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Guideline

Creating and Maintaining File Naming Standards

This guideline is designed to assist your unit, not intended to cause you to change your entire way of working. File naming should be tailored to best suit your working methods. Ultimately, what matters most is agreement on which standards to adopt, and consistently applying them.

Why do we need standards for file names?

Establishing electronic file-naming standards, specifically tailored to each unit's business needs will:

- improve access to documents and make sure that the right documents are available at the right time to support the daily business operations of each unit;
- facilitate more effective collaborative work between employees; and
- ensure that electronic files are easy to locate for records retention purposes.

In addition, consistent use of a standardized set of file names will be cost-effective for the university by decreasing the time needed to locate documents when responding to formal requests for information.

This guideline is to be used as a basis for naming electronic documents thoughtfully and consistently. All employees should endeavour to apply these standards within their unit in the regular course of business.

How to Begin

Each unit should establish file-naming standards for:

- files that support unit core activities; and/or
- files that are routinely shared with others.

Your unit should identify file naming standards appropriate to its unique business needs. These standards should enable you to distinguish between files with similar names and enable you to identify documents without the need to open and review them.

There are four basic elements of a file name that should commonly be incorporated when naming a file. These elements include:

- a subject description that indicates the content or purpose of the file;
- an abbreviation of the Unit or Project to which the file is related;
- the date of the current edit of the file; and
- the state of the document (whether the file is a draft or final version).

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Examples:

BudgetAnalysis2016-FinService-2017-10-22-DRAFT.docx

BudgetAnalysis2016-FinService-2017-10-22-V3.docx

BudgetAnalysis2016-FinService-2017-10-22-FINAL.xlsx

Elements in a file name should be sorted in the most logical way to retrieve the record, which may differ from record to record but should not have a negative impact on existing working practices.

How to Proceed

Use the following naming conventions to help your unit establish file-naming standards.

1. Short Meaningful Names

Short file names are preferable because a long file name means a long file path or, when posting a document on the web, a long URL. This increases the risk of broken links from web pages and error messages when users attempt to view documents.

Meaningful names are used so as to provide a clear indication of the content. A folder named “Letters” might sound appropriate, but when the letters are all of a different nature (various subjects, incoming, outgoing, etc.) it offers little assistance in retrieval.

A file name does not require every single word in the document title to be used in order to identify it. It is also possible to use standard abbreviations. For example, “cmtc” is a standard abbreviation for “committee” and can be used in all committee-related areas providing it is commonly understood.

Abbreviations only work if everyone uses them; inventing new abbreviations that only one person understands will negate the ease and efficiency of the system.

Example:

Instead of naming a document **the employment and finance committee.doc**

It can be named: **EmpFinCmte.doc**

When using acronyms, each letter should appear in capitals, as should the first letter of the following word. Only the first letter of an abbreviated word should be a capital.

Example:

Instead of naming a document **EmpFinCmteTermsOfReference.doc**

It can be named: **EmpFinCmteTOR.doc**

2. Separating Words

Spaces, hyphens, and underscores are not universally recognized by all computing technologies within file names and can cause problems where files are published on the web or transferred across databases or systems, so they should be used with discretion. While spaces great for human readability, they are remarkably inconvenient in computer resource locators. Any spaces in URLs are converted to the encoded space character by the web browser turning “**reference data.doc**” into “**reference%20data.doc**” when published online. Hyphens and underscores are

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less problematic, but are read differently depending on the environment you use them in. If you use an underscore, some technologies such as web browsers will combine the characters on either side into one word. Therefore, **reference_data_2019_01_05.doc** would appear as **referencedata201901015.doc** to the browser. You would have to search for “**reference_data_2019**” or “**referencedata2019**” as a query term to find that document. Where hyphens are seen as separate words by the browser, so **reference-data-2019-01-05.doc** can be successfully queried using “**reference data 2019**”. Another option is that instead of separating the words, each word can be identified using capital letters to identify the start of each word, known as medial capitals it is also called **CamelCase**.

Example:

Instead of naming a document **staff appeal.doc** or **staff_appeal.doc**

It can be named: **StaffAppeal.doc** or **staff-appeal.doc**

In summary, avoid using spaces and underscores, use CamelCase when possible, use hyphens when CamelCase will not suffice as in the example of dates.

3. Characters

Use only alphanumeric characters (letters and numbers) in file naming whenever possible. Avoid using special character marks, such as asterisks, question marks, or periods, which do not transition well if the file is published to the web.

