Frontline Resource Institute

MUSEUM of LIFE + SCIENCE

Your Archive is Your Story

Archiving for Busy People and Organizations

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Environmental Defense Fund

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On the Cover

At 2025 Street Works Earth, Frontline Resource Institute staff asked festival participants to share their vision of an environmentally just future. Participants drew, painted, and sketched their visions to contribute to a collaborative art piece. Photo by Felix Masi.



INTRODUCTION

WHO IS THIS WORKBOOK FOR?

This workbook was written for frontline and community-based organizations who might already have a lot of material that is part of their day-to-day work, but would like some help thinking about what to do with it.

This workbook is for you if you know that your work is important, but you feel like you don't have capacity to spend a lot of time thinking about documenting or preserving your story. This workbook is also for community organizers who may not have much "stuff" yet, but are interested in building out an archive to preserve or document the stories of their people and place.

A frontline community-based organization is a local, state, or Indigenous nonprofit organization, unincorporated group, or small for-profit business that represents and/or supports a specific frontline community and its residents and stakeholders. Frontline CBOs also represent or serve a particular population from many communities and geographic areas, but which face shared experiences of environmental injustice and climate challenges.



Vernice Miller-Travis speaks at FRI's 2023 Conceptual Committee meeting.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF THIS WORKBOOK?

We hope to encourage you to value the work you do, either as a community organizer or frontline organizer, and to see that the story of your community and your place is something that is worth saving for future generations and so that others can listen and learn from your experiences.

We also hope that this workbook can help you think critically about how a practice of archiving and preservation can be part of telling the story of your organization and/or your community.

WHAT IS AN ARCHIVE?

...AND WHY DO I NEED TO THINK ABOUT AN ARCHIVE?

ARCHIVING IS A PRACTICE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY.



Professional archivists do valuable work to preserve and catalogue materials in a standardized way, but for the purposes of this document, it's useful to think about **archiving as a practice that serves you, your organization, and/or your community.**

If you are in the habit of saving materials and objects that document key parts of your organization's or community's history, congratulations, you are keeping an archive.

ARCHIVING IS **NOT** THE SAME AS ORGANIZING.



Maybe you feel overwhelmed by the idea that you might want or need to create an "archive." Perhaps you feel pressure that you need to go from what you have now to a neatly organized filing cabinet or perfectly arranged bookshelf, and that feels impossible. **Don't let the fear that you're not "organized enough" keep you from maintaining an archive.**

ARCHIVING DOES **NOT** MEAN YOU SAVE EVERYTHING.



Once you decide to start archiving materials, it can be tempting to try to keep everything. This is a very human thing to do, particularly when it comes to physical items that may be strongly associated with a particular memory or time and place.

Part of deciding to maintain an archive is **deciding what you have the time and energy to hold on to and keep track of**. Be kind to yourself – don't hold yourself accountable for saving everything.

YOU **SHOULD** OWN YOUR ARCHIVE.

You may be approached by researchers, journalists or well-meaning individuals who may be interested in "helping" you document, preserve, or make your archive available. You are not obligated to accept their "help"!

You are allowed to make demands of the people who want to hear your story, especially if they might benefit from it in some way.

HOW DO YOU OWN YOUR ARCHIVE?

Often, the best way to make demands of partners is by controlling and managing their access to your story through consent forms, access controls, and Memoranda of Understanding.

CONSENT FORMS

It is essential to obtain free, prior, and informed consent from anyone who shares stories with you. Ask contributors how they want their story to be stored and used, and respect their choices.

ACCESS CONTROLS

Maintaining an archive does not necessarily mean everyone must have equal access, especially if your materials are in a private repository. You can decide what's available, when it's available, and to whom, to protect your community.

MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING

You can make demands of the people who want to see your materials. A Memoranda of Understanding can formalize partnerships with external people or groups, to make sure everyone understands the goals of working with your archive.



YOUR ARCHIVE IS YOUR STORY.

