

10 Most Important Things to Know about Archiving with PDF/A

1) PDF/A is an ISO standard

An ISO standard represents an international consensus for best practice in conforming to a specification or standard. PDF/A has been an ISO standard since October 2005. It was established to meet the specific requirements for long-term archiving (see below). As an open standard, PDF/A is platform and supplier independent. PDF/A builds on more than 15 years of experience in the area of PDF, a format widely used and accepted in all industries. The PDF/A standard provides all necessary information to build a PDF/A-compliant viewer, even in 50 years from now. The PDF/A standard along with the availability of a large number of viewers (such as Adobe Acrobat/Adobe Reader) guarantee the readability of the PDF/A format into the future.

2) Standardized Metadata is embedded directly into the document

All information used to describe a document (so called "metadata") is directly embedded in the PDF/A document in a standardized, exchangeable format (XMP, open XML standard). Metadata of other formats such as PNG, PostScript or TIFF can easily be transferred into the PDF/A document. The use of (often proprietary) systems to store such metadata separate from the document is obsolete.

3) PDF/A documents are fully text searchable

The ability to perform full text searches on PDF/A documents is also part of the standard. The text of digitally generated content is preserved in the document. This is also true for scanned documents that have undergone optical character recognition (OCR). The PDF/A file saves both the recognized text (as Unicode) as well as the originally scanned image, which retains the visual appearance yet allows the search function.

4) Everything is included for authentic reproduction

PDF/A files are self-contained: all elements (fonts, color profiles etc.) necessary for a flawless, authentic reproduction are included in the PDF/A file. A PDF/A document may not contain any references to external content or resources. Simple information references like links to Web pages are allowed however.

5) PDF/A is space saving

Although PDF/A documents contain more information than images (such as TIFF), the PDF/A files are usually due to the use of efficient compression algorithms.

6) Optimal security with digital signatures

The combination of PDF/A and digital signatures is the perfect way to verify that the PDF document has not been tampered with and that it is also authentic. This provides optimal legal security for long-term archiving.

7) PDF/A can meet accessibility requirements (section 508)

The PDF/A-1 standard contains two sub-standards:

- PDF/A-1a is a more detailed variant that requires specific information to better assist persons with certain disabilities: for example, text must be stored as Unicode so text-to-speech engines can be supported, and document structure, the reading order as well as descriptions of pictures must be included.
- PDF/A-1b is a less demanding variant of the standard which is sufficient in most cases. Typical application areas are scanned documents and conversions of digital born documents into PDF/A.

8) PDF/A documents remain valid without time limits

The standards committee extends the existing standard every 2-4 years with meaningful amendments. In PDF/A-2 for instance, it will be possible to use JPEG 2000 compression. That does not mean that existing PDF/A documents must be migrated to such new standard amendments. Existing PDF/A documents remain conform perpetually. Contrary to other standards, the ISO cannot withdraw the PDF/A standard.

9) PDF/A being widely accepted

In Europe and Asia, PDF/A is already recommended or required and legislated for long-term archiving in several governments, organizations and corporations. Also in North America such recommendations exist in the areas of jurisdiction and libraries and the demand for this standard is growing continuously. The PDF/A Competence Center (see next page) is instrumental in supporting the PDF/A standard.

10) Reliable tools are available today

Thanks to the long experience with PDF and the fast response of the major PDF technology suppliers, there are already many PDF/A compliant software tools on the market. The PDF/A Competence Center has developed a test suite that allows PDF/A validation software products to be validated reliably. A validator helps to check whether a document conforms to the PDF/A standard or not.

What is PDF/A?

PDF/A is an ISO standard for using the PDF format for the long-term archiving of electronic documents. The standard was published on October 1, 2005 as "ISO 19005-1: Document management – Electronic document file format for long-term preservation – Part 1: Use of PDF 1.4 (PDF/A-1)".

ISO 19005-1 defines "a file format based on PDF, known as PDF/A, which provides a mechanism for representing electronic documents in a manner which preserves their visual appearance over time, independent of the tools and systems used for creating, storing or rendering the files."

Compared to a "regular" PDF document, a PDF/A file may only contain elements that are suitable for long-term archiving.

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PDF Tools AG today is a world leader in PDF programming technology for customers in all market segments. The company provides high performance server-based software products as well as desktop solutions that are designed specifically for developers, integrators, contractors, consultants, customizing specialists and IT-departments.

Dr. Hans Bärffuss, CEO of PDF Tools AG, is an internationally acclaimed expert in PDF technology. Dr. Bärffuss is also the official representative of Switzerland in the ISO TC 171 working group for PDF/A (ISO 19005) and PDF 1.7 (ISO 32000) – and he also holds the position of Vice President of the PDF/A Competence Center, which was co-founded by PDF Tools AG.

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The PDF/A Competence Center was established as an international association in 2006. The objective of the association is to promote the exchange of information and experience in the field of long-term archiving in accordance with ISO 19005 (PDF/A). The management board is composed of executives from major suppliers of PDF software. Within less than two years, more than 85 companies and various experts from more than 20 countries have joined the PDF/A Competence Center.

Several members of the PDF/A Competence Center are technically oriented and actively participate in the further development of the PDF/A standard as members of the responsible ISO committee (ISO TC 171 – Document management applications).