



TAKE CONTROL OF

Your Digital Legacy

by JOE KISSELL
\$14.99

**2ND
EDITION**

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Read Me First

Welcome to *Take Control of Your Digital Legacy, Second Edition*, version 2.1, published in February 2026 by alt concepts. This book was written by Joe Kissell and edited by Caroline Rose (second edition) and Tonya Engst (first edition).

This book walks you through the process of digital estate planning. It helps you identify the important information you may want to pass on to future generations, document your wishes in detail, and make practical decisions about preserving your data.

If you want to share this ebook with a friend, we ask that you do so as you would with a physical book: “lend” it for a quick look, but ask your friend to buy a copy for careful reading or reference. Discounted classroom and user group copies are available.

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Updates and More

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What's New in Version 2.1

Version 2.1 is a relatively minor update that makes a number of small wording changes for clarity, corrects or deletes outdated links, and does the following:

- ◆ Adds the topic [Consider Your Digital Avatar](#), which discusses AI-generated chatbots based on your voice and likeness
- ◆ Relocates and updates the sidebar [Assigning Legal Authority to Your Digital Executor](#) with additional information
- ◆ In [Legacy Contacts](#), adds a link to Apple's page that describes to a legacy contact all the files they may receive
- ◆ In [Create a Data Archive](#), adds a bullet point about copying data from an iPhone or iPad to external storage

What Was New in Version 2.0.1

Version 2.0.1 was a minor update that:

- ◆ Added a couple of notes about scanner types
- ◆ Revised the image at the beginning of [Deal with Social Media](#) and a bit of the wording in that chapter to account for changes in social media sites
- ◆ Replaced the author photo

What Was New in the Second Edition

Although the broad strokes of what I recommended in the first edition of this book back in 2017 remain accurate, changes to operating systems, apps, hardware, websites, and businesses meant there were lots of new things to talk about in the second edition. In addition, after giving dozens of presentations on the contents of this book, I realized that I left some questions unanswered and omitted some essential details. As a result, I thoroughly revamped this book. The most significant changes in the second edition were:

- ◆ Revised the text as necessary to reflect the increasing likelihood that your crucial data is stored on mobile devices (see, in particular, the sidebar [Computers vs. Mobile Devices](#))
- ◆ Added [Instant Messaging and Chat](#), and updated [Social Media](#) and [Other Accounts](#), to reflect the types of accounts people are most likely to use these days
- ◆ Added information about passive income sources to [Digital Business Assets](#)
- ◆ Added a sidebar called [What Is Media, Anyway?](#) to help clarify this ambiguous term
- ◆ Expanded my guidance for what to do with your digital photos; see [Inventory Other Personal Data](#)
- ◆ Updated [Inventory Cryptocurrency](#) to better reflect current reality and to mention NFTs
- ◆ In [Decide on File Formats](#), made some clarifications and attempted to make the advice a bit easier to follow
- ◆ Added a lengthy new chapter, [Handle “Big Tech” Accounts](#), covering the special steps you should take with an Apple, Google, or Microsoft account

- ◆ Included a discussion of book scanners in [Obtain a Scanner](#)
- ◆ Revised [Outsource Scanning](#) with additional options you can consider
- ◆ Added a sidebar, [What About Passkeys?](#), that discusses the benefits and additional challenges of password-free logins
- ◆ In the chapter now called [Deal with Email and Messages](#), added a section ([Handle Instant Messages and Chats](#)) on dealing with instant messaging, chat, and SMS data
- ◆ Reworked [Handle Your Media](#), especially the topic [Digital Media Complications](#), to offer better advice in dealing with purchased media
- ◆ Added more detail about handling cryptocurrency in [Handle Cryptocurrency](#)
- ◆ Added calendars and contacts to the list of information you should consider in [Handle Other Cloud Data](#)
- ◆ Included two new sidebars, [Does Disk Format Matter?](#) and [Including One Person's Digital Legacy in Another's](#), in the [Preserve Your Data for Posterity](#) chapter
- ◆ Noted how important it is to exercise hard drives and SSDs used for archival storage in [Store Media Safely \(and Redundantly\)](#)
- ◆ Added hardware security keys to the items you should include when you [Create a Legacy Dossier](#)
- ◆ Thoroughly overhauled the lists of services in the sidebar [Online Digital Legacy Services](#)
- ◆ Updated the downloadable [Digital Will Template](#) to reflect the many additions and changes in this edition

Introduction

I've been writing books about technology for over 30 years. For whatever reason, much of my audience over these years has been a generation or so older than me. I constantly get email from readers in their 80s and 90s, and when I speak to user groups, I'm often the youngest person in the room by a considerable margin.

For a long time, this phenomenon was a mere curiosity, and I didn't consciously tailor my writing to an older reader. But then I started noticing that lots of the questions and comments I received had to do with topics I hadn't thought very deeply about myself: namely, how to deal with files, photos, email, online accounts, and other digital items when their owner died or became unable to handle them personally. People would come up to me after a talk about passwords or backups and say something like, "Well, I'm 89, so I won't be around much longer, and I want to make sure my son can get into my accounts when I'm gone," or "I'm trying to figure out how my great-grandchildren will be able to read my documents 50 years from now."

Those questions deserve answers, and that's what I aim to provide in this book. Your digital legacy—whether, how, and in what ways your data will carry on without you—is a hugely important topic in the 21st century. No matter your age or health, something *could* happen to you at any time, and having a plan in place to deal with your accounts, files, and other digital data is a great kindness to your family and friends—to say nothing of future generations who may want to know all about you. (And, lest this all sound terribly morbid, the very same steps can be equally useful to someone who needs to take care of business for you temporarily if you're sick, injured, or even just on vacation.)

We have tools such as wills and trusts to spell out what should happen to our physical and financial assets, but more often than not, those instruments say nothing about our incredibly valuable digital assets. Maybe you have tens of thousands of beautiful family photos, but what if they're on an encrypted computer and no one else knows the password? What will become of your website, Facebook account, or email if you alone know how to access it, and leave no instructions? And what will happen to all the data you've trusted to various cloud services when your credit card expires and no one else is paying the bills?