REFLECT: HOW CAN ARCHIVING BE A PART OF YOUR STORYTELLING?



What are some important things for young people or future generations **in your community** to know about their people and place?



What is important for **others outside your community** to know about your place, community and/or organization?



What are some shared experiences or activities that define your community and/or organization?



How could you preserve or document it for someone in the future who may never experience it firsthand?

What sorts of stories do elders and/or leaders have to share? What are some goals you have for talking to elders? What do you hope to learn from them?

How do you want your community and/or organization to be remembered? What do you want your legacy to look like?

YOUR ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS WILL INFORM THE CONTENTS OF YOUR ARCHIVE, WHO HAS ACCESS TO YOUR ARCHIVE, AND HOW THE ARCHIVE'S CONTENTS ARE SHARED (OR NOT SHARED). KEEP THESE ANSWERS IN MIND AS YOU MOVE THROUGH THIS WORKBOOK.

WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH ALL THIS STUFF?

TAKING INVENTORY OF YOUR ARCHIVE

FIRST, DECIDE:

WHAT TO KEEP

What types of stuff will go in your archive? Start by taking **inventory** of what you have, and think about what you'd like to collect in the **future.**

HOW TO KEEP IT

What you do with your stuff will depend on the **format** (what type of stuff it is) and the **content** (what or who the stuff is about, or whose ideas it contains).

WHO CAN SEE IT

Consider who your story is for, and **to whom you are accountable** when telling your community's stories.

HOW DO WE DECIDE **WHAT TO KEEP?**

Begin by taking an inventory. **What is already in your archive?** Check the boxes if your organization or community has or uses any of the following:

Print	Digital	
☐	☐	Photographs
☐	☐	Video recordings
☐	☐	Financial records
☐	☐	Correspondence (letters, emails)
☐	☐	Meeting minutes or notes
☐	☐	Flyers, signage, decorations, swag buttons, etc.
☐	☐	Media coverage - print/written
☐	☐	Media coverage - video clips or audio interviews
☐	☐	White papers / reports / original research

Print	Digital	
☐	☐	Research data or results conducted by your organization
☐	☐	Research data or results from research conducted/managed by partners
☐	☐	Sensitive or protected data (e.g. SSNs, health data)
☐	☐	Oral histories (audio)
☐	☐	Oral histories (transcripts)
☐	☐	Other written materials (speeches, educational materials, brochures)
☐	☐	Other materials not listed: _____

REFLECT: DECIDING **WHAT TO KEEP**

What are some items that you do not currently collect or save that could tell an important story of your community or organization?

"I HAVE A HARD TIME DECIDING WHAT TO KEEP AND WHAT TO THROW AWAY."

When it comes to archiving, it is very likely that you simply can't keep everything, and even if you did, it might not help you tell your organization's story.

For example: Imagine if you saved every receipt you ever got from the grocery store for a year. That archive might tell a very comprehensive story of your eating habits, but it might take up a lot of space. Now, imagine if you compiled all of your favorite recipes into a cookbook. That might tell almost the same story as the grocery receipts, in a way that someone else could more easily understand - and, on top of that, it would be easier to store!

You may feel that it is important to 'hold on' to certain items, 'just in case.' You may feel a sense that you are 'throwing away memories' or that the item might be useful later, and you may regret throwing it away.

This is normal and common.

A FEW IDEAS FOR LOW-MAINTENANCE ORGANIZATION:

ORGANIZE BY YEAR

Maintain files or boxes organized by year. Every few years, go through old boxes. Make a point to identify and discard items that no longer have resonance.

GET A SECOND PAIR OF EYES.

Have someone else go through your archive. Encourage them to find opportunities to make your collection smaller. Allow them to ask questions about the significance of items.

REFLECT: MAINTAINING A **PRESERVATION PROCESS**

Use the space below to reflect on how you can maintain a process of preservation that still allows for you to let go of items that may not be useful for your archive. What would you need to do to feel OK about letting those items go?

