

Advisory



*New York State  
Archives*

# The Records Life Cycle

May 2021



The University of the State of New York  
The State Education Department

New York State Archives  
Government Records Services  
Albany, New York 12230

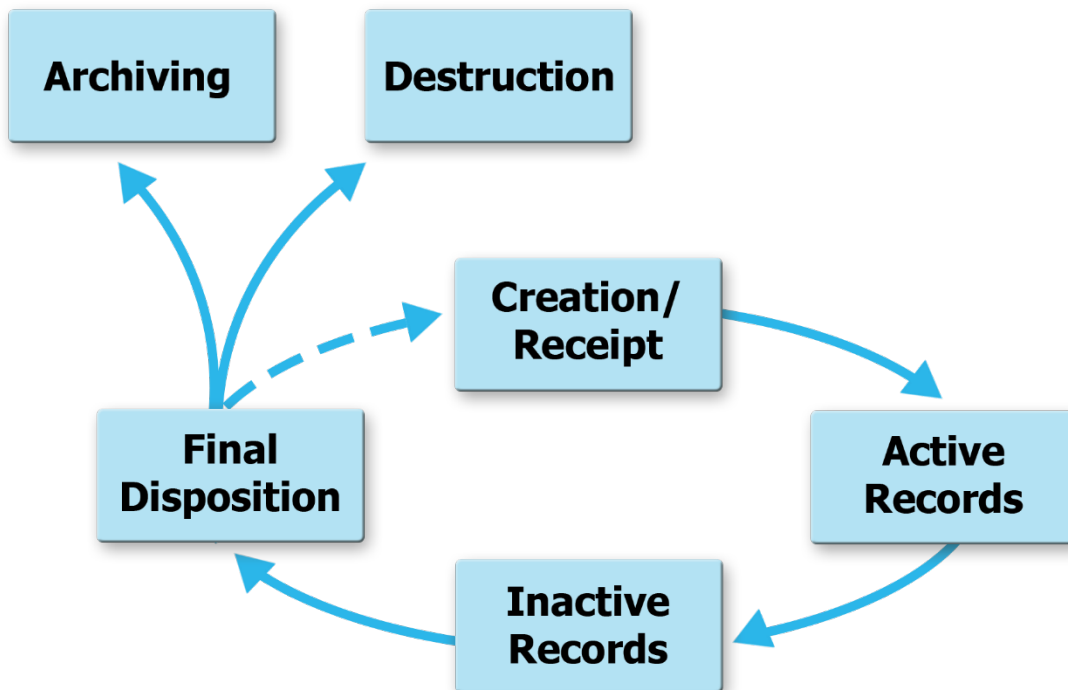
[www.archives.nysed.gov](http://www.archives.nysed.gov)

## The Records Lifecycle

All records have a life span. The life span may be four months, or it may be permanent. A records life span is determined by how long it must be kept to meet legal, administrative, fiscal and historical purposes. Once determined, a record must be managed throughout its lifespan. The amount of time that a record must be kept is its legal retention. Whether it is eventually destroyed or preserved is the records ultimate disposition. Public officers have a legal responsibility to ensure that records under their care remain accessible, understandable and useable throughout their life span.

Understanding and applying the records lifecycle concept will help you efficiently and cost effectively manage your records. The life cycle has four basic phases:

1. **Creation.** The first phase is when you create or receive a record. You should be thinking about how this record needs to be identified, stored, and managed throughout its lifecycle. For example, if it's permanent, how will you protect and preserve that record indefinitely.
2. **Active Use.** The second phase is when you use a record frequently enough that you must maintain it in an easily accessible location for easy access and use. Normally, this is when you store a paper record in a file cabinet close to your workstation or an electronic document in an easily accessible file location or when an electronic record is considered active within a large database system.
3. **Inactive Storage.** When you stop regularly referring to a record, and no longer need immediate access to it, the record enters the inactive phase. Although you may never refer to the record again, the record must be retained for legal, administrative or other purposes. At this point, you should remove the records from their active storage environment and maintain the records in a secure records storage facility or inactive records filing system for electronic records or indicate their inactive status within a database system. For State Agencies, the State Records Center provides low-cost, secure inactive storage for paper records, and many agencies rely on functions such as e-mail archiving to separate their inactive from active electronic records.
4. **Disposition.** The final stage of the records lifecycle is disposition. In most cases this will mean the physical destruction of the record, or in the case of electronic records, purging the records from the electronic information system and all backups. However, if the record has a permanent retention period, its disposition would be to transfer it into archival storage. This may mean the legal transfer of the record to an archival repository or transferring the record to appropriate storage that ensures its protection and preservation. For example, some counties operate an archival facility and county offices dispose of their permanent records by transferring them to the county archives and in the case of State agencies, they transfer their permanently valuable records to the State Archives.



The lifecycle is based on the assumption that some records retain their value longer than others and that the value of records often changes over time. For example, a record with a permanent retention retains its value forever, a record with a six-year retention loses its value entirely after six years.

Most governments and organizations still create and rely heavily on paper records. Determining when those records enter or leave a particular phase of their life cycle can have significant fiscal and productivity benefits for the organization. For example, instead of storing inactive records in expensive filing cabinets located in costly office space, you'll want to store them in an inexpensive cardboard records storage carton in less costly warehouse space.

