

organize today!

Ideas and tips to help you live
an organized, simpler life at work and home

Summer 2006

Organizing Photos & Memorabilia

Memorabilia come in all shapes and forms, from traditional (such as stamps, coins, and baseball cards) to off-the-wall unique (antique teapots, snow globes, and crazy hats). Whatever you collect, it provides a glimpse into your life and personality. But just as important as the items in the collection is the way you choose to organize and display them.

Photographs are another common kind of collection. And just like memorabilia, they can get out of control unless properly organized, stored, and displayed.

This issue of *Organize Today* will share tips to get your photos and memorabilia under control and looking great. With a little work today, your collections will be beautiful for years to come.

Photo crazy

How to gather, sort, store, and maintain
your photo collection of any size



Do you have photos spilling out of shoeboxes, cluttering up closets, or crumbling in the attic? Now is the perfect time to get your collection under control with the following simple process. Recognize that it will take some time — especially if you have decades' worth of photos to organize — but with regular maintenance, your collection will offer a lifetime of enjoyment for you and your family.

(Please note that this article details the first steps to take before tackling any scrapbooking project, but scrapbooking need not be the end result. Creating albums is not for everyone, as it can be time-consuming, expensive, and even frustrating. So just try the easy organizing process listed below and see what happens!)

1: Think of the goal. Before you begin, recognize *why* you are starting this process. Perhaps it's to preserve and share memories. Or maybe you just want to eliminate those scattered piles of photos and negatives once and for all. Whatever your reasons, keep them in mind throughout the organization process.

2: Gather photos in one place. The first step to creating an organized collection is to gather the photos all in one place. Check everywhere for hidden photos — attics, basements, files, closets, under the beds, and in current non-archival albums. Decide on a large, central work surface, such as the dining room table or an out-of-the-way floor. You'll want a space that will be undisturbed so you won't feel rushed to finish.

3: Sort the photos. This is the part that will take the longest, but it goes quickly once you set up your system.

Collections under control



Collections can look like work of arts, or they can look like piles of junk. It's all in the presentation and preservation. The key is deciding what to keep and setting limits, while properly storing and artfully displaying your collectibles. Whether you collect Barbie dolls or Bobbleheads, you'll want to follow these tips to keep the collection clutter-free and under control.

First off, gather together all your collectibles from one category. (If you collect multiple types of things, only tackle one genre at a time. You don't want to be working on coins and books at the same time.) By doing this, you'll be able to really see what you have. Some people are surprised by the volume they've accumulated once they see it all together.

To help you sort the cherished treasures from the not-so-special others, ask yourself, "Which of my keepsakes are *really* worth keeping?" For example, a tea cup given to you by your grandmother may hold significantly more memories than one you picked up at a garage sale. A rare baseball card worth lots of money might hold more value than entire boxes of run-of-the-mill cards. A thoughtfully written thank-you card from a dear friend holds more sentiment than a birthday card simply signed, sealed, and delivered. Traditional organizing strategies might ask you, "When was the last time you used this?" But for collections, this question is not appropriate. Collections are not only for use, but also for simple enjoyment. Allow yourself to part with items that are doing nothing but taking up space, time, and/or money. By clearing out those that you don't truly love, you appreciate your favorites even more. Remember, it's okay to let go of things, even if they were gifts from loved ones. You're not throwing away their love; you're just making room for more!

Once you've chosen what items to discard, find good homes for them. You'll feel better knowing someone else is enjoying your cast-offs. Round up your family and friends and let them choose their favorites. Donate to your local library, women's shelter, elementary and high schools, or even Goodwill or the Salvation Army. Sell valuable things to specialty stores or on eBay. And then maintain this new, manageable amount by following the in/out rule: For each new item brought home, an old one must go. Remember, the less you keep, the more likely that everything in your collection will be meaningful and loved. Don't be afraid to give or throw things away.

Decide on a space to display the collection, and confine it to that area only. By doing this, you'll help limit yourself a bit. (As you probably know, collections can sometimes get out of control!) You'll want to display if you have room, if items can be kept safe while on display, and if you really like them enough to look at every day. Before you designate a display area, you'll need to know how much space your collection takes up. Do you need a shelf or an entire bookcase? Make things look like they belong together by grouping things with similar color, shape, and size.



Watch for excess. When collections turn into hoarding (for example, hundreds of butter tubs, years' worth of old newspapers, or thousands of books) it may be time to call in a professional organizer who specializes in chronic disorganization.