These are just a few of the many questions I help you answer in this book. I walk you through the process of inventorying your digital assets, figuring out what to do with each of them, drafting a digital will that lists those assets and what should happen to them, choosing a digital executor, and much more. I also talk about information that isn't currently digital but maybe should be if you want to preserve it for a long time—things like paper photos, analog video and audio tapes, and important family documents. And I discuss at length the nuts and bolts of decisions you'll have to consider like which file formats and physical media you should use to preserve data for posterity, whether you should entrust any of this data to a cloud service, and how to be sure all your preferences are clearly spelled out.

In short, this book is about digital estate planning. It's not going to teach you new tech skills or get you excited about the latest apps and gadgets, but I've done my best to make this essential topic interesting and engaging. By the time you've finished the steps in this book, you should be confident that your data will be in good hands when you're no longer able to manage it. You'll have both a written document describing what should happen to your digital assets and multiple physical copies of an archive containing all the files you want to preserve. In the process, you may just find yourself becoming more organized and better prepared for random, fleeting emergencies too.

In much the same way that a book can walk you through the mechanics of writing a will but not tell you which assets to leave to whom, I can't give you precise step-by-step instructions for everything, because each person's situation is unique. My goal, instead, is to provide a thorough framework that will help you identify what you need to do and make smart decisions about how to carry out your plans.

Whether you're 25 or 95, and regardless of which devices or operating systems you use, I hope you'll find the resources here to put your digital affairs in order—and, with any luck, have some fun doing so.

What If I Can't Do Everything in This Book?

Please don't feel you have to follow every suggestion in this book in detail. Of course, you're entirely welcome to do so, but depending on the amount and types of digital data you have, it could take quite a while to get through everything. As you develop your own digital estate plan, you can incorporate as little or as much of this information as makes sense to you, and in any order.

Even if you accomplish only a fraction of what this book describes, you're still taking important steps toward preserving your digital legacy and helping your family and friends make the most of your data.

Quick Start

In this book I lead you through a process of compiling, documenting, and preserving information that you'll leave for future generations. For the most part, later topics build upon earlier topics, so I strongly recommend reading the book in linear order. (You may, however, choose to skip chapters or topics that don't apply to you.)

Take preliminary steps:

- ◆ Learn about the benefits and challenges of planning for your digital legacy; see [Envision Your Digital Legacy](#).
- ◆ Make detailed lists of your major types of digital data in [Inventory Your Digital Assets](#).
- ◆ Decide what types of data you'll preserve for the future, who will handle your digital estate, what file formats to use, and more; see [Make High-Level Decisions](#).

Prepare major categories of data for archiving:

- ◆ Learn what special actions you may need to take with your Apple, Google, and Microsoft accounts; see [Handle “Big Tech” Accounts](#).
- ◆ Scan (or have someone else scan) and organize photos and documents that currently exist only on paper; see [Digitize Photos and Documents](#).
- ◆ Make sure someone else will have the usernames, passwords, and other details necessary to access all your accounts; see [Deal with Passwords](#).
- ◆ Provide instructions for both ongoing access to your email account(s) and how to deal with all your saved messages; see [Deal with Email and Messages](#).

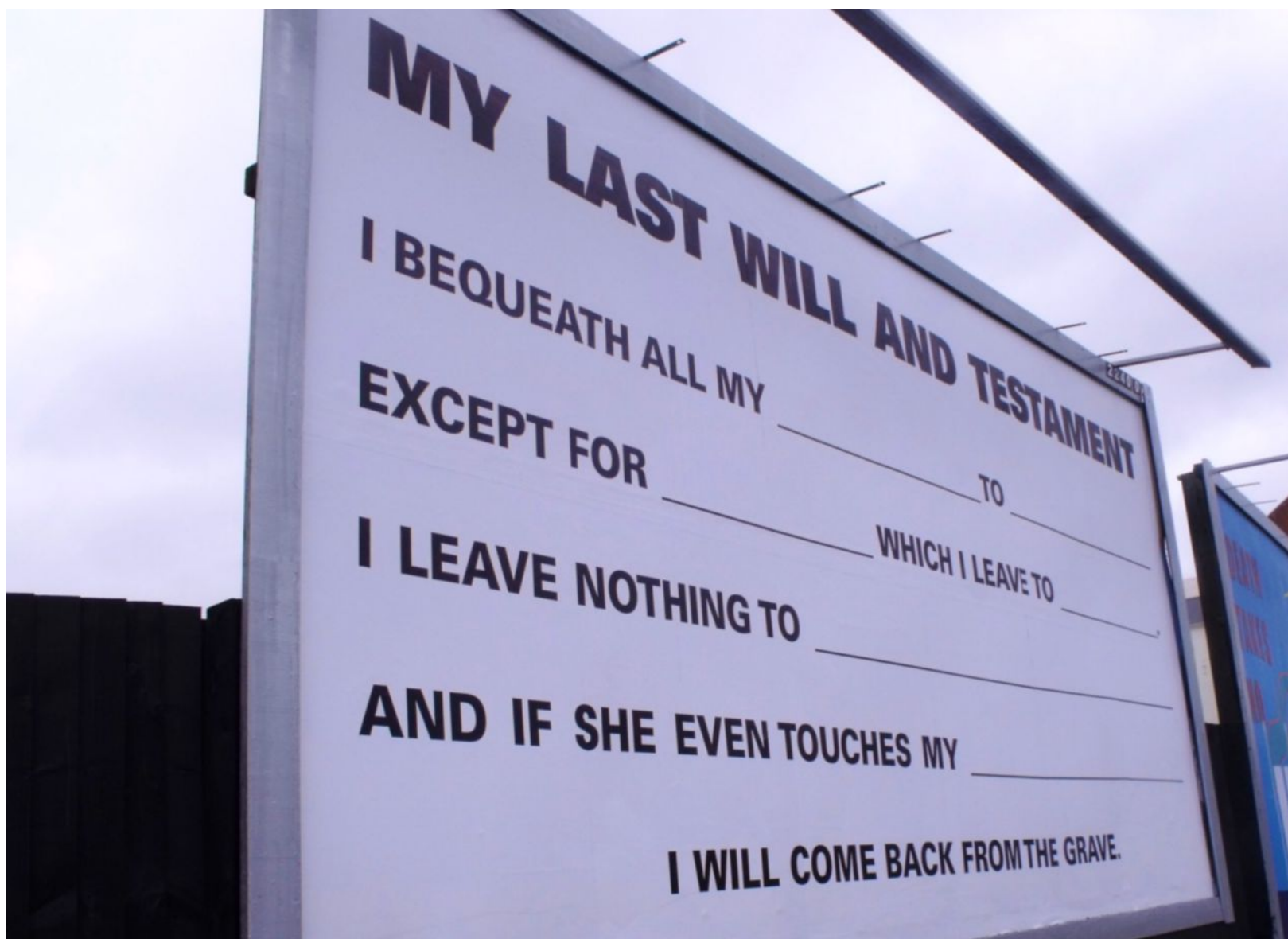
- ◆ Decide whether your social media accounts should be preserved (online or offline) and whether any final messages should be posted; see [Deal with Social Media](#).
- ◆ Make decisions about the files and software on your devices and in the cloud, plus backups and other miscellaneous items; see [Deal with Other Digital Data](#).

