

Columbia University Libraries

Preservation Policy – Revised 2018

The responsibility to build research collections carries with it the obligation to ensure that these collections, both physical and digital, are permanently accessible. The Columbia University Libraries is committed to the preservation of its collections. Preservation is the action taken to prevent, stop, or retard deterioration of all library materials in all media and formats; to prevent their theft or loss; where feasible, to correct past damage to them; and, as necessary and appropriate, to change their format in order to preserve their intellectual content.

The comprehensive approach to preservation entails choosing the most appropriate method of preservation for every item. This is accomplished for physical materials through storage of materials in proper conditions, through careful handling and housing, through use of security systems designed to eliminate mutilation and theft, and through repair or replacement of damaged materials. Materials of unique aesthetic or historical value are best preserved in their original form if possible. There are many other materials whose value lies primarily in the information they contain. When repair of such materials becomes impossible or prohibitively expensive, their content may be preserved through digitizing or otherwise reformatting them. The indefinite storage of unusable materials within the Libraries cannot be justified.

Preservation is accomplished for digital content – whether “born-digital” or the result of digitization – through creation of appropriate master files and accompanying structural, descriptive, and administrative metadata, followed by ingest of the files and metadata into a well-managed digital archive that employs robust security measures, persistent identifiers, verification mechanisms, replication of the files in geographically distinct locations, and continuous monitoring and management of the files. Emulation, migration of files to new formats, and creation of new copies in new formats may be employed to render the content usable in diverse present and future electronic environments.

Columbia, as a research library, selects most materials for permanent value. Some, however, may not become permanent parts of the collection because they are of only short-term interest to scholars. Department and distinctive collection librarians and selection officers are responsible for developing and maintaining a collection which meets the needs of library users. Therefore, preservation decisions for the collection are best determined by these officers in consultation with each other, the Preservation & Digital Conversion Division, the Digital Library and Scholarly Technologies Division, reference staff, and others, including the faculty when appropriate. Preservation decisions must always be made within the context of overall collection policy, balancing the constraints of cost, historical and aesthetic and scholarly value, and user accessibility.