How to Organize Your Digital Files With a Naming and Folder S

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A practical 32-step guide to building a file system that stays usable: decide what it has to do, make a shallow folder skeleton, move the existing mess safely, make finding things reliable, and keep the whole setup working months later.

Decide What the System Has to Do

1. **Write down every place a file can land**
   Write down every place a file can land.
2. **Pick one home for work in progress**
   Pick one home for work in progress.
3. **Define what finished means**
   Define what finished means.
4. **Put the date first, written year-month-day**
   Put the date first, written year-month-day.
5. **Use short words a stranger would understand**
   Use short words a stranger would understand.
6. **Write the rule on one card and keep it visible**
   Write the rule on one card and keep it visible.

Build a Folder Skeleton You Will Not Outgrow

7. **Create four to six top folders by area of life**
   Create four to six top folders by area of life.
8. **Put every project inside exactly one area**
   Put every project inside exactly one area.
9. **Keep one Inbox for unsorted arrivals**
   Keep one Inbox for unsorted arrivals.
10. **Cap nesting at three levels**
    Cap nesting at three levels.
11. **Name the last level by year or by status**
    Name the last level by year or by status.
12. **Add an archive only when a project truly ends**
    Add an archive only when a project truly ends.

Move the Existing Mess Safely

13. **Make a full backup before the first move**
    Make a full backup before the first move.
14. **Sort one folder at a time, starting with the smallest**
    Sort one folder at a time, starting with the smallest.

15. **Delete duplicates only after comparing them**

    Delete duplicates only after comparing them.

16. **Let version history replace version numbers in names**

    Let version history replace version numbers in names.

17. **Give scans and photos a subject label, not a camera label**

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18. **Clear the downloads folder on a fixed weekday**

    Clear the downloads folder on a fixed weekday.

19. **Leave system and application folders alone**

    Leave system and application folders alone.

Make Finding Things Boringly Reliable

20. **Learn three search operators in your file manager**

    Learn three search operators in your file manager.

21. **Add tags only where the system supports them**

    Add tags only where the system supports them.

22. **Pin the three folders you open every day**

    Pin the three folders you open every day.

23. **Set a default save location in each app you use**

    Set a default save location in each app you use.

24. **Turn on automatic backup for the whole home folder**

    Turn on automatic backup for the whole home folder.

25. **Empty the Inbox on a fixed day each week**

    Empty the Inbox on a fixed day each week.

26. **Test a restore once and note what happened**

    Test a restore once and note what happened.

Keep It Working Months Later

27. **Do a ten-minute monthly tidy, not a yearly overhaul**

    Do a ten-minute monthly tidy, not a yearly overhaul.

28. **Archive by year and keep the current year visible**

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29. **Keep a short log of rules you changed**

    Keep a short log of rules you changed.

30. **Write a one-page rule sheet for anyone sharing the folders**

    Write a one-page rule sheet for anyone sharing the folders.

31. **Share a link instead of mailing another attachment**

    Share a link instead of mailing another attachment.

32. **Retire the system gently when a tool changes**

    Retire the system gently when a tool changes.

Sources

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Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Organize-Your-Digital-Files-With-a-Naming-and-Folder-System. Corre