

LEARN



TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Introduction</u>	3
<u>Basic Principles of Preservation</u>	4
<u>Identification</u>	4
<u>Description and Cataloging</u>	5
<u>Storage</u>	6
<u>Reformatting and Digitization</u>	6
<u>Checking in With Your Media Over Time</u>	7

This is ***The Learn Guide***, or the first of five instructional manuals written for anybody with a collection of unidentified films, tapes, CDs or other media. If you are looking for guidance in salvaging your collection, this guide – and AV Compass as a whole – will give you direction.

Whether you do it on your own or seek the help of a preservationist or archive, AV Compass will empower you to take initial steps to preserve your collection.

AV Compass will make preservation seem less overwhelming by breaking the process down into doable tenets (five of them, to be exact). In using this resource, you will gain a basic understanding of how to identify, protect and digitize any number of audiovisual formats. Furthermore, you will be able to create an accurate inventory of your collection using the AV Compass inventory tool. In the end, you will have a detailed report of the items in your collection that can help you communicate your preservation goals and needs with others.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT PRESERVING YOUR OLD TAPES, FILMS, DISCS AND FILES?

Treat your media as you would your memories. Your memories make up who you are. They help you to appreciate where you have been, so you can see where you are going. If you value your media, you're saying, "My actions are worthy of holding dear. I am valuable." Letting your personal media fall through the cracks can be a bit like losing your memory or perhaps your identity.

The inherent worth of moving images and recorded sounds tends to reveal itself later on down the road. Whether you are cognizant of it or not, your media can be valuable to you, to your family, to your community, and perhaps to your business. It might even be of value to artists or researchers.

Moving images are the closest thing we have to a time machine, or to an invention that allows us to see or hear things from somebody else's perspective. Just by virtue of what the camera catches in its lens, or the microphone in its diaphragm – we can learn a great deal about each other and the world we live in.

We tend to take our ability to watch, listen to and enjoy our media for granted. When you look at your old tapes and films, think for a moment about playback. If you have working machines for playing back your media, how much longer will those machines be functional?

The case is no different for your films, CDs, and files on hard drives. If your films are improperly stored, they can warp and become decayed, proving difficult to recover and costing you excess money when you finally get around to preserving them. Try playing your old CD-Rs in ten years.

Many of us already have horror stories about plugging in a personal hard drive to find that it is no longer functional – and that we have lost our memories.

In the face of decay, obsolescence and technological failure, why not make the effort to save work that often took valuable time and effort to create? The longer we wait, the harder it will be to salvage content that lies on older media formats.

In the long run, you will thank yourself for taking active, ongoing baby steps to make preservation happen. You will save your personal history – your student films, your video art, your family or business history, your mix tapes – your activity, your feelings and your knowledge. You will learn about your past as well as the past that others have bequeathed to you. All it takes is a willingness to learn and an investment of time and resources.

This guide was written with the intent to breakdown preservation concepts in a simple way that everyone can understand – much in the way a recipe offers step-by-step instruction on how to make a soufflé or a casserole. But as with culinary arts, there are different techniques for accomplishing the same result. There is no one correct way to go about preservation – and, frankly, much is accomplished through trial and error. In preservation, the end result is not a soufflé, but a piece of media -- cared for so that it might be accessed and understood into the future.

The important thing to know is that you cannot treat one person or resource as the definitive authority on preservation practice. You must do your due diligence to find the process that works for you. There are certain tenets to strive for, but ultimately you can only do as much as your ambition, lifestyle, and budget allow for. AV Compass is merely meant to give you some suggestions.

With this in mind, here are the ***basic principles of preservation***. This expands upon the principles that were laid out in the first instructional video (*Step 1 – What is Preservation?*). AV Compass can help you tackle each principle for your own collection.

1.) IDENTIFICATION

When you open that box in your closet or take a look at your media shelf, you might notice tape or film ***formats*** that you know very little about. You do not know what the format is, much less how you would go about playing it back or getting it digitized. You might be utterly at a loss for why a certain file will not play on your computer or how digital files work on a basic level. If you are older, you might be reluctant to embrace newer digital formats. Conversely, if you are younger you might be terrified and utterly unsure of analog formats. Identifying the types of media in your collection is of primary importance because once you know what you have, you can gain a better understanding of what you must do to preserve it. AV Compass (in its identify section) will help you differentiate between formats, know the risks associated with

each, and provide advice regarding appropriate methods of treatment. Identification is the first step.

More than recognizing what formats you have, identification is about recognizing various types of **damage** and **decomposition** and how they can affect your media. Advanced decomposition can greatly set you back in your preservation efforts. Some decomposition cannot be treated just anywhere; some can make you sick; some can damage your playback equipment. It is important to have a foundational understanding of damage and decomposition moving forward with your preservation efforts. AV Compass will help you to know what formats are prone to certain types of decomposition and damage.

Equally important to identifying the materials in your collection is identifying something in *yourself*. You must have an understanding of your aspirations for your audiovisual collection. AV Compass will provide the structure you need to articulate your goals and it will supply you with the motivation you need for actually meeting them.

2.) DESCRIPTION AND CATALOGING

Do you know the titles, content and location of all the items in your collection? Knowing this information will help you to know the content of the tape without having to play it, which can be invaluable in a world where working playback equipment is often scarce. Since preservation can be costly, you will probably have to set **preservation priorities**. Having a sense what is on your tapes can help you to do this more efficiently. What memories will you go the distance to keep?

