

# Saving and Archiving Images

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Monday, 17 March 2008

I learned a painful lesson about two years ago: those backups we make for safekeeping aren't as safe as we might think. Allow me to explain: After several months spent revising a book that I had written back in the mid-1970s, I archived all the data and forgot about it. Who knew? Maybe I'd need to release a new edition someday. Lo and behold, that day came eight years later. Unfortunately, the aged backup tape had deteriorated and was completely unreadable. End of story--literally.

Granted, I'm talking about a book rather than family photos, but data in all its many forms is still just a collection of ones and zeros to your computer. So you need to make absolutely certain that your precious pictures are safe, secure, and up-to-date.

## Back Up There, Partner

Although film fades and prints can become dog-eared, the process of storing your backup negatives, slides, and photographs is relatively easy and straightforward--whether you keep them in a photo album, a filing cabinet, or a shoebox. But storing and retrieving digital images can be complicated and a little trickier. There are several important questions to ponder: What media should you use? Is it better to place it on an online storage site? Is the file format compatible with your current graphics software? Do you have the corresponding drive or device, plus a properly equipped PC that can read and restore it? Do you know where everything is?

Early on, image files from digital cameras were small and tightly compressed, so it was a relatively easy matter to back them up onto cheap, ubiquitous floppies. However, these files have mushroomed in size with the introduction of significantly higher-resolution CCDs, along with larger-density, removable memory cards and the use of file formats that maximize image quality by requiring little or no compression. Also, the explosive growth of sites for posting photos on the Web means that people are shooting and saving far more photographs than ever.

Since most computers now offer large hard drives, most people simply save images directly onto their PCs. This may make life simple in the short run, but you're living on the edge, my friends. You may run out of space on your computer, or even worse, you could fall victim to one of the axioms of Murphy's Law--computers will crash at the worst possible times.

## Compact Archives

Before it comes to that though, let's look at some other solutions. The latest storage strategy is to upload those precious images to an Internet server. Scores of e-photo services offer free or inexpensive sites to safely park your digital images. Besides freeing up disk space, this allows you to edit your images online, share them with friends and family, and even order high-quality prints. However, there are some serious issues you must consider before transferring all your images to Web storage: First, unless you have lots of time and a high-speed Internet connection, it may take more than one sitting to transfer your images to the Web. Next, while the storage service may now be free, that e-photo company might begin charging an arm and a leg sometime in the future.

Even more disconcerting is that in this dot-com-by-night age, who knows if the site where you stored your images will still be around in a couple of weeks. Risks aside, this option is a convenient way to share large batches of images with family members, coworkers, or whomever you choose.

## Storage Tips

Let me leave you with some general survival tips for backing up your data, suggestions that I could have used a couple of years ago:

- Whether you're using CDs or disks, try to store your files in a cool, dry place.
- The safest place to store data is either in safety deposit boxes or in fireproof home safes.
- Zipping up unused files is an easy way to trim space on a hard drive.
- Try to save your images in industry standard JPEG and TIF formats.
- Change with the formats. When new standards come up, such as JPEG 2000, update your pictures.
- Always check the date of a file to avoid copying over an image.
- Maintain a photo database so that you can easily track down where you've stashed images.

In the meantime, I'm dreading having to start my book again--ugh--from scratch.