Assemble the pieces:

- ◆ Make one or more copies of your digital data on media that's likely to last quite a while; see [Preserve Your Data for Posterity](#).
- ◆ Create a file that includes your digital will, your data, detailed instructions, and other components of your digital legacy; see [Create a Legacy Dossier](#).

Note: As you work through this book, you'll be creating a digital will, as I discuss in [Begin Drafting Your Digital Will](#). At any time while reading this book, you can download a [Digital Will Template](#), in RTF format.

1. Envision Your Digital Legacy



Your digital legacy goes beyond the possessions in your will to include a lifetime of data.

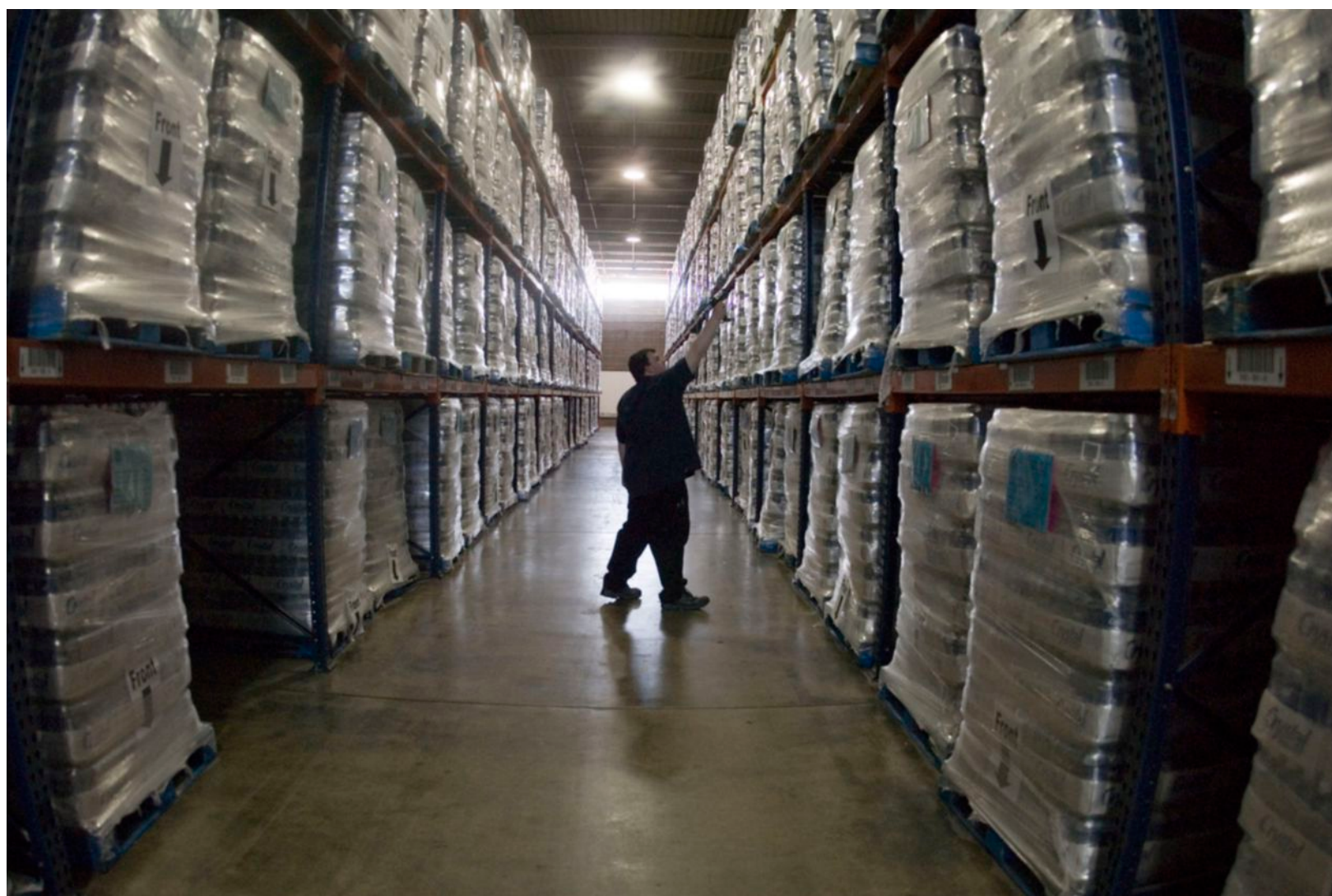
I know almost nothing about my paternal grandfather, who died a few months before I was born. I've seen photos of him, examined census records in which his name appears, and heard a few stories, but that's about it. And of his parents I know even less. There are complicated reasons why so little information about these family members survived, but the fact remains that whatever documents or genealogical

data I might dig up, I'll never be able to know what they were *like*. What were their interests, hopes, beliefs, and fears? Did they have a sense of humor? How did they interact with other people? Were they kind or cruel, interesting or dull? The answers to all such questions are beyond my reach.

