

# Photo finish

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## How to organize all those pictures you've been hoarding for years

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Come on, 'fess up. You have a shopping bag or shoebox full of photographs sitting in a closet or on a basement shelf in your home. Snapshots may be in the original processing envelopes, or just gathering dust willy-nilly — a school picture of you at age 6 next to a shot of your mother-in-law on her honeymoon in Atlantic City, next to a picture of the neighborhood kids at last year's Easter Egg hunt.

If you're the type of person who immediately organizes photos into crafty little albums — complete with snappy homilies to underscore warm and fuzzy moments — then move on to the next article. But if your photographs have gotten the better of you, continue reading. The experts can help.

First, a caveat: We're talking about old pictures here, as well as ongoing prints from your trusty point-and-shoot 35 mm.

If you've gone digital, then hopefully you're using a program like Photo Parade 4.0, a terrific way to create slide shows, themed groupings and organized categories of digital photos on your home PC. There's even a West Trenton-based company, [www.dotphoto.com](http://www.dotphoto.com), that offers free online album organizers, along with competitively priced prints and free viewer software available on the company's Web site.

But if you're still processing your film the old-fashioned way, you might need a little help.

Tracy White, editor-in-chief of the Salt Lake City magazine *Creating Keepsakes* ([www.creatingkeepsakes.com](http://www.creatingkeepsakes.com)), truly believes that — in 10 easy steps — you can take your photograph collection from chaos to order.

White, a big proponent of the scrapbooking craze that seems to be sweeping the nation (it's one of America's fastest growing hobbies), understands that serious scrapbooking isn't for everyone. But she also knows that photographs are important to most of us, and the easier they are to view and more integrated they are in our lives, the more we'll enjoy them.

Of course, Rome, or at least an organized photo album of your vacation in Rome, wasn't built in a day. "Don't expect to get a photo organizing project done overnight," advises Ann T. Sullivan, president of the Manhattan-based ATS Organizing Services. "Set up in a workspace that you can leave undisturbed for a while. Schedule a time once a week or so for you to make progress. Involve the kids, put on some music — make it fun."

The first step in this, like in just about every other endeavor, is to adjust your attitude. "Don't start out thinking this is going to be miserable," said White. "Allow yourself the time to relive old memories and feel nostalgic, make some notes while you work. Chances are, you'll enjoy the process more than you think you will."

Next, collect all photos from their miscellaneous hiding places — from kitchen drawers to the car glove compartment and your home office shelves. Put them all in your designated workspace, preferably a place with a door you can close.

Separating pictures into categories comes next. "How you do this depends on how you process things," said White. "Maybe you want to do categories like your children, your husband's family,

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special vacations. Then you can whittle down each of those into manageable groups, chronologically or otherwise."

But that's not the only way to go. You may do all family Christmas celebrations in one album, an album by decade or a single special event. There's no right or wrong way. Just pick what makes sense for you.

Put novelty and oversized pictures, such as school and family portraits and panoramic shots, in a separate category. Antique and heritage photos also can go in a separate pile.

Do some editing. Don't be afraid to throw bad pictures away and pull out duplicates for inclusion in future Christmas cards or for framing.

Label the pictures in each category, using a soft graphite pencil or photo marker. This process is best done when the pictures are fresh in your mind, but do the best you can. Even a few words will be helpful years down the road.

Figure out a storage system that works for you. Albums or photo boxes are good options, but be sure the system is acid free and won't deteriorate your photos. If you want to try your hand at scrapbooking, take one category, say, family holidays, and gather those pictures together.

Jot down some thoughts and memories sparked by the photos, and record both in an archival-type scrapbook, available at craft and photography stores. "You can get as sophisticated and artsy as you want. It's all up to your personal sense of style," White said.

Follow this same process with your negatives, organizing and storing them in a safety deposit or fireproof box. You can buy a three-ring binder for negative sleeves to simplify the process.

Don't get overwhelmed. "Once you have a system, you won't feel as though you have 30 years of pictures to get through," White said. She keeps a few different types of albums going simultaneously, allowing her to add new pictures as soon as they're developed.

Finally, enjoy the fruits of your labor. Rotate albums on a coffee table, spend time sharing old photos with friends and family, or just enjoy a solitary waltz down memory lane.

"Photographs give us a sense of self, of where we've been, our personal history," said White. "It's a nice little touchstone to illustrate how we've changed over the years."



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY NOAH ADDIS/THE STAR-LEDGER

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## 10 do's and don'ts for photo storage

Archivist Craig A. Tuttle, author of "An Ounce of Preservation: A Guide to the Care of Papers and Photographs" (Rainbow Books, \$12.95), offers the following tips to ensure you'll enjoy your photographs for years to come:

1. Don't store pictures in envelopes or shoeboxes. Neither are pH-balanced or lignin free — lignin is the bonding element that holds wood fibers together. It causes paper to change color and become brittle, and can adversely affect precious photographs.
2. Don't be afraid to throw blurry, fuzzy, badly composed or duplicate pictures away. You don't need them.
3. Don't expose framed photographs to sunlight. They'll fade away.
4. Do use frames featuring Plexiglas instead of glass — Plexiglas filters out dangerous UV rays.
5. Don't store pictures in the basement or attic, or anywhere with an unstable humidity level and temperature.
6. Do spend a little more for archival quality albums. Check out [www.gaylord.com](http://www.gaylord.com) for an idea of what's out there or stop by your

local photo store.

7. Don't keep pictures in old magnet photo albums. The acidic adhesive on the back of the plastic eventually will wear through the image.

8. Do write notes on the back of pictures, using a soft lead pencil or archival pen, never a felt tip or ballpoint, which can bleed through the image.

9. Do have old nitrate negatives copied. Nitrate is a volatile substance and will degenerate. (Nitrate negs are pre-1960, often have nitrate written on the side and smell strongly of vinegar).

10. Do organize pictures in categories, such as special events, vacations, people, pets, etc. Then, you can organize chronologically within each category if you like.

— Beth D'Addono