The rest can be stored. For safe storage of remaining items, keep them away from light, heat, extreme cold, and humidity.

Reading resources: *Who Gets Grandma's Yellow Pie Plate?* by M. Stum; *Conquering Chronic Disorganization* by J. Kolberg.

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The most common way to sort is chronologically. This works well for most people because our minds tend to think chronologically. As you sort through the photos, place them in labeled stacks, envelopes, or boxes by year. Once sorted by year, you can go one step further and sort again by month if you desire. If narrowing down to a specific year is difficult, try just sorting the photos into decades. If you're overwhelmed by the sorting process, start with the most recent ones first and save the older ones for later.

Another way to sort is by broad category or theme. For example, you might sort by events such as vacations, holidays, or weddings, or by family members or sides of the family. If you run across photos that stump you, pop them in a "mystery photo" box for later research at family reunions.

Just like any organizing project, it's important to group similar objects together so you can really see what and how much you have. Once the sorting process is complete, see if you have duplicates you can toss or share with someone else. If you have 25 photos of your son's third birthday, perhaps you can share some with the grandparents, or enlarge and frame your favorites. And remember, it's okay to toss any photos that are out of focus, dark, off-center, or that you just don't like.

Make this process as fun as possible, inviting family or friends over to help. Play some music, have some snacks (just be sure to always wash your hands before handling photos), and stop when you get tired or bored. Set a regular schedule to work on the sorting process so you don't lose steam.

4: Store them properly. You've made the time investment to sort your photos. Now make sure they're preserved for generations to come by using archival-quality storage materials. Some types of storage include photo storage boxes, accordion file boxes, 3-ring binders filled with photo sheets, and heavy-duty plastic (poly) envelopes. Your local office supply or scrapbooking store will have a variety to choose from. Whatever you choose, look for products that are acid-free, archival, lignin-free, and PVC-free. Store the photos away from light, heat, and humidity. (Basements and attics are no-nos.) Now your photos are ready for scrapbooking, or simply to enjoy as is!

5: Maintain the system. As new photos enter your home, be sure to sort and store them according to your new system.

Quick photo tips

- When you first get your photos back, weed out those that you don't like, and discard them.
- It's helpful to label the backs of photos with names, dates, and locations. Be sure to use an acid-free, photo-safe pencil or pen.
- Keep your negatives separate from your photos. Place them in archival envelopes and label. Keep them in a fire-proof safe so you'll be able to recreate all your precious photo memories in the event of a fire or other disaster.
- Limit future photo clutter by using a digital camera and printing only the photos you love. If you store the files on your computer, be sure to organize them there by creating categories. And back up your files regularly!
- Archive-quality, decorative photo boxes are a simple, inexpensive way to sort *and* store photos. Choose a color to suit your decor, label the front of each box, and store the boxes on a book shelf.
- Retrospect by Smead (www.retrospectbysmead.com) has an Expanding Photo Organizer to sort, transport, and store 200 photos. Creative Memories (www.creativememories.com) has a great Power™ Sort Box that holds up to 2,400 5x7 photos. Many office supply stores, bed and bath stores, and discount stores also carry photo storage products.

Kids' art collections: Save the best

Wondering what to do with the wonderful compilation of kids' art? Parents should learn that they don't have to save every single project made by a child. Here are a few great ideas to keep the memories but save some space.



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- As new artwork enters your home, ask yourself: “Is this different than other works we’ve already saved?” “Does it give me a glimpse into my child’s uniqueness?” “Does it make me laugh or cry?” Keep only those that really make an impact. Let the rest go so you can appreciate the best.
- Start an art project box for each child. Oversized professional artist’s portfolios work great. Your local art or office supply store will have a variety of sizes and materials (leather-bound, cardboard) to choose from in a wide range of prices. Or place schoolwork in a drawer or even an unused pizza box. Another option is to use underbed storage boxes (which can be placed anywhere in the home) labeled with the years or grades of artwork they contain. As projects come home, save the favorites. At year’s end, help kids select their top 10–20 favorites to save. Then, take photos or videotape of three-dimensional art and toss the rest.
- Post artwork temporarily to give the family a chance to admire. To create a fancy refrigerator display, purchase a few 8x10 and 5x7 cardboard mattes. Glue plastic sleeves behind them to hold kids’ pictures, and attach magnets so they stick to the fridge. You can easily remove and rotate art as new creations arrive.
- Start an Art of the Month Club. Have kids select one piece of artwork each month to give to family and friends. (Grandparents love this idea!)