The value of permanent inactive records will affect the way you store them. You would not store a record that will be destroyed after six-years in an acid free container in a climate controlled fireproof vault like you would a valuable 19<sup>th</sup> Century historical record or any other permanent record that is no longer actively used.

Different records management activities take place during different phases of the records lifecycle. The chart below lays out many of the key activities that should take place during each phase of the lifecycle. The activities in the chart are arranged vertically from the more basic activities to the more advanced. This will help guide you in building or improving your records management program.

Creation	Active Use	Inactive Storage	Disposition and Archiving
<p>You create only the records you need to support business functions and prove compliance with <u>laws, regulations</u>, and audits</p>	<p>Filing systems are developed, documented, and adhered to for both paper and electronic records</p>	<p>Inactive records are separated from active records and stored in a safe, secure records <u>storage area or records center.</u></p>	<p>Policies and procedures are in place to ensure the systematic and routine disposition of all records, regardless of format, in accordance with <u>retention schedules. Routine disposition is essential for compliance with Public Officers Law.</u></p>
<p>New York State Archives guidelines, federal or state “recordkeeping requirements” and other professional standards are used in records creation to ensure that records meet the needs of the organization and are easier to manage throughout their entire life span.</p>	<p>Paper records are filed with appropriate filing supplies and filed in appropriate filing equipment. Records maintained in electronic systems are actively managed in accordance with existing internal controls and information technology management practices.</p>	<p>Inactive paper records are stored in standard size boxes on 18-gauge <u>steel shelving.</u> Inactive electronic records are easily identified and segregated from active records.</p>	<p>Destruction of non-permanent records is authorized and documented with the use of <u>records destruction</u> authorization forms, to ensure defensible destruction of records. Records with permanent value (archival records) are transferred to archival custody, such as transfer to the State Archives for state government agencies.</p>
<p>Official or “record copy” of records are designated by policy</p>	<p>A subject matter list is created in compliance with the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL)</p>	<p>Security rules and standards are in place and followed for all records, including inactive electronic records</p>	<p>Security procedures are in place for the public use of archival records.</p>
<p>The creation of unofficial copies is limited by policy and reinforced with training and guidance to staff</p>	<p>Office retention schedules are developed that identify how long a record is active and should be retained in the office.</p>	<p>Electronic records are systemically backed up and backups stored offsite</p>	<p>Legal holds are placed on the destruction of records during litigation</p>

The capacity to support technology solutions is considered before implementation	Records classifications and taxonomies are developed for recordkeeping.	Cloud computing vendors are carefully researched using the criteria set forth in State Archives Advisory, <u>Using a Data Storage Vendor</u> before signing a service contract	Use of archival records is promoted through a public outreach program
Records retention requirements are considered before any technology implementation	Records can be easily located and delivered to the appropriate parties during the discovery phase of a lawsuit.	The final version of electronic records is saved in a non-proprietary format (such as <u>PDF-A</u> ) and a migration plan is in place to ensure the long-term maintenance of inactive electronic records	Indexes and finding aides exist to promote easy access to archival records
Business requirements are identified through <u>needs assessments</u> and an understanding of recordkeeping requirements. Electronic systems are designed to create and keep records based on recordkeeping requirements.	Records management policies are applied to all devices including tablets, phones, and flash drives that are used to access, use or store records	Environmental controls and <u>fire suppression systems</u> exist in storage areas.	Dedicated research areas are available to the public
Records born digital are managed digitally throughout their lifecycle including information needed to identify and control the record (metadata).	Retention and other records management principles are applied to all electronic messaging including <u>e-mail</u> , voice mail, and instant messages (texts).	Climate controlled vaults are used for the storage of the most valuable records. Inactive electronic records are easily identifiable and maintained in formats that can	The oldest and most valuable archival records are reformatted to promote public use and protect the original documents from damage or theft

		be migrated to new hardware and software environments.	
<u>Archival records</u> are identified at the point of creation	<u>A social media policy</u> exists and is followed.	A <u>disaster prevention and recovery plan</u> for records is in place	The oldest and most valuable archival records are appropriately stored and protected from damage, modification or loss.

A successful records management program, one that effectively manages all records through their entire life cycle depends on:

- Records management formalized by the adoption of a records management law (local governments) or policy (state agencies). The State Archives can provide sample local ordinances or policy statements for use by local governments and state agencies.
- A Records Management Officer appointed at the appropriate level in the organization. The State Archives can provide sample duties descriptions and appropriate qualifications for a records management officer.
- A Records Advisory Board that meets at least once a year. Records management is an organization-wide responsibility. A records advisory board can assist any organization in implementing a program that is effective, reduces redundant recordkeeping and meets the needs of all business functions.
- A records management program appropriately staffed and funded. Public organizations have a legal responsibility for creating, maintaining and making records available. More importantly, good records management saves time, money and makes government work more efficient. Appropriate staffing, especially for large and complex organizations is essential to realizing these benefits.
- All staff periodically trained in records management policies and practices. The State Archives offers a comprehensive, free program of training and technical support.