

Guideline to Principle 4: Describe Principle

A resource for implementing the Standard for Records and Information Governance

INTRODUCTION

Records are evidence of business activity. The *Territory Records Act 2002* (the Act) defines them as 'information created and kept, or received and kept, as evidence and information by a person in accordance with a legal obligation or in the course of conducting business. Within the context of the Territory Records Act, to be understandable, usable, and reliable as evidence of an ACT Government business transaction or event, a record must have the following properties:

1. Content – Text, data, symbols, or images that convey information.
2. Structure –Arrangement of this information into understandable formats, such as designated fields for required information.
3. Context – A direct relationship to the technical and/or business environment that created the record, for example through software applications or metadata.

The Act allows the Director of Territory Records to approve standards for records management, which ACT Government organisations must comply with. The [Standard for Records and Information Governance](#) (the Standard) sets out seven principles that must be applied to ensure that data and information can be managed in ways that allow them to function as records when this is required to support business and accountability requirements. This Guideline is intended to assist organisations to comply with the Describe Principle.

While the term 'record' has a specific meaning, in practice it can at times be difficult to distinguish between records and other types of information or data. The Standard is explicitly designed to meet the requirements of the *Territory Records Act 2002* in terms of records, but is also a guide to good practice approaches for managing information and data for the ACT Government. The [Data Governance and Management Policy Framework](#) is complimentary to the Standard, with the common aim of providing a framework in which information assets can be made, kept and used by the ACT Government.

The Describe Principle

The Describe Principle means ACT Government organisations must adhere to metadata

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schemas endorsed by the Territory Records Office for records, information, and data management.

Metadata refers to the naming, identification, searching, classification and categorisation of records, information, and data by using defined attributes or fields to ensure consistency across the ACT Government and its business systems. Metadata attributes and fields are required to digitally manage records information and data and maintain their:

- searchability
- usability
- reliability
- protection
- security
- context
- business classification
- disposal
- accessibility
- authenticity
- accuracy
- preservation
- privacy
- completeness
- retention

By adhering to the Describe Principle, ACT Government organisations will ensure records, information and data remain accessible, usable and understandable over time and that the requirements of the Act can be met both in the short and long term.

Complying with the Describe Principle

There are two aspects to complying with the Describe Principle:

- 1 ensuring appropriate and sufficient description elements are incorporated into the systems managing records, information and data: all business systems, whether they are purpose built to manage records (such as an electronic document records management system [EDRMS]) or are developed to perform some other function (such as a client management, case management, finance or human resource system) must be designed so they include specific metadata elements to efficiently meet the requirements of the Act
- 2 ensuring the described elements are managed appropriately so the authenticity, usability and reliability of the records, information and data are protected.

For an organisation undertaking a comprehensive assessment of their records, information, and data management, use the Territory Records Office's Records Management Maturity Assessment Tool in association with this and other guidelines to implementing the Standard for Records and Information Governance .

Further information

This guideline should be read in conjunction with the Standard for Records and Information Governance and the Guidelines which support each of its seven principles.

Along with the seven guidelines, further information can be found in the following resources:

- *Territory Records Act 2002*
- International Standard: ISO 15489 – Records Management
- International Standard: ISO 30300 series Management systems for records
- International Standard: ISO16175—Requirements for Records in Electronic Systems
- Australian Standard: AS 5044—AGLS Metadata Standard
- Australian Standard AS/NZS 5478—Recordkeeping Metadata Property Reference Set
- CARE principles for Indigenous data governance
- FAIR data principles
- ACT Government Metadata for web-based resources standard
- Territory Records Office *Records Advice* series.

ENSURING APPROPRIATE AND SUFFICIENT DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS ARE INCORPORATED INTO THE SYSTEMS MANAGING RECORDS, INFORMATION AND DATA

Metadata is essential to the management of records, information, and data. It helps to make data understandable, both to systems and to people, and helps to form the links between data elements that allow them to function as records that are evidence of business transactions.

To serve effectively as evidence, records must have content, context, and structure. Data and information are the content of records. In digital systems, metadata is essential to provide context and structure to that data and information. Some basic metadata is required to ensure that records are authentic, reliable, understandable, and usable evidence of business activity. However, the extent of metadata applied to records and the way it is managed can be influenced by the sensitivity and significance of the records it relates to.

