THE (MOSTLY) PAPERLESS WORLD

When people started memorializing their thoughts thousands of years ago, they painted or carved things like oxen, trees, and adorable kittens on cave walls. Unfortunately, others had to visit the cave to see these things. Then folks invented papyrus from reeds, clay tablets from, well, clay, and parchment from sheep (bad time to be a sheep), all of which were portable media (if you consider a brick to be portable).

Then someone invented paper, the printing press, Xerox machine, and Staples, and we were awash with paper. So much paper that someone had to invent landfills and recycling so we had a place to put the paper when we were through using it.

I don't keep much paper these days. I read digital issues of newspapers and magazines on my iPad, pore over books on my Kindle, and keep all manner of documents, manuals for my kitchen appliances, and insurance policies on my computer as **PDF documents**. And PDF's are at the core of the paperless world.

The Portable Document Format

The PDF was invented by Adobe in 1992 as a universal format for presenting and exchanging documents that virtually any computer can display. For example, PSRC's communications coordinator, Emily Logue, composes this newsletter using Microsoft Publisher and then converts it to a PDF document that you can download (and keep) from PSRC's website. You don't need Microsoft Publisher to view it. The PDF revolutionized electronic document exchange, and made the "paperless office" (or "home") possible.

Microsoft Word and most all Apple applications can create PDF versions of whatever document, drawing, or spreadsheet you're creating. You can email these PDF files to anyone, and they'll be able to view them on their computer without needing the originating software. You can download the instruction booklet for your toaster in PDF, as well as your monthly checking account statement from your bank, and your current insurance policies.

You can annotate a PDF document with text, highlight sections, and even add your signature if it's a contract. (You cannot, however, modify the text unless you purchase a PDF creator such as Acrobat Pro.)

And you don't have to shred anything when you're done with the PDF document. Just delete it from your computer.

If, for some reason, you don't have a PDF "viewer," you can download Acrobat Reader for free (yes, FREE). Mac computers include a program called Preview that displays PDF documents (among many other formats).

Scanners

When I receive a paper document I want to keep, I scan it directly into a PDF document (which most scanners can do) and save it to one of my many computer folders. High-speed scanners (about $500) can convert a 20-page double-sided document into a PDF file in less than a minute, leaving a clean desk (and a full recycle bin). All-in-one printers, which include a scanner, are less than $100.

Sometimes, Paper is Better

That said, I still buy physical reference books for software applications, prefer real birthday cards, and cherish paper drawings from my 4-year-old grandson. Everything else can be digital. But that's just me.

If you want to learn how to go "paperless," or need help with your digital doo-dads, bring your laptop, tablet, or phone to the PSRC computer lab on Tuesday from 1 to 4 p.m. or Friday from 10 a.m. until noon. Our volunteers will provide our own brand of personal service.