



Records Management Tip

Records management advice prepared for GNWT records coordinators by the Records Management Unit, PWS

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Active Filing Series

Classifying a Document

What is a Records Classification System?

A records classification system is a way to impose order on an unorganized world of information. It does this by sorting the world of information into logical groups, which are called **sections, primaries, and secondaries** in the ARCS/ORCS system. Records are grouped together based on common subject or function characteristics. That is, records that deal with similar subjects or functions are kept together. The records classification system also organizes the records into an alphabetic, numeric, or alphanumeric sequence so that they can be easily found, retrieved, and used.

The GNWT's ARCS/ORCS system is based on the block-numeric classification system. In the block-numeric system, numbers are used to represent subjects and functions.

What is Records Classification?

Records classification is the process of choosing the best group for a record in a records classification system. There are three steps to classifying a record:

1. Review the record to determine its contents.
2. Use indexes, scope notes, and other tools to choose the best group for the records.
3. Assign the numeric, alphabetic, or alphanumeric code associated with the classification to the record. Write this number in the upper right corner of the document. Classification codes should be kept as short as possible. Long codes lead to misreading and misfiling.

The classification code (also called the classification number) does not just indicate where the record belongs in the world of information. For physical records, such as paper, microfilm, magnetic tape, etc., it also tells you where the record will be stored in the filing equipment.

Cross-Referencing Files

There may be times when it is useful to cross-reference between two or more files. This can be done by making a copy of the document and placing it in both files. It can also be done using a cross-reference sheet. The original document is filed in one file, and a cross-reference sheet is placed in the related files. The cross-reference sheet will refer users back to the file that contains the original document.

Use cross-referencing only when the system contains more than one file on the same subject, and it is not clear which one you should use. If you use cross-referencing

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heavily, it may indicate that the classification system and filing system is not as precise as it should be and needs to be revised.

Who Classifies Documents?

A departmental records management program should have a clear policy on who is responsible for classifying records. Most organizations choose from one of these three options:

- The person who creates the document classifies it.
- The person who receives the document classifies it.
- The file clerk classifies it.

The system will be more accurate and consistent if employees classify the documents that they create and receive. This responsibility does not usually place a large burden on employees, because most of them will only use a few different classification codes. They can quickly learn which codes apply to the records that they create and use.

Tips for Classifying a Document

It is usually easy to classify a document that you have created or received. However, there may be times when you may have to classify a document without having a full grasp of its content or purpose. The following tips will help you classify the document.

- Check the letterhead. This can help you identify the subject.
- Check the addressee (the recipient). If you know who received the document, you may have an easier time figuring out what it is about.
- Read the subject line of a letter, memorandum, or e-mail message with suspicion. Many subject lines do not accurately reflect the purpose or contents of the document.
- Check the document for internal or external file references (“Our file #”, “Your file #”)
- Check for any references to previous documents. This will lead you to the larger subject area.
- Skim the document as often as necessary to understand its content and purpose.
- Check the date of the document. This will help you find related documents.
- If your filing system has an index, use it to help locate the classification code.
- Check for cross-references before you assign the classification code. This will help you verify that you have chosen the correct classification.