APA DIVISION 15 PRESENTS

▶ ONE TIP

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"TAKE TIME TO PRUNE"

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Over forty years, I have been curious, dedicated, and enthusiastic about the role of organization in reading and learning with nonfiction texts. It is important to teach students how to follow the logical structure of text and differentiate main ideas from major supporting details—and, particularly, from peripheral details. Throughout my career, my problem has been transferring this "pruning" concept to the organization of my offices at work and home.

As a result, I approach retirement finding myself saddled with a seemingly endless stream of hard drives and file cabinets filled with multiple drafts of papers (my own and others), final copies of applications, multiple iterations of reports, student papers, teaching materials, professional reviews, etc.

Ultimately, the accumulation of such volume runs adverse to its purpose; I now find retrieval for most items an extremely cumbersome process. The more information you have connected to an idea, the slower the retrieval. The older you are, the slower your speed of processing. Thus, over the life span, there is an even greater need for efficient, organized memory structures and deletion of what is no longer relevant.

And so, with my "tip," I am advocating for career-long, systematic approach to file organization—a process which *necessarily* includes pruning over time. This is the tip I most wish I had read and absorbed at the beginning of my career.

Pruning: What to Keep, How to Decide, and Duration. Context and current guidelines and practices will need to be considered for pruning. For example, authors of articles for APA journals follow standards for availability of data for at least 5 years after publication. However, I have had requests about intervention data from national research agencies up to 9 years after publication in the *Journal of Educational Psychology.* Similar to guidelines for tax or property records, simple situations and single purposes for retention have shorter times for retention than data used for varying purposes. Your university or college probably has links to policy schedules for keeping general and financial records. With more university instruction and records online, faculty need to keep fewer records themselves. For example, with student applications online, you can shred the materials needed after the conclusion of admission committee meetings.

My avoidance of pruning a large file cabinet in my office due to sentimental attachment to data published in a 1989 book falls outside the limits of rational pruning. Try to avoid such long-term fruit from the lack of pruning! It will be easier on your back and recycling resources. Additionally, it may spare you from sinus infections as you wildly sift through dusty files and equipment during your last months in office.

Specifically, I recommend the following approach:

Save Minimal Student Work**:** Do not stuff all of the teaching materials, extra alternative handouts, or completed assignments in a file cabinet (or even online files). The minimal time to save student work and grades is one year at Penn State in case there is an appeal. After a year, shred student work. I have asked one or two students a semester if they would be willing to have me to post their paper as an example of a stellar effort. That has been a productive approach, but it compounds after 30 years without pruning old class files. Consider saving one after five years and delete the others. Note that Penn State policy indicates that advisor files should be shredded three years after the student's last activity.

Course materials and syllabi: I was somewhat amazed by a university Curriculum Record chart for syllabi noting, "Last activity + 10 years; faculty may retain all versions as personal papers." My lack of pruning did not fall short of this policy. Another bit of information in the policy charts was that the retention period of deferred grade forms is one year.

For Recommendations for Students and Colleagues: Little clutter is involved and repeated requests are frequent. At most, keep the most recent letter per active mentee/colleague for 10 years.

For Applications**:** Delete applications after awards or acceptance decisions are made. Be sure to check for multiple downloads of folders of applicants and delete them. Save your own grant applications, technical reports, and publications as long as you like, but—ultimately—unfunded grant proposals can be pruned after five years with minimal separation distress! My university requires only three years of storage for rejected research proposals.

For Professional Service**:** After all professional work has been archived (e.g., Policy and Procedure changes for Division 15), wait at least a year after your term and then delete all files. For Promotion and Tenure Committees, once the reports are submitted, delete all of your files.

For Data Sets: Scan or digitize your data sets and store them electronically when possible. Delete pilot data after three years.

These are recommendations I now wish I had followed throughout my career—but, I suggest experimenting with your own needs, so long as you *do* build and maintain a pruning schedule. As for me, I now feel ready to head to the recycling bin with my formerly precious box of 5" x 8" index cards filled with key points from references for my 1974 dissertation!

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studies learning, reading and writing, and decision-making across the lifespan. She also teaches learners of various ages and backgrounds a reading strategy focusing on using organization in text (the structure strategy) to improve their reading comprehension of nonfiction. Her pioneering research, applications, and interventions have influenced numerous domains and promoted better reading comprehension. For example, Meyer and Wijekumar developed and tested an Intelligent Tutor to teach the Structure Strategy (ITSS) to elementary and middle school students—as well as adapting ITSS to English Language Learners. Professor Meyer is a Fellow in the American Psychological Association (Divisions 3, 15, & 20), American Educational Research Association, Association for Psychological Science, Society for Text and Discourse, and is a 2019 inductee into the Reading Hall of Fame.