



Dear Dr. Book

Dear Dr. Book,

I have a question about the timeliness of articles, textbooks, and reference materials for professional use. I have recommended that professional friends of mine dump their textbooks of 10+ years and buy new reference materials. Additionally, I've heard periodicals more than three years old are outdated. Help!

A Professional Colleague

Dear Colleague,

In terms of preservation, this question has two parts: WHAT to save, and then HOW to save those materials so they will be available when you need them.

Deciding “what to save” is the trickiest part of the question, as the answer depends on the nature of your discipline and the nature of the materials. Some disciplines are changing so fast that any reference book or textbook beyond five or ten years has only historical interest. For example, computer science today is vastly different than 10 to 15 years ago as the hardware and the software has gone through many new versions and upgrades. In other disciplines, older reference and textbooks may still be the standard today; it is difficult to call a history volume “outdated” except for the lack of the most recent “historical” facts.

When making a decision on what to keep and what to toss, base your decision on your professional expertise and standards, the intended use of the materials (day-to-day reference shelf or “just in case”) and the availability of the materials elsewhere. Do you need the whole run of a periodical title or just specific issues? Does the local library own the volumes or have subscription to the periodical title? Academic libraries traditionally keep entire runs of the journal titles either in paper or microfilm copy. Today an increasing number of titles are accessible in electronic format. If relying on electronic format for future access, determine if the materials include a back-run of older issues and have been ‘archived’ or saved to ensure that they will be available when you need them.

Weighing these factors, my recommendation is to be conservative as practicability dictates when deciding what to keep – you can always toss them after. As it is often said: “you do not need something until after you have thrown it out.”

The answer to the second part of the question is the proper preservation storage of those materials that you have decided to save. I am assuming in my answer that you are going to store materials out-of-sight for possible future use.

The over-riding principle is to keep the materials in a CONSTANT environment, particularly in terms of temperature and relative humidity. The goal should be around 35 percent relative humidity and 65-70 degrees Fahrenheit year round, avoiding both daily and seasonal fluctuations. Relative humidity and temperature outside of these ranges hasten the breakdown of the structure of paper. Meeting the ideal humidity and temperature is a challenge as the most likely locations for storage are usually the worst locations in relation to the environment. Attics, basements and garages normally do not have the same environmental controls as the rest of the house, so that the temperatures and relative humidity change as rapidly as the outside climate. In particular, attics and garages allow stored materials to bake in the summer and freeze in the winter; or in our variable Colorado climate, bake and freeze all in one day. Also our average

Colorado relative humidity is below 35 percent. These storage locations also present another challenge of unwanted water and dampness. Any stored materials in basements, even climate controlled ones, should be a least 2-4" above the floor (about the height of a pallet) and away from walls to minimize damage from any water leaks/floods or sweating of the walls. Water can be introduced into garages through another avenue - water melting off the vehicles driven inside during a snow storm and then running across the garage floor.

Another environmental concern is light. Materials should be kept in the dark as ultraviolet light is harmful to paper. Keep the storage area clean so pests are not attracted to a free lunch. Keep materials in an area of good air quality, away from pollutants.

Preferably, materials should be stored in archival quality boxes, with volumes stored either flat or on the top or bottom edge. Never store a volume on its fore-edge (open side edge) as the text block will tend to fall out of the cover. Materials in file folders should be packed tight enough so that the materials in the folders do not slump down to the bottom. Loose periodical issues should be stored flat. When packing a box, make sure it is full and pile no more than four boxes high.

This is just a quick overview on preservation quality storage of materials. For information on other preservation topics, please write to "Dear Dr. Book" in care of the *University Libraries Newsletter*, Colorado State University Libraries, Fort Collins, CO 80523 or visit the Libraries Preservation Services Web site at: <http://lib.colostate.edu/preserv/>.