By contrast, my descendants should have a bountiful supply of information about me. During my lifetime I've written many thousands of pages of books and articles, recorded hundreds of hours of audio and video, bared my soul in innumerable email messages, and posed for countless photos. I don't fancy myself a person of particular historical significance, but I would at the very least like family members in future generations to be able to find out what sort of person I was—what made me tick. And as long as I preserve all that data carefully, they'll be able to do just that. They won't have to rely on faded photos in a shoebox and half-forgotten, second-hand stories. And whether they consider me a hero, a villain, a champion, or a loser, at least their feelings about me will have a pretty strong basis in reality.

That's a big part of how I envision my own digital legacy. In this chapter, I want to help you get a sense of what yours might entail. Crucially, that includes not just the things you'll preserve for future generations, or even the stuff you'll want your next of kin to know about in the days leading up to your funeral. It also entails information and concrete steps that can improve your life today. At the same time, the complexities of preserving your digital legacy may be more involved than you imagine, and I hope to give you a realistic overview of the challenges you'll face. I also offer a few quick reminders about conventional, non-digital estate planning that you'll want to take action on if you haven't already done so.

2. Inventory Your Digital Assets



Your computer or mobile device is a virtual warehouse, with many thousands of files. Knowing what you have is a crucial first step.

When you're writing a will, it helps to have a fairly detailed list of your tangible assets—home, car, money, furniture, artwork, and so on. Perhaps you're leaving most of your estate to your spouse and kids, but you know your nephew has always loved that old cuckoo clock in the hall, or your neighbor would be thrilled to have your woodworking tools, and you want to make sure each item goes to the right recipient.

Many of your digital assets are qualitatively different in that they can (if you like) be left to more than one person—for example, you can give everyone you know a copy of your entire digital photo album, effectively for free. However, you may not truly own some of your digital assets; items like software, music, and movies might simply be licensed, which affects whether or how they can be passed on. And other digital assets, like online accounts and cryptocurrency, come with additional legal and logistical issues.

Rather than leave it to someone else to sort through this stuff later, I suggest starting now to create a list of your digital assets, including notes about how key data types are organized. Because your inventory of digital assets will form part of your digital will, I begin by helping you start that document. Your inventory will help you [Make High-Level Decisions](#) about how to prepare your digital legacy, which will in turn inform the rest of the process.

Begin Drafting Your Digital Will

Unlike your regular will, which deals with your physical assets, money, and so on, your *digital will* is an informal document that contains instructions on the disposition of your digital assets.

Note: When I say “informal,” I don’t mean that it’s breezy prose written in Comic Sans (although, hey, if that’s how you roll, more power to you). I mean it’s not a rigidly structured and legally enforceable document like a conventional will. Rules for whether or how a digital will can gain legal status vary wildly by jurisdiction. If you want to make it official, talk to your lawyer or estate planner for guidance.

A digital will doesn’t have to be fancy, and it doesn’t have to follow any specific format. It can be a simple document you create in your favorite word processor and then print out and keep with your regular will. Depending on the extent and nature of your digital assets, it might be just a few pages long or it might be much more extensive.

3. Make High-Level Decisions



Pick a door! The decisions you make now will influence how you prepare your digital legacy.

If you've followed the steps in the preceding chapter, [Inventory Your Digital Assets](#), you now have a fairly complete list of the items you need to make decisions about. Rather than go through that list item by item, we're going to work our way from larger issues to smaller ones.

In this chapter, I walk you through a number of high-level considerations. First I suggest figuring out the order in which you should attack various parts of the digital legacy process ([Determine Your Priorities](#)) and deciding which sorts of stuff, in general, you want to keep or delete ([Decide What to Preserve and Discard](#)).

Then we turn to what may be the most important step of all: choosing a digital executor to manage your digital assets when you're gone ([Choose a Digital Executor](#)). You'll record your instructions for this person in your digital will, which I described earlier ([Begin Drafting Your Digital Will](#)).

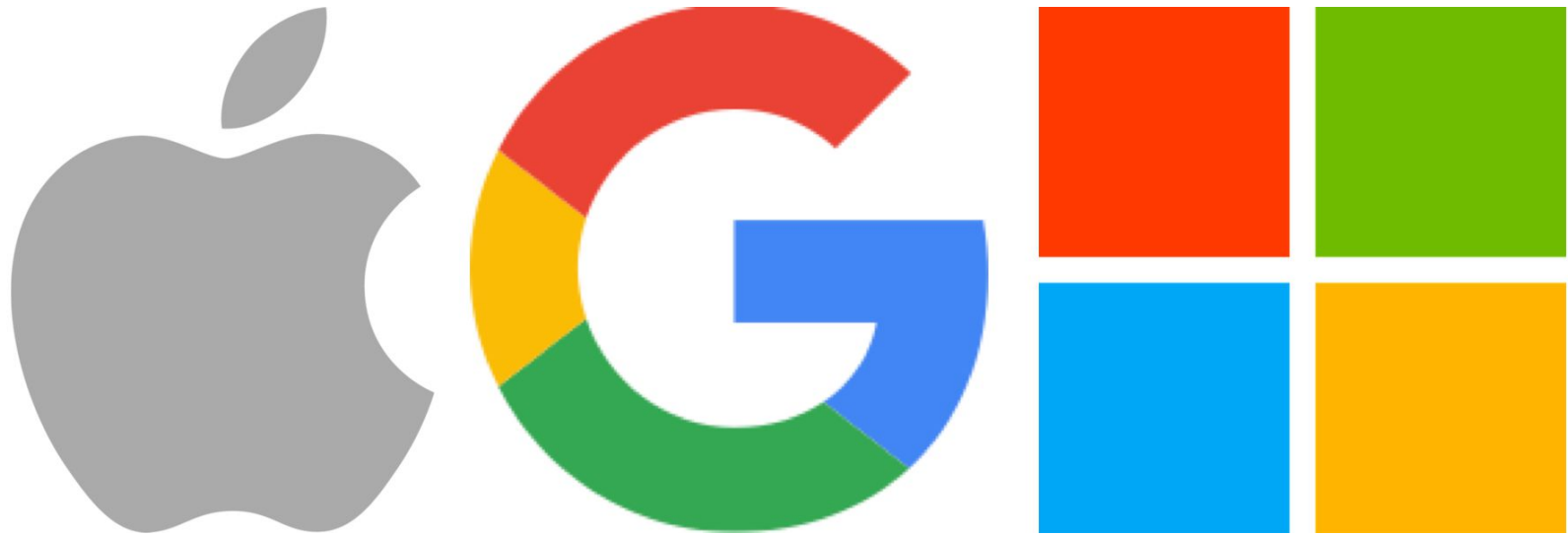
Finally, we take a somewhat technical trip into the world of file formats ([Decide on File Formats](#)), as I help you decide which file types are best suited for long-term storage.

