

conquer paper pileup

Feeling adrift in endless paper? Stop flailing and start taking control. This four-step approach will help you rediscover your desktop.

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OPPOSITE: A streamlined workstation combines the tools that let you easily act on, delegate, trash, or file every piece of paper that comes your way. RIGHT: A three-tray in-box sorts papers by required action. BELOW LEFT: Bulletin boards dedicated to the current week or one person target specific deadlines or family members. BELOW MIDDLE: Respond efficiently with a correspondence kit that gathers stamps, envelopes, address labels, and other writing essentials. BELOW RIGHT: A tickler file system sorts to-do items into monthly and daily folders.

Even though a sheet of paper is only 0.004 inches thick, several can add up to bury your desktop under miles of bills, letters, reminders, and other important documents. “Paper pileup is the No. 1 reason that new clients call me,” says Kathy Jenkins, Certified Professional Organizer and president of Come To Order.

Although dealing with paper takes time and effort, Jenkins’ approach is straightforward and stress-free because it limits your responses to paper to one of the following four:

Response #1: Act on it. Active papers—documents such as unpaid bills, invitations, coupons, practice schedules—need to be out in the open where everyone who needs to can see and respond to them. Systems and tools to organize active papers are numerous and include vertical file holders, in-boxes, wall pockets, tickler files, and many more. Try one or two that appeal to you for a few weeks and see how it goes. Just don’t stop trying to find solutions that prompt you to act.

Response #2: Delegate it. If a document requires someone else’s knowledge or action, hand it off. Personal mailboxes or in-boxes are effective tools. Be sure to communicate to others what they’re supposed to do—in person or via a note.

Response #3: Trash or shred it. “Only keep what you need or want to keep; get rid of the rest,” Jenkins says. Avoid future paper heaps by adding trash cans in the spots you typically sort mail, pay bills, and complete office to-do tasks. Establish a paper-shredding station in your office with a small shredder plugged in and a bin to gather waste.



“Stop making piles and more piles. Respond to paper in one of four ways.”

—KATHY JENKINS, CPO, PRESIDENT OF COME TO ORDER





LEFT: Invest in a sturdy two-drawer, letter-size file cabinet that's at least 23 inches deep and has fully extending drawers. BELOW LEFT: Rather than destroy documents, stamp out personal information. BELOW MIDDLE: Shredding scissors are a quick alternative to a bulky paper shredder when you need to destroy only a few pages. BELOW RIGHT: Use a two-section wall calendar to track events on the upper portion and assign tasks to specific family members each week on the lower portion.

Response #4: File it. Well-organized file cabinets don't happen overnight, so be gentle yet firm with yourself when setting up your household file. Jenkins recommends setting aside one to two hours to set up your filing system and create all the labels, then dedicating 15- to 20-minute sessions over several weeks to filing documents.

"People always want to jump in and start making piles and throwing out papers, but that's not the most effective approach," she says. "Take the time to consider your family's needs and build the entire system before doing any filing." After you buy colored hanging folders and 1/3-cut manila folders, make a list of all the tabs and files you'll need, then create them. See "Four must-have sections for your file cabinet"

Consider everyone's filing needs, but your household filing system should follow the preferences of whoever works most frequently with the documents.



(opposite) for details on the sections and tabs you'll most likely need to create.

Plan to write all labels by hand. Yes, you can purchase preprinted label kits, but your filing needs are unique. Writing your own labels lets you customize your system and helps you get to know the documents you're keeping. Also, you can quickly add folders or tabs without turning on your computer and loading your printer with label paper.

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4 must-have sections for your file cabinet

The top drawer of your household filing cabinet is the spot for important papers you need to be able to get your hands on quickly. Use one manila folder for each account, person, or topic; divide the drawer into four color-coded sections, in the following order.

- 1 Financial (green hanging folders and left-hand tabs).** Organize documents related to incoming or outgoing money first. Create tabs for banking, credit cards, investments/retirement, mortgage, employment (one file for each family member), property assessments, taxes (current year only), utilities, and wills/estate planning.
- 2 Insurance/Vehicles (blue hanging folders and left-hand tabs).** Create folders for everything related to insuring your cars, house, life, and health. You can also cluster vehicle-specific files such as loans, registration, taxes, and maintenance.
- 3 Personal (yellow hanging folders and center tabs).** Start with one file for each family member, including each pet. Create additional tabs and folders that suit your family's needs, such as education and medical records (one file for each family member), church, sports, hobbies, and vacation ideas.
- 4 Home (red hanging folders and right-hand tabs).** Use this final section to organize records of past and future home projects, including decorating, furniture purchases, home improvements, repairs, landscaping, and homeowner association details.

REMEMBER: Some important papers you need to save don't belong in your file cabinet's top drawer. Protect important legal documents in a safety deposit or fire-safe box. Store warranties in expanding folders in a lower drawer.

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→ How Long Should I Keep It?

The old rules for file retention no longer apply. Get our handy chart with guidelines of what to keep, how long to keep it, and where to store it safely at bhg.com/paper.