In short: good, specific **description** will help you contextualize what you have, helping you to know how you used it in the past, which will inform how you go about valuing and using it into the future.

In addition to featuring step-by-step instructional videos, this resource can also act as an **inventory tool** – allowing you to capture data about all of the items in your collection. What does this mean? It means that you can track the title, the description, the format, the damage and the story of the material – so you have a document that accounts for everything in your possession. Why is this important? It is important because you can give it to collaborators and they will be able to give you a better idea of how they can help you – and again, you will feel better equipped to set priorities.

Once you create your inventory, you will be able to export it as an excel file and print it, helping you to better keep track of your collection. Your inventory can also serve as a kind of to-do list, helping you track your preservation progress. Your inventory will be indispensable in helping you to develop a **preservation plan**.

If you can develop and then articulate a preservation plan, you are much further along in the process than many people ever get.

The videos and PDF guides presented here will echo the same refrain: having good labels and an accurate inventory can help you. Knowing what exists in your collection and what state it is in can help you take initial steps toward making preservation happen. Cataloging, description and planning are the first step toward taking action.

3.) STORAGE

Audiovisual preservation is generally two-pronged. It means holding onto your original materials so you have a record of the original format, but it also means ***transferring*** or ***reformatting*** your original materials, so that you can access the content even when the original item or carrier is rendered unplayable by obsolescence or damage or just.... time.

Think about why we hold onto anything. The idea behind preservation is to actively work to keep something alive so that it will continue to be useful into the future. To make sure that our audiovisual materials are useful to us into the future, we store them in ideal ***environments*** – environments that postpone the onset of decay. For example, we refrain from storing films in attics or unbelievably humid environments because we know this only causes them to decay more rapidly. Similarly, we store moving images in containers to keep dust from accumulating on them and causing issues in playback.

There are specific, equally important (and equally confusing!) steps to storing and holding onto digital files. The most crucial tenet is to have back-ups on hand in case one hard drive or computer fails, so that you have your materials in a safe place.

The PRESERVE PDF will give you tips for storing your materials for the long-term so that you can continue to access them. Without setting impossibly high standards, it will help you to set up a preservation storage space in your home or in your office where you can rest more comfortably knowing that you are not doing wrong by your materials.

4.) REFORMATTING AND DIGITIZATION

What is the difference between audiovisual media and other things we seek to preserve? Moving images and recorded sounds find themselves in the precarious position of being utterly dependent on machines in order to be seen and heard – otherwise they are just junk, stuff that people might use to decorate their apartments, completely ignoring the original meaning or intended use.

Having a tape or moving image or even a file that you cannot play is like having a car that no longer runs. Moving images should be seen. Sound recordings should be heard. When we talk about films, videotapes, audiotapes or discs, we tend to think only of the media item itself – separating it from the machinery that is essential to our viewing or listening to the content. The media object and the **playback machine** should be seen as equally important and completely co-dependent.

The problem is that equipment manufacturers are no longer make tape decks or projectors or CD players because there no longer exists an economic incentive for them to do so. In addition, the people with the skill sets necessary to build and service these machines continue to become fewer. The unfortunate situation is that older media items are in fact very hard to playback. This is especially unfortunate when valuable content resides on that videotape or audiotape or film. It will be costly to you, maybe even out of the realm of possibilities, to playback. The problem will only get worse with time, so it is important that if you have personal or business content that is valuable to you, you should get it reformatted or digitized sooner rather than later.

What does it mean to transfer or reformat or digitize? It essentially means that you are moving your content from the obsolete (or soon-to-be obsolete format), backing it up so that you have a means of accessing, seeing and hearing the content in the event that something happens to the original or older item. Where traditional conservation and archiving concerns itself with salvaging and maintaining the original item, reformatting is a different kind of preservation action that ensures that you can successfully *access* and benefit from the content.

5.) CHECKING IN WITH YOUR MEDIA OVER TIME

Think about this for a moment: the word preserve is a *verb*. This means that preservation is an active process. The AV Compass instructional videos will tell you that you should not leave a hard drive on a shelf and forget it. Preservation involves **inspecting** or checking your media from time to time – to make sure that it is still there and playing correctly.

This point is mentioned here, too, because it is important to check your digital files when you get them back from a vendor. You do this to make sure there are no anomalies or errors. You do it to hold the vendor, yourself and the media itself accountable – to make sure that it is what it purports to be. In business and manufacturing, we call this practice **quality control**.

Similarly, we have talked about inspecting your physical materials to ensure that there are no obvious signs of decay. Preservation is more than a verb. Preservation is a cycle. You inspect, catalog, plan, preserve and perform quality control in a fairly continuous process.

AV Compass will help you to understand what is involved in preservation; it will help you to understand and keep track of the audiovisual media in your possession, ultimately empowering you to make a *plan* for preserving your collection...

First and foremost, we want to remind you that preserving your materials is not something that you should aspire to, but something you should strive to make work for you – and only if you truly want to. If you decide to take the preservation plunge, it can be incredibly rewarding and AV Compass will be there at your side.

A compass will tell you which direction is which, but it will not tell you *where* to go or *how* to get there. That part is up to you. Preservation is something you must navigate and AV Compass is but one tool to use on your journey.