NEXT: HOW TO KEEP IT?

HOW YOU STORE THINGS DEPENDS ON **FORMAT** AND **CONTENT.**

FORMAT (WHAT IS IT)?

Consider:

- What do you need to do to access its contents?
- What is it made of?
- How can you preserve it for as long as possible?

Note: All formats benefit from storage in climate-controlled conditions, away from heat, humidity, and in containers that protect from water or fire damage.

CONTENT (WHAT IS ABOUT)?

Consider:

- Does it contain community knowledge and/or indigenous knowledge that should be afforded additional protections and/or access restrictions on use?
- Does it contain private information that could (or should) be removed or destroyed before archiving?
- Does it contain protected information where access should be controlled or limited, such as research data?
- Did everyone who contributed or was part of the item (e.g. a photo or a video) provide consent or affirmative approval?

FORMAT: PHYSICAL ITEMS

STORE ALL ITEMS IN A COOL, DRY, DARK PLACE AWAY FROM SUNLIGHT OR HEAT.

FOR **PAPER** ITEMS:

- Store clean, dry, acid-free paper in flat files (vertical or horizontal).
- Copy paper is acid-free; newsprint and magazine clippings are not. Scan and discard newsprint or magazine clippings, or place individual sheets between folded sheets of blank copy paper to reduce acid bleeding.
- Remove any paper clips, binder clips, fasteners, or other metal bindings (staples). If it is important for the papers to be bound together, use plastic clips. Remove any post-its, scotch tape, or other glues.
- Avoid using adhesives to affix items to paper or scrapbooks.

FOR **PHOTOGRAPHS:**

- Store in a box or flat file away from sunlight or heat.
- If possible, store in archive-quality photo albums or plastic sleeves.
- Avoid using adhesives to stick photos to albums.

FOR **FABRIC AND TEXTILES:**

- These items will naturally degrade over time. Keep fabrics in climate controlled conditions, away from sunlight or pest damage (e.g. moths).

FOR **TAPE RECORDINGS:**

- Back up tapes (cassette, VHS, reel to reel) into digital formats (e.g. DVD, cloud storage) as tape degrades over time.

FOR **ALL OTHER PHYSICAL/PRINT ITEMS**

- Keep in mind that not all items will be archival. Store items you are unsure about separately from other materials to avoid contamination or damage.
- Consider taking photographs for documentation as an option to “back up” any items that are not archival.

FORMAT: DIGITAL ITEMS

If possible, **move files** from physical media (CDs, hard drives) to **cloud storage**. This ensures that files are backed up and cannot be lost if a hard drive fails.

Download your own copy of a file whenever possible.

Keep in mind that readable file formats can change as technology advances and older formats can become obsolete.

- When possible, **create a copy of your file in a standard format** that is likely to be supported for the foreseeable future (e.g. .txt, .csv).
- Avoid formats that require a software license to access information.

DATASETS

Consider “depositing” data in external repositories when feasible.

WEBPAGES OR ONLINE ARTICLES

Create a backup by archiving the page at the Wayback Machine or Perma.cc.

REFLECT: DECIDING HOW TO KEEP IT

Use the boxes and prompts on pages 14-16 to consider the *content* of your items.

REFLECT: **COMMUNITY AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

Uoes the item contain community or Indigenous knowledge? If so, what audiences should this knowledge be shared with? Are there any audiences this knowledge should **not** be shared with?

REFLECT: **CONSENT** AND APPROVAL

Did everyone who contributed to or was part of the item provide consent or affirmative approval? If not, is it possible or relevant to get consent?

REFLECT: **SENSITIVE** AND **PROTECTED** INFORMATION

Does the item contain private or protected information, such as SSNs or health data? What about protected data where access should be limited, such as research data?

“I FEEL OVERWHELMED WHEN I THINK ABOUT ORGANIZING!”