Determine Your Priorities

The word “legacy” suggests the distant future—the way you want to be remembered generations from now. And, to be sure, preparing your data for the long haul is an important part of the process. However, as you assemble the files and instructions that will comprise your digital legacy, you should think about three time periods simultaneously:

- ◆ **The present:** Which of your digital assets could be useful *right now* to your friends, family members, and relatives? For example, would your siblings appreciate having access to your digital photo album? Would your relatives like copies of the paper photos you'll scan (see [Digitize Photos and Documents](#))? Are there key passwords you should share with a family member now, to make things more convenient for both of you (see [Deal with Passwords](#))? Could the sorts of instructions you might write for someone to carry out after your death also be useful when you're on vacation next month (see [How to Be Me](#))?
- ◆ **Immediate post-mortem needs:** If you die (or become suddenly ill or incapacitated), what digital information would a family member or other trusted person need *right away*? I'm thinking, for example, of access to financial accounts, insurance information, your pre-written obituary (see [Your Autobiography](#)), and anything

4. Handle “Big Tech” Accounts



The operating system used by your computer, smartphone, or tablet was almost certainly made by Apple, Google, or Microsoft. Accounts with these companies have far-reaching implications.

Apple, Google, and Microsoft are not the only “big tech” companies out there, but they have a special status because together they’re responsible for creating the operating systems that most of our computers, smartphones, and tablets use—macOS, iOS, and iPadOS from Apple; Android and ChromeOS from Google; and Windows from Microsoft.

Each company uses accounts to sync data, manage hardware, and coordinate services across multiple devices (and even, in some cases, multiple operating systems). Because these accounts have virtual tentacles that reach into many parts of your digital life, it’s especially important to ensure that the person or people you designate can access the accounts and their data after you’re gone.

Most of us have more than one of these accounts. For example, even if you’re all-in on Apple or Microsoft operating systems (or Linux, for

that matter), you very likely have a Google account too, which is used for services like Gmail and Google Docs.

Of course, credentials for all these accounts should be included in your digital will, but—especially in the case of Apple and Google—there are additional steps you should take ahead of time to make it easier for your heirs to access the data in these accounts.

Apple Accounts

Virtually everyone who has ever used an Apple product, or even just purchased something (physical or digital) from Apple, has an account known as an Apple Account (formerly called Apple ID). Your Apple Account username takes the form of an email address, usually ending in [@icloud.com](#), [@me.com](#), or [@mac.com](#). It has an associated password and, often, two-factor authentication in the form of a code sent to your trusted devices.

Note: All iCloud accounts are also Apple Accounts, but not all Apple Accounts are associated with iCloud accounts.

The list of data that may be part of your Apple Account is quite long, but it includes all the information you sync between your Apple devices via iCloud (email, calendars, contacts, reminders, notes, and so on), the documents you store in iCloud Drive, all the photos and videos in Apple’s Photos app, and a great many other things that may be important to pass on to someone else. In short, for Apple users, this single account is the key to some of your most valuable data.

You can, of course, record your Apple Account username, its password, and any two-factor authentication details in your digital will—and perhaps you’ve already done so. But there are additional steps you should consider that may simplify (or, in some cases, complicate) matters for your digital executor and your heirs.

5. Digitize Photos and Documents



Many of us have boxes full of old photos and documents that will last longer if converted to digital form.

Earlier, in [Inventory Other Personal Data](#), I talked about your digital photos, including how to make notes about which ones are especially important to add to your archive and pass on to other people. But those aren't the only photos you should be thinking about.

If you're like most people, you have photos and videos in digital format going back to whenever you started using a digital camera. You probably also have digital documents of various kinds stretching back even longer. But you may also have paper photos from earlier decades in albums or shoeboxes, not to mention paper documents that may

have historical or sentimental value—school records, old love letters, your recipe collection, and so on.

Of course, you can (and probably should) leave those boxes of paper to your heirs. But paper deteriorates over time and is also subject to the damaging effects of moisture, heat, and other environmental issues (not to mention fire, flood, and so on), so if you want that material to be preserved indefinitely, making a digital copy is an excellent idea. Doing so also enables you to make those photos and documents more easily searchable and sharable, benefits you may well take advantage of right now.

The effort and expense involved in scanning these photos and documents is largely a function of quantity: it's no big deal for a handful of pictures, but scanning tens of thousands of pages could take you years or cost a great deal of money. In this chapter, I spell out various ways you can tackle this task, discuss the ways the digital files should be organized and preserved, and help you consider various options for handling the original paper copies.

Tip: As useful as it is to digitize your paper photos and documents, I consider this a lower-priority task than preserving data that started out in digital form. After all, someone else *could* deal with the paper later if need be. So, if you get partway through this chapter and start feeling like this part of the process is too overwhelming, my advice is to skip it and return to it later if you have the time and energy.

6. Deal with Passwords



Every site and service that asks you for a password represents information you need to pass on to someone.

When I turn on my computer, it asks me for my password; without it, no one would be able to access any of my files. The same goes for my smartphone and tablet (although mobile devices typically use shorter, numeric passcodes). And in the course of my work and play, I use (at least occasionally) hundreds of websites, apps, and cloud services, each of which requires an account with a username and password or

passkey, and most of which contain at least some information that would be interesting or useful to my family and friends when I'm no longer around.

Note: You may notice that I snuck in the word “passkey” just above. What's a passkey, and how is it different from a password? See the sidebar [What About Passkeys?](#), ahead.

