal rule, however, subject files and case files should provide for most additional files needed by individual offices.
- b. **Avoid Unnecessary Filing.** Filing unnecessary papers is a waste of manpower and equipment. The following are some ways to avoid unnecessary filing:
 - (1) Limit the creation of formal communications for routine matters where a memo or routing slip may be substituted or a reply may be made on the incoming communication and then returned.
 - (2) Limit the number of copies prepared to those which are specifically required or requested or which serve a valid purpose.

- (3) Eliminate the copies of routine communications which require no record, such as:
 - a. Routine requests for publications. (Return the requesting letter with the material sent. An alternative is to reply by form letter. In neither case is a file copy needed.)
 - b. Outgoing form letters. (A notation on the incoming letter showing the form letter identification number will suffice.)
 - c. Routine transmittals.
 - d. Copies of letters furnished solely for information, unless it is known they will be subsequently referred to.
- (4) Limit "extra copy" files to those offices having justification for their maintenance.
- (5) Limit the quantity of technical reference documents received, and file only those which will be of significant reference value.

3. ARRANGING FOLDERS, GUIDES, AND LABELS. The orderly appearance and efficiency of any file depends upon the careful preparation, use, and arrangement of folders and guides in the file drawer. Folders are necessary to keep the papers together and in order. Guides serve as "sign posts" to help speed up the filing and finding operations. The incorrect use of either folders or guides will retard these operations. Filing supplies are described in Chapter 7.

- a. **General Correspondence Files.** Instructions for arrangement of guide cards, folders, and labels for general correspondence files are contained in Chapter 8.
- b. **Case Files and Other File Series.** Guide cards and folders are important for case files and other types of records, especially if the files collection is large. Guide cards reduce the area of the search and help the folders stand erect. A guide card for every two or three folders is wasteful and defeats the purpose of the guides. Four to six guide cards in each drawer or one guide to every ten folders are two rules to follow. As a general rule, place a third position (right) guide card in front of each record series to identify and isolate it from other series in the same drawer. Square-cut folders are recommended for all files. Carefully and uniformly prepared folder labels are important to any file series. Labels should be easy to read, precise, and complete.

4. INSPECTION OF PAPERS. Before filing any papers, ensure that only those eligible to be filed are prepared for filing, and that ineligible papers are not filed.

- a. Papers ineligible for filing include:
 - (1) Those which should be sent to another file station.
 - (2) Those which should be circulated and read before filing.
 - (3) Those authorized to be destroyed.
 - (4) Personal papers.

- b. Papers eligible for filing include:
 - (1) Incoming communications on which required action has been completed (incoming letters and memoranda concerning matters pertinent to administrative or substantive functions of the office).
 - (2) Office copies of outgoing communications, reports, etc. (official yellow or otherwise designated file copies retained by originating office as an official record of action taken).
 - (3) Memoranda of conversations, memoranda to file, minutes of meetings, and other papers created within the office and not transmitted elsewhere, but needed to record the business affairs of the office.
 - (4) Agreements, contracts, or other documents having legal significance (signed copies or confirmed copies).
 - (5) Fiscal or financial records which document the acquisition, distribution, utilization, or expenditure of funds.
 - (6) Forms bearing information about personnel, property, accounts, procurement, shipping, programs and projects, or commodities.
 - (7) Original copies of reports, or cleared final drafts of publications, along with the necessary supporting documents which reflect conclusions of studies, surveys, or investigations of the Agency.
 - (8) Any other papers which establish, confirm, implement, or recommend Agency or office policies, programs, positions, or procedures.

Usually, only one copy of any paper will be the official file copy in any one official file station. However, another copy of the same paper may be an official file copy in another official file station.

5. **FILES CLASSIFICATION.** Classifying records involves the ability to read with understanding, to analyze subject matter, to select the most appropriate subject classification, to recognize related subject matter of sufficient importance to warrant cross-referencing, and to distinguish between papers which belong in case files and those which belong in subject files.

The classifier needs a good general knowledge of what the Agency does, how it is done, and who does it. Also needed is complete and detailed knowledge of the functions and operations of the office and of those file subjects which relate to those functions and operations. It also is useful to know what kinds of files have been needed in past operations.

