



Questions to Ask Before Starting a Digitization Project

1) What is your purpose?

There are many reasons for digitizing collections. Some of the first questions you should ask are:

- For what purpose do you want to use the digitized materials and what are the benefits of having this collection in digital form? Is there a demand for the content of these materials in digital form?
- What are the goals of your project/what do you hope to accomplish?
- Is the main goal increased access or decreased handling of fragile originals (preservation)? Or both?
- Will the digital images replace or supplement existing originals?
- Will the digitized materials complement existing collections in online or print form, or might they fill a lack of digitized materials in a certain unique subject or topical area?

2) Who is your audience?

Another important question to ask at the outset of any digitization project is:

- Who is your intended audience? This will determine the parameters of the project at all stages of digitization.
- Often your audience can be divided into primary (in your service area), secondary (related to your service area), and tertiary (Internet users at large) user groups.
- What are the needs of your users and how can you best serve them? This question may apply to modes of access, what search features and web interfaces will be most helpful to your users, what types of browsing might be appropriate, how users intend to use the information, scanning practices appropriate to intended use of the materials, etc.

3) What are the physical characteristics of the collection?

- What is the physical condition of the materials? How do the originals need to be handled during scanning to prevent further deterioration?
- What is the format of the collection (negatives, black and white, color, text and graphics, etc.)?
- What size are the materials? Do you have the capability to scan oversized materials?

- What is the quality of the originals? This will determine what resolution you will scan at (scan at the highest resolution appropriate to the quality of the object you are scanning is a general rule of thumb), as well as file size and storage considerations.
- In what format/how will the digitized images be stored (on CD's or tape)? If you intend to store images online, do you have appropriate server space?

4) Who owns it?

Copyright is important and it is essential to understand issues of ownership and intellectual property rights.

- Who owns the materials?
- Are they in the public domain? If not, can permissions be secured?

5) What is your timeframe?

This is an important consideration, especially for grant-funded projects. As a rule, everything usually takes longer than you plan for. It is helpful to break the project schedule down into proposed durations, with milestones and expected completion dates.

6) How is the project being funded?

- Have you secured a funding source for this project?
- Have you considered local, state, national, philanthropic, and collaborative sources?
- What parts of the project will funding support? (Physical resources, hardware, software, networked access, personnel, dedicated space, vendor services, etc.)
- What about plans for maintaining access into the future (ongoing costs)? Is there a long-term institutional commitment to this project?

7) How will you perform the actual digitization?

- Where will the digitizing take place--in a central location or off-site? If off-site, does the vendor have adequate, safe storage facilities?
- What is the level of image quality (resolution) you hope to obtain (according to user needs and the quality of originals you are digitizing)?
- Will you perform any manipulation of the images post-scanning (faithful reproduction vs. image optimized for presentation)?
- What is your criteria for an "acceptable image" when performing quality control?
- How will you store copies of the digitized images? CD-ROM, magnetic tape?
- Are there specific image guidelines specified by your funding source that you must adhere to?
- Will you create an "archival image" as well as derivative files for viewing and downloading?
- What are the limitations of your hardware and software (file size, file format standards, proprietary file formats, interoperability, scanner limitations, etc.)?

8) What metadata scheme are you planning to use?

- What type of description already exists for the collection, and at what level (item level, collection level...)?
- What metadata or finding aid scheme do you plan to use (Dublin Core, MARC, VRA, EAD, etc.)?
- If there are several versions of an original, which version will you catalog?

9) How are you going to provide access to the collection?

- Will the images be linked to existing bibliographic systems, or will it be necessary to develop a new access method for the images?
- At what level will this access be provided: item or collection level or both?
- Will the images be accessible and deliverable via a central or distributed site?
- Will you provide a search mechanism? How will users be able to search the collection?
- Will your audience be local or global? Will access be restricted or password protected?
- How will you distribute your collection: over the web, at dedicated CD-ROM stations, by interactive media device, etc.?

10) How are you planning to maintain the collection into the future?

- How do you plan to store archival images and where?
- What kind of a backup mechanism do you have in place in case of hardware/software failure?
- What plans have you considered for data migration and refreshment?
- What level of long-term institutional commitment have you secured for your project?
- Do you have funding resources secured for maintenance of the digitized collection into the future?