

# Conservator Hacks



## Archival “quality”? Really?

*By Jane Dalley, CSP Conservator*

I was shopping in an office supply store recently and came across packets of clear plastic sleeves advertised as “PVC-free”, “acid-free”, “archival quality” and “archival safe”. Unfortunately, only one of these terms comes close to meaning anything and even then, it is still subjective.

Putting torn documents and original photographs into clear plastic sleeves is a standard practice in archives and museums. However, it is important to use a good quality material such as polyester terephthalate, food grade polyethylene or polypropylene. Ideally, any materials that are in contact with original material must meet the standards required by the Photo Activity Test, or PAT.

The plastic must also be free of additives and surface coatings which have a tendency to degrade whatever they are in contact with. For example, polyvinyl chloride is often added to impart softness and flexibility. This is why Mylar sleeves are rigid and plastic grocery bags are not. Unfortunately, PVC leaches out of the plastic onto whatever it is in contact with. This is why your driver’s licence information is permanently etched on the inside of the plastic sleeve, and your Grade 9 chemistry notes are offset on the inside cover of a 3-ring binder.

Polyester is sometimes advertised as acid-free, but this is irrelevant, as the level of acidity – the pH – can only be measured in an aqueous solution and, as far as I know, plastic does not dissolve in water! The presence of surface coatings or additives is the important factor here.

But what if it says “archival quality” or “archival safe”? They can’t just say that, can they? Yes, they can. There is no true definition of these terms and they mean nothing unless qualified by a phrase such as “passes the PAT”.

As you can probably see, the only somewhat – useful term used above is “PVC free”. However, the manufacturer may consider this term to mean “less than a certain percentage” of PVC. One way of determining the presence of PVC is to conduct a Beilstein test, as described in CCI Note # 17-1 [Beilstein Test](#), using a piece of copper wire and a propane torch. This Note also has a list of clear plastic sleeves that have been tested by the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI). If you don’t wish to test, you can follow their recommendations!

I ended up purchasing 3 types of protective sleeves and testing them myself. They passed the Beilstein test, but I plan on asking CCI to test them to confirm my results. I will keep you all posted!

In the meantime, please remember that it is Buyer Beware when it comes to purchasing “archival quality” and “acid-free” storage materials! If you have any questions about the suitability of a particular storage enclosure, or would like to learn how to make your own, please contact me at: [conservator@museumsmanitoba.com](mailto:conservator@museumsmanitoba.com).