

Mennonite Archives of Ontario

About electronic archival storage

For a multitude of reasons, printing to paper is still the best option for long term preservation of archival records. However, this is not possible for all records. Audiovisual recordings and digital photographs need to remain in a machine-readable format that can be played using ever-changing technology.

Optical Media

“Optical media” are usually glass or plastic discs that store digital data and use polarized light to record and retrieve that data. The most common in use today are compact discs (CDs) and Digital Video (or Versatile) Discs (DVDs). They can be used to store computer files, audiovisual recordings, photographs and other images. When using optical discs for storage, remember that:

1. Storage conditions for optical media require a combination of 20–50% relative humidity (RH) and temperatures between -10 and 23°C. In addition, it is important to avoid large, rapid fluctuations in temperature and RH because these changes can promote delamination of disc layers, especially on discs that are poorly manufactured.
2. CDs and DVDs should be stored in standard polystyrene plastic “jewel” cases that are 10 mm (3/8 in.) thick. Store the jewel cases vertically on their edges and away from direct lighting. Standard commercial CDs and DVDs are not sensitive to light. However, CD-Rs and DVD-Rs may contain light-sensitive dyes as recording material.
3. Don’t use stick-on labels. If you use markers, make sure they’re CD/DVD safe.
4. The Canadian Conservation Institute has additional recommendations for the care of electronic media here: <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/care-objects/electronic-media/electronic-media-collections-small-museums-archives.html>
5. Finally, don’t forget to record information *about* the data you are recording! What format are the files on your CD? When they were first recorded? Who recorded them? If they are photographs, who is in the picture? When was it taken? And so on. If possible, record this information within the files themselves, as well as elsewhere, such as in a printed list. Don’t think “Oh, I’ll remember.” You probably won’t.