

Back Up Your Writing - And the Rest of Your Life!

by Moira Allen

At the grocery store the other day, I succumbed to the temptation to pick up a copy of *People Magazine* to read its coverage of the effects of Hurricane Katrina. One article in particular caught my eye: A photo feature on the items evacuees felt they absolutely had to take with them, even when they had to leave everything else behind.

As a writer, to me this question would be a no-brainer: My laptop! Not because I have a particular fondness for that piece of hardware, but because that laptop holds something very important to me: My work. I can replace clothes, books, household items -- but I can't replace the words that I've written over the years, particularly those that haven't been published.

My laptop holds a great deal more than words, however. It also holds my entire output of digital photography. It holds my business records. In fact, it holds a rather large chunk of my life -- a chunk that I no longer have to worry about losing in the event of a disaster.

Hurricane Katrina is a wake-up call to all of us, a reminder that in an instant, you can lose everything you own. But if you plan ahead, you can ensure that some of the most important elements of your life are protected against just about any kind of disaster -- even if you *can't* take it with you. Here's some tips on the types of things you can preserve.

Back Up Your Work!

Every writer knows how important it is to back up files of your "work in progress." But how often do we actually do it? (I say "we," because I've realized that I have gotten lazy and complacent about making frequent backups.)

I've found that the easiest way to remind myself of what needs to be backed up at the end of the day, or the end of the week, is to keep two separate "backup" folders/directories on my hard drive. One folder is titled "Daily Backup," and is for those files that get changed as often as every day, such as my spreadsheets that track business expenses and income. At the end of the day, before shutting down my computer, I make a copy of each file that I've worked with and drag it to the backup folder.

The second folder is titled "One-Time Backup." This folder is for items that are unique -- i.e., that don't get changed every day. When I write a new article or column, it goes into this folder. If I download an article of interest from the Web, it might go here. If someone sends me a photo that I want to keep, it will go here. I keep these items separate because, once this folder has been transferred to my laptop, it will be emptied for the next batch of items, unlike my "daily backup" folder.

Ideally, I know that I should transfer these files over to storage every night, but of course I don't! Instead, about once a week I use a flash storage drive or "data stick" to copy the two backup folders. My "work" computer is downstairs; my laptop (which is my photography and "play"

computer) is upstairs, and the flash drive is perfect for transporting files from one to the other. There's no way I could easily disconnect the hard drive of my main computer in an emergency, but I know that I can easily grab my laptop -- and that it will always be no more than a week behind in archiving my records.

Back Up Your *old* Work!

It's easy to see the need to back up your work in progress: The last thing you want is to lose the work you've done on that article that is due in a week, or half the novel that you've been sweating over for the past year. But it's also a good idea to back up your older work. If you haven't made a backup copy of older articles, stories, or whatever, consider doing so, even though you may not think that you'll ever "need" them again. If something happens to your hard drive, that work could be gone forever. This is especially true of anything that you've written but haven't published.

You can also back up work that you created before you had a computer. My older writings have been lurking in my file boxes for years, typed on all sorts of interesting scrap paper. A part of me likes to imagine the day when archivists will be thrilled to discover the genuine, original, hand-typed copy of the Gothic novel I started to write in college -- and that is typed on the back of some of my old college essays -- but the practical side of me says "scan it and toss it!" The same applies to a host of other literary efforts that will mean nothing to anyone but me.

It's also not a bad idea to scan your clips. With a color scanner, you can create Adobe PDF files, which you can then use as attachments when submitting to a publication that is willing to review clips electronically.

Back Up Your Business Records

My grand archival project actually started when I began to back up my tax records. At the time, I wasn't thinking of disasters; rather, I was thinking of moves. When you've moved nine times in twenty years, you look for any means possible of "lightening the load." Scanned copies of business receipts and other tax records are considered acceptable documents by the IRS. And if you're one of those folks who is afraid to throw out tax records no matter how old they are, backing them up electronically provides the perfect solution. At the same time, scanning your recent returns and receipts provides peace of mind: you're secure in the knowledge that if the IRS decides to audit you ten minutes after your house burns down, you're covered.

I also recommend backing up important personal documents, such as deeds, birth certificates, marriage licenses, passports, etc. Unlike tax records, these will *not* be considered valid documents if you lose the originals. However, such backups *will* give you all the information you need if you should ever have to replace those originals. Scanning your credit cards and other identification cards can help if your wallet or purse is stolen. A word of warning, however: It may be unwise to leave this kind of material on a computer that is connected to the Internet, unless you have a good firewall. The last thing you want is to put your identity papers in a place where hackers can find them!

Back Up Your Photos

Whenever people lose their homes in any sort of disaster, one of the things they say they miss the most is their family photos. Today you don't have to take the risk of losing those precious memories: You can back them up!