- a. **Classifying Subject File Material.** Papers to be filed in subject files are marked in the upper right corner (in pencil) with file codes taken from the left column of the File Outline. Example: ADM 4-1. The following include techniques used in selecting the correct subject file classification:

- (1) Read the subject line, if any, first.
- (2) Look for key phrases or familiar terms used in the text and check these against the file outline or the index.
- (3) Note the addressee and/or originator. The identification of either may help to establish the subject area with which the document is associated.

- b. **Classifying Case File Material.** Papers are marked in the same manner as the subject material. However, not all papers for case files need to be marked. Certain forms and reports used in personnel, fiscal, and other operations show numbers, names, and other identifying characteristics which are self-classifying, and need no further identifying markings to ensure that they are correctly filed. Example: T&A's.

- c. **Pre classification.** In this optional procedure, the originator of correspondence (or his/her designated employee) may obtain the proper file location code for the subject matter dealt with in the correspondence by referring to the file plan and the relative index. The originator should write the appropriate file code in the upper right corner of the correspondence draft copy before giving it to a typist for typing. The typist then should type the file code on the record copy in the upper right corner.

- d. **Classification Review.** Employees should double-check file numbers before filing to ensure that they are accurate.

6. **FILING.** Assemble papers to be filed in the subject files alphabetically by their primary file codes, and within each primary code by secondary and tertiary file numbers. Place papers in folders facing the front of the file drawer, with the left edge of the paper resting

against the bottom of the folder (in lateral files the right edge of the paper rests against the bottom of the folder), the most recently dated material in front.

When no folder exists in subject files for a paper, e.g., a secondary subject, file the paper in the primary folder until there are about 10 papers on the same secondary subject. Then at make up a folder for the proper breakdown. The same rule applies to a tertiary subject. The document itself should be correctly classified, however, at the time of initial filing.

Subdivide folders which are filled to capacity (about 3/4"). There are three ways to do this:

- a. **Subdivision by Subject.** In a general correspondence file, a folder filled to capacity before the end of the year may indicate a need for subdivision by subject. For example, a folder on leave could be subdivided by kinds of leave (annual, sick, etc.).
- b. **Subdivision by Type of Material.** A case file folder may be subdivided by placing material on one aspect of the case in one folder. For example, statistical report forms relating to a special project may be placed in one folder; all other material, such as correspondence, would be placed in another folder. All material in the two folders would relate to one subject.
- c. **Subdivision by Date.** When subdivision by subject or type of material is not practical, use dates. Enter on both folder tabs the inclusive date of the material in the respective folders. For example, on the old folder tab show "10/1/96 - 3/31/98" and on the new folder tab show "4/1/98--" with a blank for the closing date. This method may be used for both subject and case files. When oversize or bulky materials such as maps, films, or data processing machine runs are to be made a part of the file, place them in separate cabinets appropriate to their size. Use a cross-reference to record their file location.

7. PREPARING FILE FOLDER LABELS.

- a. **Subject Files.** Use white pressure-sensitive labels. Show the file code (such as PER for personnel), folder title, period covered by the folder (fiscal year - FY, calendar year - CY, or leave year - LY) and the disposition. The file code and subject title appear on the label of each subject file folder exactly as they appear in the Subject Outline. When using pull out shelf files, place folder labels in the third (right) position on the folder.
- b. Case files may be arranged:
 - (1) Alphabetically by name of person, State, city, company, etc., or by grouping within a geographical location such as cases within a city, State, or area.

- (2) According to a number assigned to identify the case.

Case files normally are filed directly behind the subject to which they apply. However, they may be maintained separately if voluminous or if they would be more readily accessible to the user.

- c. **Subject-Expansion Files.** These files are labeled to show the further breakdown of a prescribed subject file code. The additional information is supplied by the user, rather than from any part of the Subject Outline.

The file code and title of the primary, secondary, or tertiary, as shown in the Subject Outline, is shown on the top line of the file label. The added information, such as name, number, State, or title, which identifies the further breakdown, is shown in parentheses. Example:

PRP 9-1 Architectural Engineering FY 96
 (DBI DESIGN)
 Destroy FY 99

The position of the subject-expansion file label on the folder is the same as that of the primary, secondary, or tertiary file code to which the subject-expansion file relates.

- d. **Nonrecord Files.** The filing of nonrecord material in filing cabinets should be avoided where possible. When it is necessary to maintain nonrecord material in filing cabinets, file the material in a separate folder behind the subject folder to which it applies. When a subject folder has case files behind it, file the non-record folder behind the case files. Prepare the label in the same manner as a subject folder, except type on the lower line, "Reference" to the left and "NONRECORD" to the right. Example:

PER 16 Health and Safety FY 98
Reference NONRECORD

Place the label in the same position on the nonrecord folder as the label on the preceding subject folder.

