Preservation Action Plan: Email
National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)
Plan Date: 202505
Template: 202105

Email

Email records are created or received via an electronic mail system (EMS), and may include brief notes, formal or substantive narrative documents, and any attachments, which may include files from other content categories, that were transmitted with the message. Email records are often threads, which are a series of messages and replies grouped together in a single conversation or back and forth that are the main components of an email and replies.

This plan doesn't currently explicitly include other forms of electronic messaging, such as SMS text or chats.

Significant Properties of Email

Appearance properties are not generally significant to email, with the possible exception of text, which has similar appearance characteristics to textual records. Layout might also be considered in certain circumstances, as specified below. Behavior/User interaction with email does not generate a property that can be preserved or replicated after the fact.

Appearance

Name	Definition	Function Description
Font	The appearance of the message(s).	Font information inclusive of bolding, italics, etc., would apply. Color, orientation, etc. would not apply. This applies only to the messages; attachments are handled as separate objects.
Layout	Distinct layout in which more than just the discernable data elements themselves provide meaning.	Overall visual layout or structure of highly recognizable email "formats" such as State Department cables, EOP ARMS email, or Defense Messaging System messages.

Message body mark-up	HTML code/documentation that formats the body of the email	Markup may be necessary to preserve, depending on the content and layout of the message.

Structure

Name	Definition	Function Description
Structure	Proprietary internal structure of a commercial email format. Includes links and connections to other types within the same system (calendar, meetings, etc.).	During transformations, the specific constructs of the proprietary format should be preserved. Markup may be necessary to preserve, depending on the type and format of the message.
Attachments (if present)	An identifier that indicates one or more attachments (including inline attachments) are associated with the email.	
Original Order	The organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records. Possible strong association to email, e.g., maintenance of email in folders that indicate separate mailboxes, time periods sent/received, etc.	Preservation of original order for email would most likely come into play in circumstances where email is transferred in distinct folders or directories that reflect a clear operational structure; for example, where email is segregated and transferred by mailbox like inbox, spam and trash or username; or where segregated and transferred by blocks of time, such as by week or month. In such circumstances, that structure would be named as a significant property and should be preserved.

Behavior

Name	Definition	Function Description
User Interaction		User interaction with email does not generate a property that can be preserved or replicated after the fact.

Context

Name	Definition	Function Description
Subject	A short string that may identify the topic of the message. The subject line may be blank, indicate the content of the email to which the Sender is replying, or contain other information.	The Subject may provide qualitative information that indicates the message's purpose. Additionally, it may provide a simple method to sort several emails into a thread, or group of emails that comprise a conversation, when used in conjunction with the received date.
Keywords (if present)	Words and phrases that may summarize the content of the message. Keywords may be created by the person or software application that creates, receives the message, or archives the message.	
Header	- Originator/Local-part - Originator/Domain-part - Originator/Domain-literal - Originator/Display name (if present) - Originator/Relationship - Message-ID - msg-id - Sent Date - Received Date - Trace-field	Components that establish provenance and/or relationship between threads.
Header-Optional	- Resent - References - In-Reply-To	Optional components that establish provenance and/or relationship between additional threads or responses

Current NARA Transfer Guidance for Email
[Bulletin 2014-04](#)

- Preferred Formats for Individual Messages:
  - Internet Message Format (EML)
  - MBOX Email Format (MBOX)

- Acceptable Formats for Individual Messages:
    - Extensible Markup Language (XML), version 1.1
    - Microsoft Outlook Item Message Format (MSG)

- Preferred Formats for Aggregations of Emails:
    - Microsoft Personal Folders Format (PST) 2003 (Unicode)
    - MBOX Email Format (MBOX)

- Acceptable for Imminent Transfer Formats:
    - Microsoft Personal Folders Format (PST) 1997-2002 (ANSI)

Current NARA Format(s) for Public Access and Reference for Email

Formats for Public Access are those made available online through the National Archives Catalog. Formats for Reference are defined as those made available to researchers upon direct requests for digital copies.

Formats Available for Public Access: ASCII Text, PDF. Other file formats may be present depending on when they were added to the Catalog. Email records may be available via FOIA requests from Presidential Libraries and presented through the National Archives Catalog or FOIA Reading Room.

Format(s) Available for Reference: PDF, native plain text format.

Comments and Notes

Additional email metadata requirements for federal agencies can be found in 36 CFR 1236.22.