Archiving is the practice of preserving your materials for use by others, whether it’s other folks in your organization, by researchers, or future generations. It is possible to have an archive that is disorganized, and it is possible to have organized materials that are never archived.

THE STUFF DOES NOT HAVE TO BE ORGANIZED ...

IT JUST NEEDS TO HAVE A PLACE.

REFLECT: **ORGANIZING**

Use the space below to reflect on any concerns you have about keeping an archive organized.

Remember: Archivists and librarians are professionals who go through a process of organizing new collections before they are made available to researchers. It is very likely that unless your collection is highly organized, it will not necessarily be stored in an external archive exactly the same way you stored it. So when thinking about organization, **focus on making your archive useful for you.**

A FEW IDEAS FOR "LOW MAINTENANCE" ORGANIZATION

- Organize files by year, quarter, or month. Once the year, quarter, etc is over, start a new folder.
- Organize files by type. e.g. all reports together, all photos together.
- Use key words in digital filenames to make them easily searchable (e.g. New Orleans Convening 2025.jpg)

An ideal "home" for physical stuff is **indoors**, in a **climate-controlled space** if possible, with l**ow risk of water and/or fire damage** (elevated off floor, in sealed containers), and **low risk of damage from pests** (stored away from food, clean, dry)



Tony Defalco, Shamyra Lavigne-Davey, Erica Holloman-Hill, and Ayako Nagano at FRI's 2023 Conceptual Committee meeting.

CONSIDER: STORAGE OPTIONS

Any of the following options can be used to store physical items for long-term preservation. **Which could work for you?**

- ☐ A set of binders
- ☐ A stack of cardboard boxes (stored off the floor)
- ☐ Stackable plastic containers/totes
- ☐ A vertical filing cabinet
- ☐ A flat file cabinet
- ☐ A bookshelf or set of storage shelves

REFLECT: DECIDING HOW TO KEEP IT (PART 2)

Use the boxes and prompts on pages 18-20 to consider how you'd like to store your items, based on what is feasible to you. Remember: **focus on making your archive useful to you.**

REFLECT: **PHYSICAL** AND **PRINT MATERIALS**

How are you currently storing physical or print materials? What is working, and what would you like to change?

REFLECT: **PHYSICAL** AND **PRINT MATERIALS**

Describe how you'd like to store your physical or print materials. What is possible now? What could be a long-term plan for the future?

REFLECT: **DIGITAL FILES** AND **ACCESS**

How are digital files currently stored? Who has access to those files?

REFLECT: **DIGITAL FILE STORAGE**

Describe how you'd like to store your digital items. What is possible now? What could be a long-term plan for the future?

REFLECT: **WHAT HAS WORKED IN THE PAST?**

Take a moment to reflect on what has worked (and hasn't worked) for you in the past. How can you make your archive work for you?

NEXT: WHO CAN SEE IT?

IN THIS SECTION, YOU'LL CONSIDER A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION TO YOUR ARCHIVING PROCESS: **WHO IS THIS ARCHIVE FOR?**

Determining the audience, purpose, and overall goals for your archive will help guide your decisionmaking around who has access to the information. It's also important to determine which stories shouldn't be told, like those that include sensitive information as identified in the last section. Remember, this archive should work for you and your goals.

REFLECT: **WHO IS THIS ARCHIVE FOR?**

How are digital files currently stored? Who has access to those files?

REFLECT: **WHO BENEFITS?**

Who benefits from making this archive available? Ideally, who should benefit from this archive being available?

REFLECT: **WORKING WITH OUTSIDE RESEARCHERS**

How would you like to work with outside researchers? What would it look like for researchers to be accountable to the community?

REFLECT: DECIDING WHEN **NOT** TO ARCHIVE

Are there examples where it might be preferable not to preserve certain items or types of data in your archive? What items, and why?

ARCHIVING AS YOU GO

BECAUSE YOU'RE TOO BUSY DOING THE WORK!