Metadata requirements for records systems

Systems used to manage records (referred to as electronic document and records management systems or EDRMS) should be configured to meet the requirements of the [Electronic Document and Records Management Systems \(EDRMS\) and Business Systems](#)

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[Recommended Records Management Metadata Fields](#), provided by the Territory Records Office, including by making full use of system audit trails. This includes use of the Territory Records Office's whole of government business classification scheme.

Business classification information is an important metadata element that is crucial to ensuring that the value of records, information and data is understood. It is a hierarchical scheme for identifying and defining the functions, activities, and transactions an organisation performs in the conduct of its business. A business classification scheme is developed as a result of identifying information, data and records management requirements – see the [Assess Principle](#) for further guidance.

Metadata requirements for business systems

Business systems (case management systems and process management systems, for example) used by an organisation should be configured so that required metadata elements are captured, preferably automatically, by the system.

The [Electronic Document and Records Management Systems \(EDRMS\) and Business Systems Recommended Records Management Metadata Fields](#), provided by the Territory Records Office, sets out the recordkeeping metadata that should be captured and managed by business systems. It should be used in conjunction with comprehensive systems audit trails to ensure that records, information, and data remain reliable, authentic, accessible, usable, and understandable over time.

The ACT Government's [Digital Recordkeeping Policy for the ACTPS](#) requires that digital recordkeeping be considered in all ICT systems. Organisations acquiring, upgrading or replacing digital business systems, including by entering into software as a service arrangements, must identify any records that will be created in the system and their metadata requirements. Systems may capture and maintain records and their metadata internally, or may export records and their metadata to another system such as an EDRMS.

For systems that are already in place, depending on the value of the information, data or records, it may not be a cost-effective solution to retro-fit the metadata requirements. Other strategies, such as documenting the required data at system level and developing an information management plan in consultation with the organisations records manager, may suffice to ensure records, information and data management requirements are met.

Metadata requirements for unstructured environments

Business environments that are unstructured present risks to records, information, and data. An unstructured environment where electronic directories are set up in a hierarchy with top level folders and agency branches having their own folders containing a series of subject-based folders are not considered as being compliant recordkeeping systems. Unstructured environments for example can include shared drives, and emails folders.

Organisations should undertake a risk assessment of the information and data they keep in these unprotected environments and where necessary use an endorsed EDRMS, such as TRIM and Objective to capture and protect business records.

Metadata requirements and significance

The extent and management of metadata required to adequately manage records may vary depending on the significance of the records and the level of risk posed to the ACT Government and the community by the activity they document.

The [Electronic Document and Records Management Systems \(EDRMS\) and Business Systems Recommended Records Management Metadata Fields](#) represents the metadata likely to be required by any type of business system that keeps records. Full audit trail capability must be used for dedicated EDRM systems. Additional metadata, including audit trail functionality, is advisable for other business systems that manage high risk activities.

Recordkeeping metadata must be captured and adequately managed within systems when those systems create or manage records that must be retained for more than 20 years. For systems that deal with records that will not be retained for 20 years, it may be adequate to document some recordkeeping metadata at the system level using an information management plan. This may include, for example, documenting business classification at the system level for simple systems that manage a limited range of short-term records, such as finance systems, facilities booking systems, service desk job management systems and the like.

ENSURING THE DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS ARE MANAGED APPROPRIATELY SO THE AUTHENTICITY, USABILITY AND RELIABILITY OF THE RECORDS, INFORMATION AND DATA ARE PROTECTED.

Metadata authenticity and reliability

As well as being an important component of records management, metadata itself must be managed to ensure the reliability and authenticity of the records it relates to. Some recordkeeping metadata must be maintained even after the records to which it relates have been deleted or otherwise destroyed.

To ensure the metadata and the record, information, or data the metadata supports are authentic and reliable it is essential the metadata is managed diligently and to a high standard – this can be achieved by using appropriate technology and processes. For example, if certain metadata elements can be changed without adequate control measures (such as an audit trail or restrictions), then the authenticity and reliability of the information, data or records can be called into question.

Metadata registering the existence of a record and documenting its authorised disposal must be maintained in perpetuity. As for other types of metadata, it may be sufficient to document registration and disposal of metadata at the system level using an information management plan.