8. **CROSS-REFERENCE.** A cross reference is a means of referring to a document by a file identification other than that under which it is filed. If a document being classified involves more than one subject or case transaction and there is a possibility it might be asked for by either, a cross-reference should be prepared as a finding aid.

- a. Preparation.

- (1) Select the file designation for the additional subject or case and write it directly below the file designation for the main subject or case. Mark an

"x" by this file designation to show that a cross-reference is required. For example:

BUD 4-1 Indicates the location of this copy in the file.

x PAP 4-2 Indicates that a subject cross-reference is to be made for this subject.

(2) Use Optional Form 21, Cross-Reference Form, for preparing cross-references of records maintained in all types of files. If extra copies of paper are available or if "quick" copies can be conveniently made, they may be used instead of the cross-reference form.

b. Avoid Unnecessary Cross-references. Avoid making and filing unnecessary cross-reference forms, as they take up valuable space and time.

9. CHARGE OUTS. Set up a records charge-out system if records are to be removed from the file station area. Documents should not be misplaced when following these charge-out procedures. Use Optional Form 23, Charge Out Record, to charge out documents or a folder from a file drawer.

10. FASTENERS. File papers in subject files loose in the folder, not fastened with prong fasteners. Prong fasteners may be used for fastening documents in a case file.

Fasten individual papers together within file folders only when it is necessary to keep them together because of their functional relationship. Examples are:

a. A multi-page communication.

b. A report, contract, or agreement.

c. A communication with its enclosures.

Wire staples are used for fastening related papers together. Do not use bands, pins, paper clips, or tape. They deteriorate and ruin records.

11. FILE DRAWER LABELS. Label the front of each file drawer to show its contents. Show on the label the subjects and period covered. Example:

ADM through PER -----subjects

FY 1998 -----period

12. FILE GUIDE CARDS. Use file guide cards to visually aid in finding various segments of a file and to separate groups of files in a file drawer. Do not use a mixture of

letter-size and legal-size folders in the same cabinet. For most files, five guide cards per drawer is sufficient.

13. **CUTOFF.** Cutoff subject files once a year. No additional material is filed in the old set of folders. A new set for the current year (FY) should be prepared. Usually, files are cutoff at the end of the fiscal year (September 30).

Bring forward to the new folders material on policy or other material which is still current.

Separate inactive subject files or closed case files physically from active files, as follows:

- a. **Inactive Subject Files:** Place last year's files in a separate drawer or drawers.
- b. **Closed Case Files:** Remove closed case files to a separate drawer. Mark closing date on folder labels.

When reference to inactive and closed files ceases, follow disposition procedures.

14. **OPTIONAL PROCEDURES.** The file procedures listed below are optional. Before adopting them, the advantages of using any of these procedures should be weighed against possible disadvantages such as undue complication to files operations, inordinate cost, or excessive demand on employee work time.

- a. **Reader File.** Its purpose is to help keep staff members in an office currently advised on important developments and decisions. It consists of white copies of all outgoing communications. It is not part of the official record of the office, and should be destroyed when its purpose is served. Maximum retention should not exceed 6 months.
- b. **Transitory Files.** A set of folders for transitory materials may be established and placed in front of the administrative files. Transitory materials include incoming nonrecord items such as notices, leaflets, or any other material which has no long-term value to the office receiving it (e.g., job notices, routine requests for information, notices of local clubs or activities, general governmental information notices which have no bearing on office duties or operations, etc.). Transitory folders should be established and maintained as follows:

- (1) **Folders and Folder Labels.** Four folders should be created for the transitory files. They should be labeled in the following manner:

1 - Transitory	JAN - MAY - SEP
2 - Transitory	FEB - JUN - OCT
3 - Transitory	MAR - JUL - NOV

4 - Transitory APR - AUG - DEC

- (2) **Transitory Files Operations.** Place transitory material, as described above, in the folder marked with the current month. On the first of each month, clean out the material previously filed in the new current folder and begin filing in it (e.g., on November 1, remove and destroy the material which was filed in July and begin filing transitory material received in November in the emptied folder). This practice ensures that all material filed in transitory folders will be retained at least 3 full months. Of course, transitory folders are not affected by file breaks and should be kept continuously in the active files.