In fact, “useful” is an understatement: without access to certain accounts, no one will be able to carry out my wishes—whether that means shutting the accounts down, preserving them for posterity, or keeping them going under new ownership.

You should already have a list of your most important accounts (see [Inventory Online Accounts](#)). Whether you have just a handful of accounts or thousands, and whether you consider the information in them to be trivial or essential, you should take steps to ensure that the accounts are accessible to your digital executor—and that you've clearly stated what you want to be done with them. In this chapter, I discuss how to go about doing that.

Use a Password Manager

I've spent much of my writing career urging readers to protect themselves, their data, and their online privacy in various ways—backups, encryption, secure web browsing, and so on. One of my most important recommendations, which I've come back to time and time again in books, articles, presentations, and courses, is to be smart about the way you use passwords.

7. Deal with Email and Messages



Your stored (sent and saved) email can tell future generations a great deal about you.

Some people treat email as an entirely ephemeral means of communication, along the lines of telephone calls. They receive a message, reply to it (or not), delete it, and then never think about it again. At the other end of the spectrum are people like me who save virtually every email message they've ever sent or received. In between are numerous other strategies for handling email, but I think it's fair to

say that most of us have some quantity of saved email, and it may turn out to be one of our most important digital assets.

Without a doubt, a large percentage of email we send and receive is unexciting (to say the least). And yet, a trip through my email archive can tell me (or someone else) things like:

- ◆ Where I traveled and when
- ◆ What I purchased and when
- ◆ Extensive details of work and personal projects
- ◆ How I reacted to important events in my life and others' lives
- ◆ When I set up various online accounts

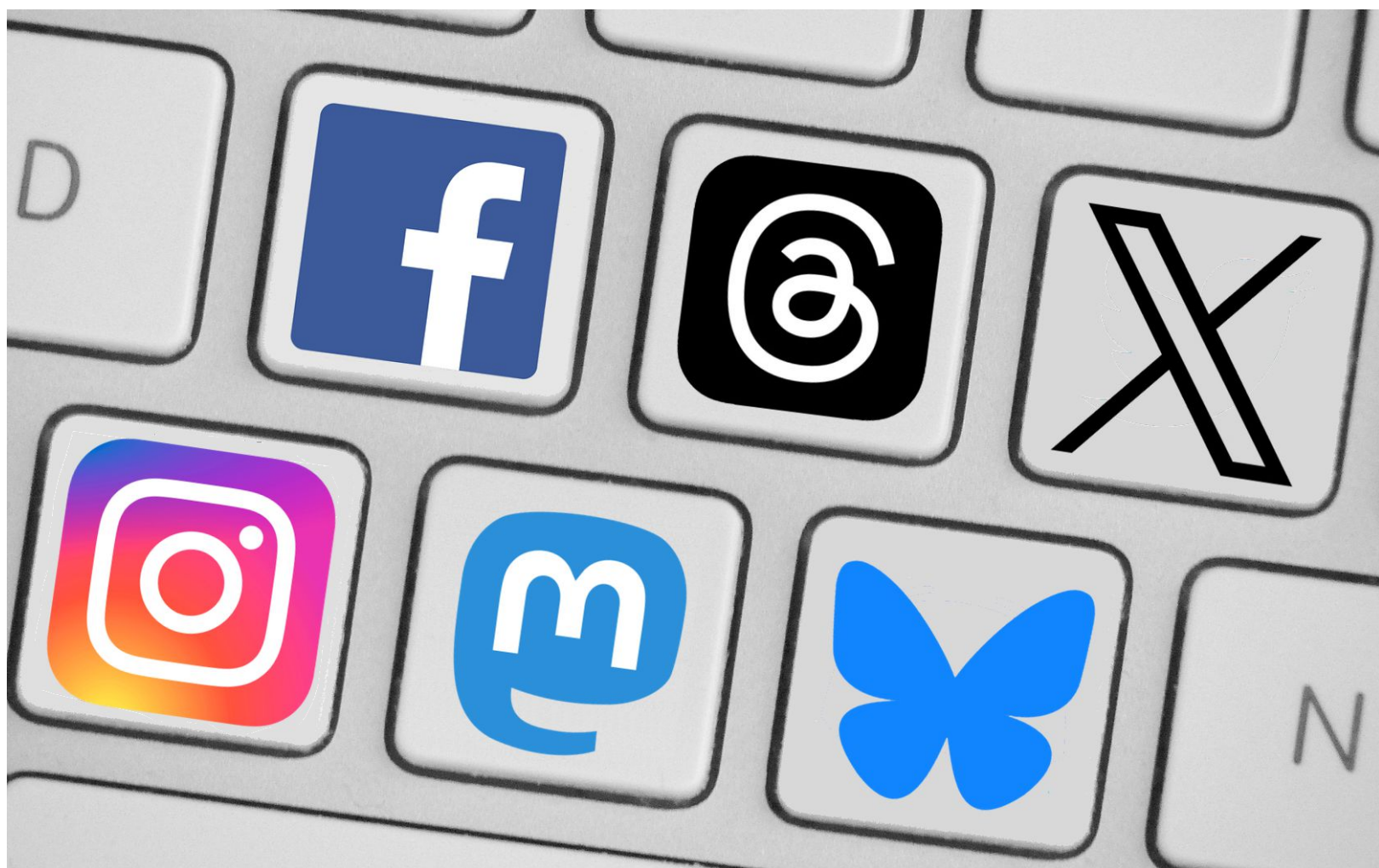
And, of course, much more. This information could be incredibly valuable to your heirs, even though it may take extensive searching and filtering to find the useful tidbits.

On the other hand, I know people who, for the very same reasons, want to make sure no one else can ever see their email! Maybe it contains secrets you want to remain secret forever, or maybe it shows an embarrassing side of you. Whatever the reason, if you want to *avoid* letting other people access your email when you're no longer around, that, too, will require planning.

There's also the matter of ongoing email access. If you get hit by a bus tomorrow and an old friend (or coworker, or business) sends you email next week, will someone else be able to see it and send an appropriate reply on your behalf? What if a password to one of your accounts is lost and someone needs to reset it by having a link sent to your email address? For reasons like these, you should give some thought to how your account itself will be handled, apart from the archived messages.

