



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

Grimwade Centre for  
Cultural Materials  
Conservation

# SAFE HANDLING PAPER, DOCUMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Many artefacts are made from paper, which can include letters, documents, maps, books, albums and memorabilia. The strength and quality of paper can vary greatly depending on how old it is, what it was made from, and how it has been stored.

Plan your movement (see *SAFE HANDLING – GENERAL* Fact Sheet).

Careful, safe handling of paper-based items and photographs is necessary to ensure long-term preservation. Excessive handling, especially folding and unfolding paper, is a major cause of damage.

Paper items are made from a variety of materials. The type of materials can influence the strength of an item. Papers made from cotton and linen can be quite strong, while some papers made from wood pulp can contain impurities that weaken and cause damage to the paper.

Photographs are particularly vulnerable to damage from fingerprints.

## HANDLING TIPS FOR PAPER

- Examine each sheet of paper for damage, such as tears and creases before handling and avoid making new folds and creases.
- Wash and dry your hands before handling paper. To avoid touching the surface of the paper altogether, small pieces of scrap paper can also be folded and used like tongs to lift and support the paper item.
- Paper can be very brittle. It is important that you support it evenly. If the item is a loose sheet, and not mounted, place a sheet of paper or card underneath it or make a simple folder to support it while handling.
- When carrying paper items without a support hold the sheet from diagonal corners. Lift the sheet, allowing it to droop in the centre with an even curve, to avoid causing any buckles or kinks.
- If the media is stable the paper item can also be transported while sandwiched between two-pieces of card or board.

## RESOURCES



reCollections  
Caring for Collections  
Across Australia – Handling,  
Transportation, Storage and  
Display, Heritage Collections  
Council, available online:  
<http://go.unimelb.edu.au/36wi>



Paper and Books,  
Canadian Conservation Institute  
Notes, available online:  
<http://go.unimelb.edu.au/5hwi>



Photographs,  
Canadian Conservation Institute  
Notes, available online:  
<http://go.unimelb.edu.au/7hwi>



Preserving Photographs,  
National Archives of Australia,  
available online:  
<http://go.unimelb.edu.au/3hwi>



Conservation Advice:  
Documents, Australian War  
Memorial, available online:  
<http://go.unimelb.edu.au/6fwi>

## HANDLING TIPS FOR BOOKS

- Use clean, dry hands when handling volumes and turning pages.
- Do not pull books from the shelf by the top of the spine. Instead, carefully push the adjacent books back or to the side, so you can grasp the book by the covers at the middle of the spine.
- Open books gently and turn pages slowly from the top corners. For brittle pages use the centre edge and support the rest of the page.
- Provide support for large, open books using pillows or rolled bubble wrap/towels, beneath front and back covers.
- Books can be easily damaged along the spine and the joints (where the covers join the spine) and shouldn't be opened beyond their point of resistance (an opening angle of 110-120 degrees is safe for most books).
- Use acid-free paper strips as bookmarks to avoid staining pages.

## HANDLING TIPS FOR PHOTOGRAPHS

- Photographic materials should be held carefully by the edges. Handle items with clean dry hands or with nitrile or latex gloves. Avoid touching the photographic image as they are easily marked
- Do not force cracked or bent photographs to sit flat, the photographic emulsion can be brittle and inflexible when aged.