Since my laptop has 30GB of memory, it's the perfect place to store all my digital photos. [Editor's Note: For readers who are laughing hysterically right now, keep in mind that I wrote this in 2005. Today I back up photos on a 500GB drive - and I have no doubt that this may seem inadequate before too long!] But I don't just use it to hold pictures I've taken with my digital camera. This summer, I began what is coming to be known as "the project that will never die" -- the task of archiving all my pre-digital family photos on my laptop. I've been scanning my old albums. I've also been scanning my "ancestral" archives -- including my husband's family black-and-white archives, and a box full of family transparencies taken as much as 50 years ago. (Actually, I cheated; I sent most of those out to a professional slide scanner, along with the transparencies and negatives of my honeymoon; otherwise, I figured I'd be spending the next ten years hunched over my scanner.) This project gave me the added benefit of being able to restore photos that had become severely discolored with age; my electronic archives are now a better record than the original photos.

Back Up Family Treasures

Just as a scanner can be the ideal way to preserve your photo albums, it's also a great way to preserve other family treasures. My grandfather was an artist -- not a terribly good one, but his few surviving paintings are something I wanted to archive in such a way that I could share them with other family members. So I've been scanning the smaller paintings and taking digital photos of the larger ones, and this Christmas everyone in the family is going to get a nice CD-ROM in their stocking. But more importantly, I know that I've preserved this artwork not only from a possible disaster, but also from the ravages of time.

You may not have an official "artist" in the family, but what about those works of art by your children that you've used to wallpaper the refrigerator? Those, and just about any other sort of ephemera that you'd like to protect, can be scanned and archived. You can scan old letters, diaries, cards, recipes -- anything that you've collected or saved over time. An archived copy will never replace the original if the original is lost -- but it is still better than having nothing left at all.

Back Up Your House

If your home *is* damaged or destroyed by a disaster, large-scale or personal, having a record of your household goods can be important when it comes time to convince your insurance company to replace them. Traditionally, insurance companies have accepted photos as proof of ownership. But if those photos have been destroyed along with the goods themselves, that won't help you much!

Therefore, it's not a bad idea to go through your house with a digital camera and take *detailed* pictures of your possessions. Open your cupboards and closets, and photograph what's inside. Download those photos to your computer, and make sure that the download includes the date that they were *taken*. (This generally means using the photo download program that comes with your digital camera.) Repeat this process about once a year, or if you move, or if you add anything major to your inventory. This way, even if your house is obliterated from the face of the earth, you can still prove that you did, indeed, have a library of 3000 books, or a collection of 420 glass unicorns. If you're truly obsessive-compulsive (I am), you might even want to do a written inventory of your goods, such as books, CDs, DVDs, and any collections of significant value.

Save It and Share It

My own archive project arose not out of fear of disaster, but out of a desire to be able to share some family treasures with other family members. By making CD-ROMs of my archives, I will be able to give everyone in the family a copy of grandfather's art and grandmother's photos. But more importantly, by making CD-ROM backups, I can *distribute* my archives to different locations around the country. By doing so, I ensure that even if I can't grab a thing in the case of an emergency, the majority of my files will still be saved. I may lose the most recent versions of my work and my business records, but I won't lose my older articles, my half-finished novel, my photos, or the family treasures.

If you embark upon an archiving project, make regular backups of your work. A major archive-scanning job can take weeks (mine is taking months) -- and the last thing you want is to have to do it all over again because your hard drive crashed. CDs are cheap, so burn them -- often.

When your project is complete, organize your files so that you can easily determine where everything is, and burn several archive-quality CD-ROMs or DVDs (depending on the amount of information you need to store). Do *not* use rewritable CDs! If you have more material than you can fit on a single CD, use a DVD. Label your disks with a notation of what they contain and the date they were made. (I've heard warnings that press-on CD labels can damage your disks, so I just scrawl the info with a permanent marker.)

Then, give or send copies of these disks to people who can store them for you in a safe location away from your home -- the farther, the better! My husband keeps a set of my archives in his office, but I also send a set to my mother-in-law, who lives on the other side of the country. Be sure that you choose people you can trust (after all, these archives may contain personal information that you don't want others to share), and people who are reliable enough not only to put them in a safe place, but to remember where that place is if you actually need them again.

The day hasn't yet arrived when we can download and backup our entire personality electronically. However, we *can* back up a huge chunk of our history, our past, our memories, and our most important achievements. Today, all it costs to preserve some of the items that are most precious to you (or most vital to your business) is a handful of CDs and a chunk of time. By making that investment, you can ensure that no matter what happens to your home, you are no longer at risk of "losing everything."

