



Electronic Records Management: What is Metadata (and Why Does it Matter)?

Purpose: Provide guidance on metadata and its importance to electronic records.

Metadata is data about data, but what exactly does that mean?

It means that metadata is information (data) that describes a record (data). That information, or metadata, helps make records searchable and discoverable.

Record Series:	Photographs
Collection:	Natural Resources Department, Commissioners' Office, Public Relations Images, 1949-1979
County:	Statewide
File Name:	AR9-1-0-27-ph000048
Photographer:	Unknown
Title:	Mount Rainier at 10,000 feet
Subject Start Date:	1957
Subject End Date:	1957
Extent:	1 slide : color ; 35 mm
Scope And Content:	View of Mount Rainier from 10,000 feet, taken from an airplane, August 8, 1957.
Notes:	Title taken from slide.
Access Restrictions:	None.
Genre:	Slides
Index Terms:	Rainier, Mount (Wash.)
Container:	AR-20180409-01, Box 3
Creation Date:	
People:	




Metadata answers complex questions about the origins of born-digital records. When you print an electronic record, metadata about that record is lost.

Agencies have the responsibility to maintain electronic records in electronic format, and the records should “remain usable, searchable, retrievable and authentic for the length of the designated retention period.” (WAC 434-662-040).

Think of an email: Some metadata is maintained when printed. But what about attachments? Reply chains? Was the original written in plain text or using HTML? What service was it sent with?

When electronic records are maintained in an electronic format, the metadata stays with the file. If you change the format of the electronic record, the metadata may change as well. What’s important is that enough metadata exists to categorize, search, and retrieve the electronic record, allowing for a complete picture.

**Additional advice regarding the management of public records is available from
Washington State Archives:**

**www.sos.wa.gov/archives
recordsmanagement@sos.wa.gov**