Example:

Instead of naming a document **Budget&FinanceReport~2014~(Draft)**

It can be called: **BudFinRep2014-DRAFT**

4. Numbering

Use two-digit numbers (or more when appropriate) when including non-year numbers in the file name. Using zero(s) before numbers will maintain the alphanumeric ordering, and assist retrieval by placing the latest files last.

<i>Instead of:</i>	<i>Use:</i>
Report1.doc	Report01.doc
Report10.doc	Report02.doc
Report11.doc	Report03.doc
Report2.doc	Report04.doc
Report3.doc	Report05.doc
Report4.doc	Report06.doc
Report5.doc	Report07.doc
Report6.doc	Report08.doc
Report7.doc	Report09.doc
Report8.doc	Report10.doc
Report9.doc	Report11.doc
(As the system sorts the files)	(As the system sorts the files)

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5. Dates

Year-first dating is used to sort files where it is useful to maintain the chronology of their creation within a folder. The date format should always follow the style of four digit years, two digit months and two digit days, i.e., YYYY-MM-DD = 2008-09-01 for September 1st, 2008.

Placing the year first allows for easy sorting (and ultimately easier disposal) by date. This can be very important with items such as tracking the history of a set of correspondence or when documents relating to regular meetings held over the course of a year are stored in a single folder.

<i>Instead of:</i>	<i>Use:</i>
11Nov2013Minutes.pdf	2004-10-31Agenda.pdf
16Feb2005Agenda.pdf	2005-02-16Agenda.pdf
25Dec2005Minutes.pdf	2005-12-25Minutes.pdf
31Oct2004Agenda.pdf	2008-07-04Enclosure1.pdf
4July2008Enclosure1.pdf	2013-11-11Minutes.pdf
(As the system sorts the files)	(As the system sorts the files)

Not all dates will require the actual day of creation to be included in the file name. Some may require just the month, the year or a date range. These should still follow the rules of year-first dating.

Examples:

YYYY-MM = 2008-09

YYYY = 2008

YYYY-YYYY = 2007-2008

When including the academic, calendar or fiscal year designation, use the two-letter abbreviations (AY, CY or FY) followed by the last two digits of the year.

Examples:

AuditNotes-FinService-FY11-FINAL

AuditNotes-FinService-CY08-DRAFT

AuditNotes-FinService-AY10-V2

6. Personal Names

Always place the surname first, followed by the initials or the first name when saving items that require the inclusion of a person's name.

Examples:

BrownP

JamesDavid

EdwardsA

JamesDonna

Smythel

JohnstonSam

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7. Placement of Words

Avoid placing words that indicate the format of a document at the beginning of the file name.

For example, placing the word “draft” at the start will group all files beginning with that word together, sorting unrelated items into groups. It is far more useful to have the subject at the start of the file name so related subjects will group together.

<i>Instead of:</i>	<i>Use:</i>
DraftFinancePlan.xls	BudgetReportDRAFT.doc
DraftBudgetReport.doc	BudgetReportFINAL.doc
FinalFinancePlan.xls	FinPlanDRAFT.xls
FinalBudgetReport.doc	FinPlanFINAL.xls
(As the system sorts the files)	(As the system sorts the files)

Indications of the version of the document such as DRAFT or FINAL should be used in all caps and placed at the end of a file name to make it easier to visually identify the status of the file. Some documents will benefit from different versioning identifiers such as DUE or PAID for some financial documents, or APPROVED for meeting minutes. Determining and applying these versioning terms for your own unit will increase the value of the file naming convention your unit devises.

Example:

AuditNotes-VPFin-2011-06-20-FINAL.docx

OfficeDepot-Invoice-12345-2018-12-05-PAID.pdf

StaffMgtMinutes-CFO-2015-02-12-APPROVED.doc

8. Documentation and Training

To ensure that all of the efforts taken in the previous steps are preserved, documentation should be created to capture the procedure for establishing various naming conventions for different file types. If the decision making process and the final results are recorded, they can be more easily passed on to workers in your office as reference material and more importantly used in training during the onboarding process. To assist with this step the Records Management office has created a **Recordkeeping Protocol** document, which can be accessed from the [Guidance](#) page of the Records Management and Privacy office website.

In Conclusion

No matter what file naming standards your unit elects to implement, only if all employees within your unit (current and future) apply these standards consistently in the regular course of business can your file naming convention be effective and useful. If you would like assistance in establishing your file naming conventions contact the Records Management and Privacy Office: recordsmanagement@queensu.ca