

Chapter 6:

File Management

Chapter Outline:

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§ 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The client file is critical. It is where all documents, notes, copies of research, pleadings, correspondence, and other material related to a client's case reside.

Keeping track of these documents is an important part of a legal secretary's job. The more organized the client's file, the more organized you will be as a legal secretary. And the more organized you are as a legal secretary, the more valuable you will be to the law firm.

It's true.

§ 6.2 MAINTAINING YOUR CLIENT'S FILE

As a legal secretary, you will keep all materials, including notes, prepared documents, and copies of relevant cases and statutes in the appropriate panels of the client's file. The following are helpful when maintaining a file folder for the client:

- *a legal-size classification file with two inserts and six panels; they usually come in packets of five so one packet will serve several students*
- *expandable files, which may be found at most office supply stores (not required)*
- *a two-hole punch (very helpful)*
- *if purchasing your own folder, also purchase small labels for naming each panel*



While every law firm has its own system of file maintenance, there are some general guidelines.

Most law firms use either standard legal files with panels for the various documents, or expandable files in which individual folders contain the various documents. Some firms even use a combination of traditional legal files and expandable files. The most common file is the classification file or folder. Some have only one insert, which results in four panels.

The more common classification file used by law firms has two inserts, resulting in six panels, each with a two-pronged bracket at the top. While the form and organizational order may vary, most arrange the material within the files into the same elements. Each element is organized in its own panel of the file.



The following panels typically make up the client file:

Panel 1. Correspondence

Letters, copies of faxes, and copies of emails should be collected as a group under correspondence. Attempt to organize it by date, with the older correspondence on the bottom so new material can simply be added on top. Most firms do not use indexes for correspondence, but it is a good idea to do so, since an index allows for instant access to materials and acts as a document inventory.

Panel 2. Instruments

This panel is for contracts, wills, leases, titles, and other such material. Never punch holes or staple original documents. Consider using a hanging pocket to hold the documents. Create a hanging pocket with a 9 x 12 inch envelope. Leaving the top flap open, create a two-hole punch, then insert the envelope in the Instruments panel of the file.

Panel 3. Work Product

This panel is for material created as part of the litigation process, such as handwritten and typed notes, messages, internal office memoranda, etc.

Panel 4. Exhibits

Exhibits are materials that will be presented to the court. Never punch holes in exhibits. Use a hanging pocket, as described in the discussion of the Instruments panel above. Exhibits that are too large to be kept in the client file should be maintained in a separate expandable folder or other appropriate location, with a reference to that location in the client file.

Panel 5. Pleadings

Collect all pleadings, motions, orders, proposed orders, and anything else filed with the court in this panel of the file. Keep a comprehensive pleading index.

Panel 6. Discovery

Collect all discovery requests and responses in this section. An index is critical. You may also want to include sign-in and sign-out sheets for documents taken from the file. This can be helpful for both the pleadings and discovery sections when several attorneys and paralegals are working on a file.

Organizational Hints for Files

Use an index as often as possible.

Write the document index number on the bottom corner of each document (in pencil), use numbered separators, or attach numbered tags to the documents.

Keep the file up-to-date.

File and index all materials as soon as they are created or received to avoid loss, removing them only when you are ready to turn them in for grading.

Use pencils, not ink

If writing on a document, do so only in pencil.

Do not alter or mutilate

Never write on an exhibit or instrument, either in pen or pencil. If a notation is needed, use a sticky note attached to the exhibit.

Where is that document?

The goal of the client file is to make materials easy to access.

Sample Client Numbers

Client Number 08-011.034

In the above example:

08- is the year.

011 is the client number assigned by the firm.

.034 is the matter number. For instance, this would appear to be the 34th matter the firm has handled for Client 011.