



Adequate Records Management in Perspective - Classifying Official Records

What is records classification?

Records classification is the systematic identification and arrangement of business activities and/or records into categories according to logically structured conventions, methods, and procedural rules represented in a classification system¹. Classification facilitates description, control, links and determinations of disposal and access status.

Why classify official records?

The classification of official records is a key records management function. It ensures:

- the structured organisation of records
- the consistent description of records
- agency-wide access to records
- increased speed and consistency of access to records.

Staff time when searching for official records should also be reduced when records are classified in a consistent and systematic manner.

By ensuring that records are classified, an agency will satisfy Outcomes 2 and 5 of the *Adequate Records Management -Meeting the Standard*.

What tools are there for the classification of records?

A common tool is a thesaurus. A thesaurus is a tool that supports the classification and management of records, usually at the file level. It ensures that classification terms are used consistently throughout a records system. It is a 'controlled language' tool.

Thesauri for records management purposes, which are based on business functions, enable records to be classified according to the context in which they are created and used. In contrast to a subject approach, records are therefore classified according to why they exist rather than what they are about.

Using a functions based approach for classification recognises that records are defined by their relationship to the activities they document. This gives records meaning and context.

¹ Standards Australia, AS ISO 15489.1, 3.5, 2002.

Following this approach, the thesaurus is usually structured so that the first two levels in the thesaurus relate to functions and supporting activities. The third level may be free text or controlled subject descriptors².

There are two types of thesauri that allow the classification of records according to function:

- a general administrative thesaurus for records common to multiple agencies, e.g. the *Keyword AAA Thesaurus* developed by State Records Authority of New South Wales
- a functional thesaurus for agency specific records.

What is the purpose of the *Keyword AAA Thesaurus*?

State Records has endorsed *Keyword AAA* as a thesaurus of general administrative terms for the South Australian Government.

Keyword AAA is designed for general administrative records that are common to most agencies in South Australia. *Keyword AAA* is not used to classify records specific to an agency or authority.

Should an agency have its own functional thesaurus?

Yes, each agency will benefit from the development of a thesaurus that relates to the functions and associated official records that are particular to that agency.

Such a thesaurus is developed to ensure that it can only be applied to the functions and official records of a particular agency.

The use of an agency specific thesaurus in conjunction with *Keyword AAA* will ensure that all official records of the agency can be adequately classified.

What is a merged thesaurus?

Once an agency has both an agency specific thesaurus and *Keyword AAA* consideration can be given to merging the two thesauri. This will result in a document known as a merged thesaurus that is applicable to all of the official records of the agency.

Are there other uses of a thesaurus?

A thesaurus can also be linked in records management software to any disposal schedules that exist for an agency. This has the result that when a record is registered it is also assigned a retention period.

This has the advantage of reducing the effort needed to ensure that official records are sentenced appropriately. All such pre-assigned sentences, however, need to be reviewed prior to the physical disposal of the records.

² State Records Authority of New South Wales, *Guidelines for Developing and Implementing a Keyword Thesaurus*, 2003.

Is training available in the use and development of thesauri?

State Records of South Australia recognises that the use of *Keyword AAA* can be complex. As a result we offer a *Using a Keyword Thesaurus to Control and Classify Records* training course to agencies.

State Records also recognises that the creation of a functional thesaurus for agency specific records is a significant exercise. As a result we offer *Developing a Functional Thesaurus* (two day course) to agencies. Day 1 of this course includes using a Keyword Thesaurus to control and classify records.

If agencies have any queries concerning these courses please contact the Course Registrar at State Records <http://www.archives.sa.gov.au/contact.html>

Further information

- State Records of South Australia, *Developing a Thesaurus Guidelines* (2002).
- State Records of South Australia, Records Management CD ROM.
- State Records Authority of New South Wales, *Guidelines for Developing and Implementing a Keyword Thesaurus* (2003).
- Standards Australia, Australian Standard *AS ISO 15489.2*, section 4.3.4 (2002).

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