

Save Your Family Treasures

Books

With a little patience, prompt action, and professional tips, saving cherished photographs, letters, and other irreplaceable objects is possible. These salvage tips will help you stabilize your treasured books and buy you time to make an educated decision on further treatment and handling of your keepsakes.

Personal safety is important when working with objects retrieved from contaminated water. Wear the personal protective equipment noted below. Wash your hands often with soap and clean water or use an alcohol-based hand-cleaning gel if soap and clean water are not available.

Supplies List



To protect yourself from contaminated water and mold:

- Disposable vinyl or nitrile gloves
- Safety goggles
- Protective clothing – apron, long-sleeve shirt, long pants, sturdy shoes or boots
- N95 mask or face covering (if mold is present)



To rinse books:

- Bucket or plastic tub
- Water – distilled water is preferable because tap water contains additional chemicals, but tap water will suffice



To air dry books:

- Unprinted paper towels (with perforations at 5½” recommended) or other unprinted absorbent paper such as unprinted newsprint



To freeze books:

- Freezer paper or wax paper
- Freezer-safe tape (exterior blue painter’s tape recommended)
- Cardboard boxes (to store books in freezer)

Follow These Steps

If you have books that were in sewage-contaminated water, they are hazardous to your health. Discard them or consult a professional conservator for advice. If you have a wet book that is printed on coated paper, such as a yearbook, freeze it immediately (see below) and consult a professional conservator. You can find a conservator here: <https://www.culturalheritage.org/about-conservation/find-a-conservator>



If you have a few damp or partially wet books:

1. Remove dust jackets to dry separately. (Refer to the instructions in Save Your Family Treasures: Documents and Papers.)
2. If the books were in muddy, rusty, or salt water, rinse the books, one at a time, in a bucket or tub of clean water, holding the book closed tightly while dipping.
 - Allow excess water to drain off. Don’t squeeze the book!

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3. On a table or clean surface covered in absorbent paper, stand the books up with covers open to a 90-degree angle.
 - Fan out pages to air dry.
4. Paperback books or large books can be placed flat on a clean surface covered in absorbent paper.
 - Insert paper towels in between pages every quarter inch or so to absorb water.
 - Insert paper towels inside the front and back covers.
 - The paper towels will need to be replaced when they become damp. Keep replacing them until the book is dry. Have patience! Drying out books takes time.
 - You can promote air circulation around the books by setting up a fan that's not pointed directly at the books. They will eventually dry out. Prematurely putting them away while still wet will lead to mold.



If you have wet or saturated books or don't have time to air dry damp books:

1. Remove dust jackets to dry separately. (Refer to the instructions in Save Your Family Treasures: Documents and Papers.)
2. Wrap each book in freezer paper or wax paper as you would wrap a present.
 - Use freezer-safe tape, such as exterior blue painter's tape, which can withstand freezing.
3. Pack books, spine-side down, in a single layer in a sturdy cardboard box.
4. Place the box in a freezer, preferably with a frost-free setting.
 - Set the freezer to the lowest possible temperature.
 - Expect this drying process to take from several weeks to several months, depending on the freezer temperature and how wet the books are.
5. Check the books after several weeks. Carefully try to open a book.
 - If the pages separate easily where you've started opening the book, follow the steps above for air drying damp books.
 - If the book resists opening, it is not ready to thaw. Do not force pages apart. Rewrap the book, replace it in the freezer, and keep checking until the pages separate easily. Then follow the steps above for air drying damp books.



For more information, visit the Heritage Emergency National Task Force website, <https://s.si.edu/2WKgccS>, email HENTF@si.edu, or scan this QR code:



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