All this is equally true for other methods of digital communication, even if it's not email as such. If you use Apple's Messages app, Whats-

8. Deal with Social Media



Your social media accounts, such as Facebook and Threads, can live on (in a sense)—if you want them to.

Do you use Facebook, Mastodon, Bluesky, X (formerly Twitter), Threads, or other social media services? (If not, nothing to see here; skip ahead to the next chapter, [Deal with Other Digital Data](#).) You may want a loved one to post a final message on your behalf, or you may want to hand ownership of the account to someone else. You may also want to have your messages archived (online or offline).

As is the case with email (see [Deal with Email and Messages](#)), there are also some people who shudder at the very thought of their social

media accounts existing at all after they've died, and would prefer the accounts to be shut down and expunged from the cloud.

Regardless of how you approach social media, it's worth reviewing what you have, how you use it, and what your options are for the future, and then including those wishes in your digital will.

Review Your Social Media Accounts

Earlier, in [Social Media](#), I asked you to create a list of your social media accounts to include as part of your inventory of digital assets. Refer back to that list now.

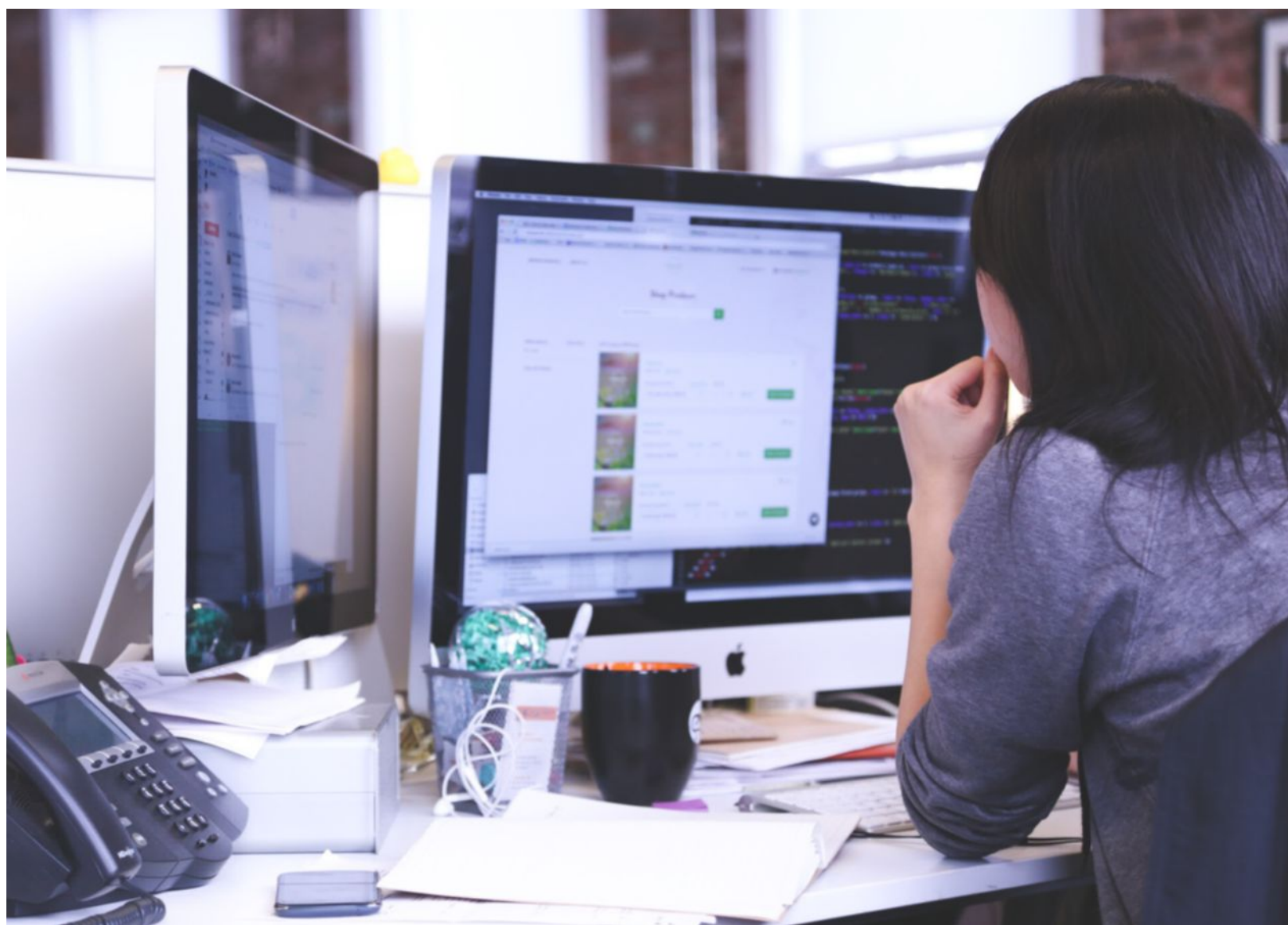
Take a few minutes to log in to each of the accounts on your list and skim through your posts, photos, and other information. For each service on your list, make a few notes about the extent to which you use it and how important it is to preserve its data. You can then choose any of several approaches for dealing with each account, as I describe next.

Note: Even if you authorized a social media service to preserve your data in perpetuity, the law may in some cases permit your executor or other legal representative to request its deletion. Therefore, be sure to state your wishes clearly in your digital will and talk them over with your digital executor.

Decide What to Do with Each Account

Under the heading “Social Media” in your digital will, list all your social media accounts along with their respective usernames, passwords, and two-factor authentication methods (if any), and how you'd like your digital executor to handle them.

9. Deal with Other Digital Data



Your media, software, and other miscellaneous digital data need to have a plan, too.

The previous several chapters detailed how to deal with major categories of digital data, such as photos, accounts, email, and social media. This chapter is about everything else—all the other bits (see *Inventory Your Digital Assets*) for which you should record your wishes.

Although these topics aren't long or complex, they're no less crucial than those I covered earlier. For example, they include all the miscellaneous files and software on your computer and mobile devices, as well as data you've stored in cloud services such as Google Docs and Dropbox. This chapter also covers how to handle backups and archives of your data, whether you've stored them on hard drives or optical discs, in the cloud, or in some other way.