You don't have to plan everything up-front, nor do you have to set aside substantial time to build your archive. For busy organizations, it's great practice to archive as you go. As important items, documents, and stories come up in your work, you can add them to your physical or digital archive.

ARCHIVING AS YOU GO: A FOUR-STEP CYCLE



STEP 1: LABEL IT

LABEL AND STORE THE FILE IN A WAY THAT WILL HELP YOU FIND IT LATER.

- For **digital files**, include the title or name of the document, and possibly the date or year in the filename, so you can search for it easily.
- For **paper files,** consider placing the file in a folder or container that has a label describing the contents (e.g. FY 2025, Published Reports).

STEP 2: REMOVE IT

REMOVE ANYTHING THAT IS NOT ARCHIVAL BEFORE PUTTING FILES IN LONG-TERM STORAGE.

- Remove any paper clips, binder clips, or other metal bindings (staples).
- Remove any post-its, scotch tape, or other tape or glues.
- Scan and make copies of **newsprint or magazine clippings** (discard originals), or place individual sheets between sheets of blank copy paper to reduce acid bleed.

STEP 3: LEAVE A NOTE

TAKE A MOMENT TO LEAVE YOURSELF A NOTE TO REMIND YOURSELF AND OTHERS WHY YOU KEPT IT OR WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO YOUR ORGANIZATION'S STORY.

- For **print documents**, if possible, make notes in pencil. Post-it notes, pens, and highlighters can degrade paper.
- For **digital documents**, add a note in the filename, file metadata, or the document itself with some background information, or create a text file that provides context.
- For **photographs**, add captions to identify who is in the photo. For digital photos, add this information in the filename or metadata.
- For **print photos**, write on the back only with pencil or acid-free ink.

STEP 4: BACK IT UP

IF YOU HAVE TIME, CREATE AT LEAST ONE BACKUP COPY.

- For digital files, consider printing the file or saving it in multiple places or formats.
- For print files, consider scanning the file or printing an extra copy.
- Create and save permalinks to web pages. Two options: The Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, a long-running project to archive the internet since 1996, or Perma.cc, a newer permalink site designed for libraries and courts.

CONCLUSION

REMEMBER: YOUR ARCHIVE IS YOUR STORY.

Your archive should work for you, your organization, and your community's legacy. We hope this approach to archiving supports your storytelling journey!

ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK



Ashton Merck presents the first version of the Your Archive is Your Story Workbook at FRI's 2025 Grantee Convening in New Orleans, Louisiana.

From 2025-2026, the Research and Engagement team at the Museum of Life and Science supported a cohort of FRI Narrative Sovereignty and Story Justice grantees through tailored technical assistance and support on storytelling projects, one of which was this workbook. During initial conversations with grantees and other community partners, the Museum team recognized that frontline organizations needed a practical, step-by-step guide that would allow them to preserve their story without distracting from their ability to do frontline work. The Museum team drew on their collective years of experience in oral history, science communication and community engagement to develop the first version of this workbook, which was shared with grantees at an in-person convening of the grantees in New Orleans, Louisiana.

MORE RESOURCES ON ARCHIVING AND ORAL HISTORY:

- OHA Principles and Best Practices
- OHA Social Justice Oral History Work Guidelines
- OHA Independent Practitioners Toolkit for Oral Historians
- UK Oral History Society's Mapping Environmental and Climate Crisis Oral History Projects Worldwide
- Environmental Justice Oral History Project

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FRI's 2025-2026 Grantee Cohort, NC Museum of Life and Science staff, and FRI staff in New Orleans, Louisiana.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ashton Merck is the Program Manager of Research and Engagement at the Museum of Life and Science, where she supports projects at the intersection of education, climate science, and community engagement. Ashton is a historian by training who has conducted research in archives across the U.S., but she gained firsthand experience with processing archival collections through an internship with the Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University. In her work with the Museum, Ashton draws on her historical training to inform her approach to science communication and social-scientific research.