



Best Practices for Law Firm Digital File Management

Allison Gibson | Digital Office Specialist

File Naming

In advance, decide on the file naming convention that works best for your practice.

Document the file naming rules and publish them along with your file structure requirements. Place a copy of the file naming rules in every digital new client template folder.

Guidelines:

- Include the date in a predetermined format (e.g., August 23, 2016 = 160823 or 2016-08-23) for chronological searching
- Include *relevant* dates (e.g., the date executed, created, identified, received, signed, etc.)
- Use abbreviations (e.g., EXE = Executed, DEPO = Deposition, DISCO = Discovery, etc.)
- Use descriptive names in subfolders. If necessary, include a very concise description of the file (i.e., for correspondence)
- Identify documents, if stamped, e.g., FILED, ISSUED, RECEIVED, etc.
- Don't use special characters.
- Avoid using spaces.

Folder Structure and Organization

Organize files in alignment with your previous physical filing system. Organize folders by client name AND either the case or matter number, and the date the file was opened. Another method includes the lawyer's name or a numeric indexing system, but the latter is not recommended here as it provides too much room for error and lacks descriptive text.

Folders: High Level Structure Example

1. ARCHIVE
2. CLIENT FILES
3. CLOSED CLIENT FILES
4. DECLINED

Client Files Structure - Subfolders

After the file structure is established, create an empty template of the folders which can be copied quickly for new cases.

Here's our favorite example of client files structure from RocketMatter.com, which we've modified:

CLIENT FILES

- [client name]
 - [matter name]
 1. ADMIN
 - File naming and structure guidelines
 - Intake checklist
 - Opening file checklist
 - Contacts
 - Other examples: labels, etc.
 2. ATTY NOTES AND RESEARCH
 - Handwritten notes from client consults
 - Research (statutes, cases, etc.)
 3. BILLING AND EXPENSES
 - Capture invoices, receipts, etc. here.
 4. CLIENT DOCS
 - Any documents obtained from the client, including electronic copies of original client documents.
 5. CORRESPONDENCE
 - All letters, faxes, emails, phone transcriptions/logs
 6. COSTS
 - All costs that may be recoverable by your client
 7. DISCOVERY & EVIDENCE
 - One separate folder for each independently represented party(ies)
 - Within each party's folder is the discovery propounded by that party and the responses thereto
 - Evidence

- Depositions
 - There is a separate folder for each deposition, containing the notice/subpoena, correspondence regarding the depo, examination outlines, exhibits, etc.

8. DRAFTS

- **All draft documents remain here**
- Final documents, whether created electronically, or printed and scanned, go elsewhere in this structure.
- Mostly MS Word docs. Use file linking to attach to other relevant docs.

9. PLEADINGS

- All documents that are filed with the court
- Should all be in PDF format
- Should not be any MS Word docs

10. RETAINER

- and Agreements

11. TRIAL PREP

- Many items in this folder will be duplicates, but will be easier to locate quickly by placing them together in a trial prep or trial folder.
- Copies of all documents that may be used as evidence at trial, including charts and timelines
- Subpoenas
- Signed “on-call” agreements.
- Court information – court directory, research about the court, special court rules and procedures, and judge’s preferences

Four additional file structure examples (from Bill4time.com):

Template #1: Family Law	Template #2: Personal Injury
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case notes • Correspondence • Pleadings • Records requests • Records <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Spouse records ○ Child records ○ Client records • Financial and property documentation • Accounting or Billing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last, First, #[file number] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Case notes ○ Correspondence ○ PIP or Medpay ○ Medicaid/Medicare ○ Liens ○ Insurance documents ○ Records requests ○ Medical records ○ Billing records ○ Pleadings ○ Discovery docs ○ Depositions ○ Exhibits ○ Accounting or Billing
Template #3: Criminal defense	Template #4: A general template
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Last, First #[file number] • Case notes • Correspondence • Pleadings • Client records • Discovery and evidence • Law (statutes/case law) • Accounting or Billing 	<p>Here's a general template you can customize on an as-needed basis.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Client name • Matter name • Admin • Notes and research • Client documents • Third party documents • Witness and exhibits • Correspondence • Costs • Discovery • Docs from client • Experts • Drafts • Orders • Pleadings • Notes • Trial preparation • Accounting or Billing • Retainer (or agreements)

Filing Guidelines

Use these guidelines to avoid losing documents or overwriting shared documents.

- Always create new files and documents in the appropriate folder.
- Work on drafts from within the appropriate folder. Use track changes if others will work on the file.
- File documents immediately.
- Never temporarily place files on your Desktop, in Downloads or anywhere else on your computer.
- Scan immediately and daily. Use descriptive names (naming conventions) for scans.
- Sort all files weekly. If necessary, hire a file clerk just to perform this task.
- Audit digital files monthly or quarterly

Resources:

<https://lawyerist.com/blog/organize-paperless-client-files/>

<https://www.onelegal.com/blog/how-to-organize-digital-files-for-your-paperless-law-firm/>

<https://www.slideshare.net/beverlymichaelis/setting-up-an-effective-filing-system>

<https://www.bill4time.com/blog/5-file-tree-structure-templates-for-different-law-practice-types/>

<https://www.filevine.com/blog/10-steps-to-better-legal-file-conventions/>

<https://www.rocketmatter.com/featured/paperless-law-office-file-naming-conventions/>