

# Appraisal: Deciding What to Digitize

This webpage will walk you through:

- How to decide which collections to prioritize for digitization
- How to determine if you have the legal right to put a collection online

## How to Decide What to Digitize

There are several factors you might want to consider when deciding which collections to prioritize for digitization:

**Uniqueness:** Unpublished, one-of-a-kind documentation of the history of your community and the Upper Peninsula. Only your heritage organization can preserve this material and make it accessible to the public!

**Materials that document underrepresented members of the community:** Archives traditionally have collected official government records and the records of the powerful. The lives of everyday people are often less visible. Consider prioritizing the digitization of the records of such groups as everyday people, ethnic organizations, immigrants, labor unions, grassroots social movements, religious organizations, and civic organizations.

**Popular and heavily-used materials:** If in-person patrons often ask for a certain collection, the collection will likely also be popular online! Popular collections often include photographs, yearbooks, and local history and genealogy materials. Digitizing heavily-used materials also reduces wear and tear on the original documents.

**Difficult-to-use or at-risk materials:** Digitization makes oversized materials like maps and blueprints more user-friendly. For audiovisual records, it eliminates the need for playback devices like cassette players or VCRs. Digitization can also help you preserve a record of materials in poor condition that are at risk of being completely lost. Consider prioritizing collections that are fragile, flaking, falling apart, or have mold, mildew, or pest damage. Most audiovisual formats inevitably decay over time and will eventually need to be digitized before their content is completely lost.

**Formats with short lifespans include:**

- Reel-to-reel tapes
- Cassette/8-track tapes
- VHS (and Betamax/U-matic) tapes
- CDs/DVDs
- Nitrate negatives/film: lifespan varies greatly, but deterioration accelerates quickly once

it starts so it needs to be checked periodically. Nitrate is also combustible and can be dangerous if not kept in cold storage conditions. If you have photo negatives from the mid-1940s or before or motion picture film from the early 1950s or before, you should check to see if they are nitrate. See the link below for information about how to identify and store nitrate film.

- Acetate negatives/film (AKA safety film) that smell like vinegar: Lifespan varies greatly, but deterioration accelerates quickly once “vinegar syndrome” starts. Acetate negatives and film need to be monitored regularly for signs of decay.
  - [How to identify nitrate and acetate negatives and their stages of deterioration](#)

## What Can't Be Published Online

Some collections cannot be published online due to privacy and copyright laws. To learn more, check out our [Privacy and Copyright page](#).