Handle Your Photos

One type of data you listed in [Inventory Other Personal Data](#) was your photos. On the one hand, photos are tricky because you might have vast numbers of them, and you may not have the time or patience to pull out just the most special ones or figure out, in detail, who gets what. On the other hand, as with so many other topics in this book, I recommend keeping things as simple as you possibly can.

Write in your digital will how you want your photos to be handled, and although you can make this description as fine-grained as you like, it could also be something like:

- ◆ Put copies of everything in my “Favorite Photos” folder on flash drives and send them to Nico, Chris, Meryl, and Siobhan
- ◆ Send all the photos in the “Grandma” album to my grandchildren.
- ◆ Make sure my best friend gets the photos of our vacations together.
- ◆ Give everyone in my family a copy of all my photos and let them figure out what to do with them.
- ◆ Email my cat-hating next-door neighbor a different cat photo every day until you run out.

OK, I'm kidding about that last one, but just saying: you can have some fun with this while making sure your essential photos are preserved in the right people's hands.

10. Preserve Your Data for Posterity



HERE LIES HISTORY
BURIED AUGUST 6, 1988
TO BE
RESURRECTED AND OPENED
AUGUST 6, 2088

O.C.C.C.

What you're creating amounts to a time capsule that will need to be preserved so people far in the future can see and appreciate your data.

You've catalogued your digital data and decided what should be done with it when you're gone. That's terrific—and essential—but if your plan hinges on a great-grandchild being able to boot your old iMac that's been passed down for generations, you've still got a problem.

Imagine finding a 1981 IBM PC, forgotten for decades in an attic. It might still turn on, or maybe not. Depending on the configuration, it may include a hard drive or, more likely, 5¼-inch floppy drives or even a cassette drive for data storage. Let's be optimistic and say the media was stored with the computer. Will it still be readable today even if the computer works? Perhaps, but I wouldn't count on it. And if you're lucky enough to be able to see those old files on a screen, you still have the challenge of getting the information onto a modern computer (or even just printing it).

That's what today's devices will look like to your grandchildren. And even if you store them in museum-like conditions, machines, media, and the data they contain deteriorate over time. You can't control how technology will change years in the future, but you can take steps to increase the likelihood that future generations will be able to read the files you've so carefully preserved. The first part of this chapter covers which media to use, how to preserve it for the near future, and instructions you can leave that will help your data last into the more distant future.

In addition, even if your current devices won't be passed on for generations, they could be incredibly valuable to the person handling your estate, so you should also [Decide What to Do with Your Hardware](#).

Tip: Since your digital executor will be intimately involved with handling your data, I recommend discussing your choices here (media, file formats, and so on) with them and involving them in the decisions.

Choose Archival Media

In museums and libraries, you can often find books that are hundreds of years old, and other documents (scrolls, papyrus, clay tablets, and so on) that are much older. But for every document that has survived hundreds or thousands of years, a vast number of others have not. All

11. Create a Legacy Dossier



It's time to wrap up all the documents you've created into a (paper and/or digital) dossier.

Early in this book I advised you to [Begin Drafting Your Digital Will](#), and I hope you've been adding to it and refining it as you've gone along. And, in the preceding chapter, I explained how to [Preserve Your Data for Posterity](#) by choosing appropriate media and storing it carefully. Your digital will, and your data itself, are obviously key components of your digital legacy.

However, in this final chapter I'd like to go a step further and urge you to create a legacy dossier for yourself. This will be a collection of documents (which, ideally, should exist in both physical and digital forms—for example, printouts in a folder plus a flash drive containing digital copies) that includes your conventional will, your digital will, and several other pieces of information that collectively constitute the information about yourself that you want to pass on:

- ◆ **Instructions:** An overview of what's in the dossier, how to use it, and a summary of your wishes and concerns
- ◆ **How to be me:** An explanation of how to do key business and household tasks that will help your executor—and may also come in handy as a reference for yourself
- ◆ **Your autobiography:** Your self-written obituary, in which you get to portray yourself exactly as you want to be remembered
- ◆ **Genealogical and biographical data:** Curated facts about yourself, your family, and your ancestors

You'll put this in a safe and accessible place for your next of kin or digital executor, and update it from time to time as needed.

Instructions

Speaking as someone who has had to puzzle through the assembly of way too many toys and pieces of furniture that included lots of pieces but lacked adequate instructions, I would like to urge you to include, as the very first thing a person will find when opening your dossier, a simple “Read Me” file explaining what this collection of documents is and what to do with it.

This instruction page should be quite brief, and it should basically provide a table of contents for the dossier along with a one- or two-sentence summary of how each component should be used.

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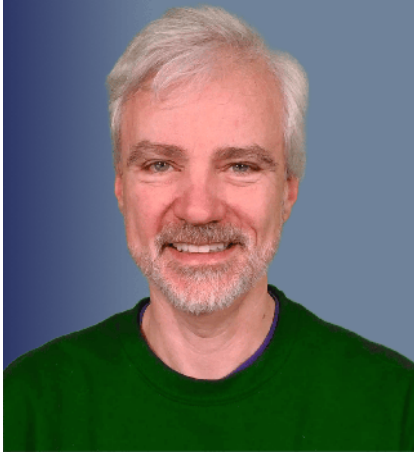
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About the Author and Publisher



Joe Kissell is the author of more than 75 books about technology. In 2017, he also became the publisher of Take Control Books, when alt concepts—the company he runs with his wife, Morgen Jahnke—acquired the Take Control imprint from TidBITS Publishing Inc.’s owners, Adam and Tonya Engst. Before he began writing full-time in 2003, Joe managed software development, a *totally normal* profession for someone with degrees in philosophy and linguistics.

In his rare non-work hours, Joe likes to walk, cook, read, and practice tai chi. He lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, with Morgen and their sons. To contact Joe about this book, [send him email](#) and *please* include [Take Control of Your Digital Legacy](#) in the subject. You can follow him on Mastodon ([@joekissell](#)) or Bluesky ([@joekissell.com](#)), or visit his personal website, [JoeKissell.com](#).

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