



What Do I File? Part 2: Master vs. Copy Records

In “What do I File? Part 1,” we introduced the idea of a substantive record as the department’s official record. This bulletin will take this idea a step further and look at master and copy records.

What is a Master Record?

A master record is a substantive record. Departments use master records to keep track of their actions, transactions, policies, and decisions. The master record is the version that departments use when they want to find out what happened.

There are several ways to identify master records:

- It is an original record, or the first copy that the department created; or
- It is the only copy that the department has; or
- It is the copy that the department uses to make decisions.

Sometimes a department will have more than one copy of a record. In these cases, one copy will be designated as the master record.

What is a Master File?

A master file is a collection of related master records. A master file contains records about:

- a single subject
- an event
- a project
- a person
- a case
- an activity

The master file is the most complete file that the department has. It can be used to trace all of the activity that took place. Everyone should file into the master file to make sure that it is complete.

Each department has its own way of identifying master files. One good way is to look at the department’s workflow, or procedures. The workflow will often tell you where the most complete file is located. Your Records Coordinator can help you identify the master files in your office.



Office of Primary Responsibility

The **Office of Primary Responsibility** (OPR) is an office, work unit, or division that is responsible for creating and keeping a master file for a department. Usually the files are related to the OPR's programs or activities. For example, the finance division is usually the OPR for accounting files. Records that do not belong to the OPR are copies.

What is a Copy Record?

A copy record is a copy of a master record. Copy records are used for convenience, reference, or to keep track of information that was sent to the OPR. Copy records do not need to be kept as long as master records because a new copy can always be made from the master.

For example:

When you buy something, you send one copy of the invoice to the finance division. You also keep a copy to show that you sent the invoice for payment. You only need to keep your copy until the invoice is paid. The finance division has the master record, which it keeps long enough to meet any legal or audit requirements.

There is a fine line between copy records and transitory records. Transitory records are required for only a short time. They are not needed to show what you have done. Copy records are needed for administrative and back-up purposes to show what you have done. However, the department does not need the copy over the long term because it can rely on the master record.

What is a Copy File?

A copy file is a collection of related copy records. Copy files contain the same information as a master file, but are not needed for the same length of time.

Copy files are classified according to ARCS and ORCS. They are usually organized the same way as master files, but are marked as a copy somewhere on the file folder or file label. Copy files do not need to be kept as long as master files, because the same information is in master file.

Why Should We Identify Master and Copy Files?

There are several reasons why departments should identify master files:

- Decisions will be made based on complete information.
- Advice, recommendations, and decisions will be more consistent.
- Employees create fewer working files and copies because all of the information that they need is in the master file. They do not have to rely on their personal files to find what they need.
- Demand for office space and storage equipment will be lower because fewer copies need to be stored.



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- Information is easier to find because there are fewer files to go through.
 - Master files and copy files can be given retention schedules in ARCS and ORCS. Retention schedules explain how long master files and copy files should be kept. In ARCS and ORCS, master files are usually kept longer than copy files. The master files are kept to meet any long-term business needs, while copy files can be destroyed when they are no longer needed for administrative or reference purposes.

Check out the GNWT ARCS manual and future bulletins for more information on retention schedules. Bulletin # 1 has more information on ARCS and ORCS.

What about Working Files?

Each department has its own guidelines for handling working files. Contact your records coordinator to find out how your department deals with working files. The usual procedure is to separate the substantive records from the transitory records. Substantive records should be included in a master file. Transitory records can be destroyed.

For more information on master and copy records records, contact your department's Records Coordinator, or contact the Records Management Unit at 920-3009 or 873-7627.

