

Using Records Retention Schedules: How to Choose Between Multiple Records Series

Purpose: Provide guidance to state agencies and local government entities on the general rules for choosing the correct records series if it seems like several different series could apply.

1. Ask what “story” the records tell

The agency function or activity that a record documents often influences the retention period. For example, the retention requirements for licensing/certification records depend on whether the records document an agency *receiving* an operational license or an agency *granting* a license to a member of the public. Ask clarifying questions about the record, such as:

- Why was this record created, received, or used? What is its overall purpose to the agency?
- Who was doing what to whom? For example, was an agency *presenting* or *receiving* a type of training?
- What was the outcome of this transaction? For example, was a permit *accepted* or *rejected*?

In general, internal agency management records often fall under the *State Government General Records Retention Schedule* or the *Local Government Common Records Retention Schedule (CORE)*. Records documenting an agency’s outward mission or duties often fall under agency-specific or sector-specific records schedules.

2. Check agency- or sector-specific records schedules first

Agency- or sector-specific records retention schedules should take into account any requirements that are unique to an agency. For example, the Local CORE records schedule includes records series for general employee misconduct records, but entities such as law enforcement agencies and school districts have different legal retention requirements for certain employee misconduct records. These unique retention requirements are addressed in their sector-specific records schedules.

3. Choose the longest applicable retention period

Agencies can opt to use the records series with the longest applicable retention period if it is difficult to determine which records series to use, or if multiple series could apply to a set of records. However, this approach could be burdensome if one extensive retention period is applied to a complex, voluminous group of records. Agencies can work with the State Archives to determine which records need to be retained long-term and which can be dispositioned sooner.

4. Ask the State Archives for help

The State Archives is always available to answer records retention questions. Questions from agencies let us know if we need to issue further guidance on a subject. They also help alert us if we need to update or introduce new records series.

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from
Washington State Archives:**

**www.sos.wa.gov/archives
recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov**