OPEX

// GET IT RIGHT ONCE

A checklist for digitizing fragile permanent records

Questions to ask of any digitization workflow under 36 CFR 1236 Subpart E, whether you run it in-house or through a service bureau.

FOR FEDERAL RECORDS MANAGERS AND PROGRAM LEADS

1 Know the requirement
2 Protect the original
3 Hit the image-quality bar
4 Catch failures early
5 Prove it

BEFORE CAPTURE

1 Know the requirement before you capture

- [ ] **Confirm the record type and the table it falls under.** Every specification in the regulation is built on FADGI three-star. Modern textual paper records use Table 1, at a 300 ppi minimum. Manuscripts, carbon copies, and other paper with poor legibility use Table 1 with adjusted target evaluation. Photographic prints, graphic-arts prints, drawings, embossed seals, and other fine-detail records use Table 2, at a 400 ppi minimum. The record type sets the specification.
- [ ] **Set the quality target to the use, not just the floor.** The minimums are 300 ppi (Table 1) and 400 ppi (Table 2), sized to the source. Where records will feed OCR, search, or AI, plan for headroom above the minimum so a near-miss does not fail you later.
- [ ] **Inventory the condition of the records.** Flag brittle, folded, taped, stapled, bound, and mixed-size material up front. These drive both your handling plan and your failure risk.

HANDLING

2 Protect the original

- [ ] **Confirm the equipment suits the media and will not damage it.** The regulation requires equipment appropriate for the media type and capable of meeting objectives without damaging the source records. Hold your workflow to that standard.
- [ ] **Match handling to condition, not to a fixed speed.** Fragile and mixed material should not run the same way as clean office paper.
- [ ] **Route bound, oversized, and delicate items off the feed path.** Use flatbed or overhead capture for anything a feeder would stress.
- [ ] **Minimize touches per item.** Count how many times a fragile original is handled from box to validated image. Fewer passes mean less risk of original damage.

IMAGE QUALITY

3 Hit the image-quality bar

- [ ] **Capture to specification.** Minimum 300 ppi (Table 1) or 400 ppi (Table 2), sized to the source, in the correct color or grayscale mode, within the defined tone, color, and noise limits. Photographic prints must be captured in color.
- [ ] **Verify with reference targets.** Use target-based image quality analysis (for example, GoldenThread) to measure conformance to FADGI and ISO 19264 objectively, not by eye.
- [ ] **Treat quality as the input to everything downstream.** A flaw a human eye forgives can break OCR, classification, redaction, and AI extraction.

> The image is the record and the fuel.

VALIDATION

4 Catch failures before the box goes back

- [ ] **Validate at capture, not after reshelving.** Finding a failure after the original is returned forces another retrieval and another pass, creating another opportunity to damage the original record.
- [ ] **Keep validation independent.** Use separate staff for validation from those who ran the QC inspection, as the regulation requires.
- [ ] **Track your re-digitization rate and its causes.** A high rescan rate is where handling damage and quality failures compound. Watch it as a leading indicator, not an afterthought.

DOCUMENTATION

5 Prove it

- [ ] **Capture the required metadata.** Administrative, descriptive, and technical metadata, unique identifiers, and both date fields (record creation date and digitization date).
- [ ] **Keep audit-ready documentation.** Retain the project documentation, including the quality management plan, acceptance test results, and corrective actions, until NARA confirms receipt and the transfer of legal custody.

// WORKING WITH A VENDOR OR PARTNER?

If someone else runs the work, also ask:

1. How do you prove conformance, and with what evidence?
2. How does the workflow adapt to brittle, taped, or mixed-size material specifically?
3. How many times is a fragile original handled from box to validated image?
4. Where in the flow does quality validation happen?
5. What is your re-digitization rate, and what drives it?

The binding authority is 36 CFR 1236 Subpart E. Its performance parameters are based on FADGI three-star aim points and tolerance ranges, and FADGI aligns its imaging metrics with ISO 19264-1. This checklist summarizes good practice and is not legal guidance.