1. **What is a record?**

A record is a document that can provide permanent evidence about a past event. Some examples of records include:

- Birth certificates, marriage licenses, and death certificates (also known as [vital records](#)[2])
- Bank and credit card statements
- Investment records and statements
- Military discharge papers
- Real property deeds
- Automobile titles
- Insurance policies
- Medical information
- Employment related documents
- Purchase receipts and product warranties
- Wills and powers of attorney
- Tax returns and documents
- Important correspondence

2. **How long should I keep my records?**

You might be tempted to hang on to records permanently, especially if you’re storing them electronically. But, storing records you no longer need takes up space and makes it more difficult to find the records you need.

- **Proof of title or ownership.** Keep active until you sell the asset. Then, permanently archive the associated records.
- **Credit card and loan agreements.** Keep for as long as the account is active.
- **Credit card and bank statements.** After a year, destroy them unless they have tax significance.
- **Credit reports.** Keep until you order your next free annual credit report.
- **Home and car insurance policies.** Keep until you get your next policy in the mail.
- **Medical records.** Keep permanently.
- **Vital records and proof of person.** Keep permanently.
- **Employment records.** Every time you leave an employer, go through your file and destroy employee manuals, vacation requests, and other documents you won’t need moving forward. (Note: if you’re parting ways on bad terms, you may want to hang on to these documents a little longer, just in case you need to dispute something.) Save everything else. You will find it helpful during future job searches.
- **Old tax returns.** For tax records, the general rule is three years, because the IRS can audit your return within three years of its filing date. However, if the IRS suspects you of underreporting your gross income by at least 25% or if you’ve filed a fraudulent report, the agency has longer to challenge you (six years and indefinitely, respectfully). If your state has an income tax, you should also check with your state’s taxing authority to see if they require you to hold your tax records for a longer period of time. For example, in California, the Franchise Tax Board can issue a tax assessment for up to four years after the tax return’s filing date or due date. As a practical matter, this means that California residents would need to hold onto their records for an additional year beyond the federal requirements.
- **Other.** It depends on the record. If you aren’t sure, 10 years is a good retention period for legal reasons. That span
exceeds the statute of limitations for most purposes.

3. How do I destroy records I no longer need?

After you’ve determined that you no longer need a record, it is very important that you permanently destroy it. Otherwise, you run the risk of identity theft. Crooks can “dumpster dive” or obtain used computers, looking for sensitive personal information.

- **Paper records** - Shred or incinerate them. Always use a cross-cut, diamond-cut, or confetti-cut shredder [3]. Unlike strip-cut models in which the pieces can potentially be put back together, these shredders will produce much smaller pieces.

  If you have a large amount of shredding and are not able to handle it at home, consider taking it to a shredding facility that guarantees and certifies that your documents are fully destroyed. If you have a large amount of papers to destroy (this can occur, for example, when an elderly family member passes and the family must dispose of decades of documents), there are services that will send a shredding truck to your home. Fees are charged for both types of services.


- **Digital records** – Destroying digital records can be tricky, because “deleting” a document or file doesn’t really erase all of the information. If you’ve been properly storing your data, all of your files are encrypted anyway, but, it’s still a good idea to permanently destroy the information.
  
    - **On a computer** – Use specialized software such as Eraser [6] to remove specific files. To delete an entire hard drive’s data, use software like Darik’s Boot and Nuke [7]. Note: before recycling or selling your old computer, make sure you’ve successfully destroyed all personal data. You may be better off physically destroying the hard drive [8] and taking the computer and destroyed drive to an electronics recycling center.

    - **In the cloud** – Unfortunately, there is no way for you to control how the information is deleted from the hard drives of your cloud provider. You’ll need to contact your cloud provider and ask them about their data destruction policies. Before deciding to use a cloud provider, be sure to read its privacy policy and terms of service.

    - **On a portable storage device** – Flash drives use the same methods as computers. CDs and DVDs should be physically destroyed by breaking them into many pieces. Some shredders can do this. If you are destroying older media, such as floppy disks and tapes, remove the film and cut it into small pieces.


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