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February 7, 2014

How to Make a Photo Last Forever (or Close Enough)

By Greg Scoblete



I wonder how long it will be until people no longer print out anything? I have to believe it's not as far out as some people may imagine.

Think about how weird it is to print something out in this day and age. Not only do we all have phones that can display any document without the need to waste paper, there are now millions upon millions of tablets even more capable of doing this. And soon, flexible displays. - MG Siegler

It's true -- while the dream of a "paperless office" may still be just a chimera, it's increasingly odd to print things these days. Few of us outside of the paper and logging industries would probably complain about this, but there is one area where our migration away from print has arguably done some real harm, and that's our photographs.

There's no question that the advent of digital cameras, smartphones and social networks have embedded photography into our lives in an unprecedented way. Twenty years ago, you would spend good money just to see your photo. Today, a company gets offered \$3 billion dollars because it promises to delete your photo after ten seconds.

But while it's never been easier to take and share images, it's actually very hard to preserve them. By "preserve" I don't mean for five years. I mean for thirty or forty or even 100 years.

Not every photo you take needs to last that long, of course. Posterity doesn't need to see

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Is This Apple's iOS in the Car at Work?

your Instagrammed breakfast. But your grandkids may want to see their parent's baby pictures. Photos, truly meaningful ones, are meant to be passed down to future generations. Photographs are kept in families for decades. In the days when photography consisted of prints, that was easy to do. You'd simply hand over a box of prints. But today? It's not so easy.

Consider this: Dropbox and Box, two of the major names in cloud storage, have been in business for under 10 years. Google has been around for 20. Are they going to last 50 years -- or 100? Do you think those photos you're posting to Instagram or Facebook will be around in 25 years, let alone 100? Could any of the dozens of cloud storage services popping up last for two generations -- and can you pick the one that does? How about those photos piling up on your computer's hard drive or an external drive? You'll be lucky to get **seven years out of your hard drive before it crashes**. Of course, you can stay ahead of these hard drive crashes by constantly migrating your ever-larger collection of digital files to new drives, but will you (the average, non-tech savvy consumer) remember to keep up?

Now consider this: a photo printed on a \$99 inkjet printer can, if properly stored, **last for over 200 years or more**. It won't crash. It won't go out of business. It won't get hacked. It won't become "unreadable" thanks to out-of-date software or hardware. It won't charge you \$5-a-month for the privilege of holding onto it. You won't have to do anything with it to ensure it lasts for generations except store it properly. About the only danger to a printed photograph's life beyond improper storage is some kind of natural disaster.

So when it comes to your digital photos, the truth is that printing is still very relevant. There's no better way to store them for the future than to print them, at least today. Not all of them, of course, you'd go broke, but the keepers. And when it comes to printing your photos, you have plenty of choices: you can upload photos to online services, drop off a memory card at a retailer, or use a kiosk to have prints made instantly. But to make a photo print that will last generations, only one method can deliver the goods: your home photo printer.

Sounds strange right? But according to print permanence expert Henry Wilhelm, it's true. Wilhelm wrote the book (**literally**) on print permanence and runs an **independent testing service** where he scrutinizes all manner of photo prints from a variety of printers to simulate how they will age and endure under various conditions. Based on this extensive research, Wilhelm has concluded that prints produced on inkjet photo printers produce the longest-lasting photos. But there's a bit more to it than that.

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Greg Scoblete (@GregScoblete) is the editor of RealClearTechnology and an editor on RealClearWorld. He is the co-author of [From Fleeting to Forever: A Guide to Enjoying and Preserving Your Digital Photos and Videos](#).

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Not just any home printer using any old ink and paper will do.

You need an inkjet printer, not a dye-sublimation printer. Most home printers use inkjet technology for printing, but a few snapshot printers (i.e. those that print out photos that are 4 x 6 inches in size, like Canon's Selphy line, use dye sublimation instead. Those dye sub printers won't do for long-lasting photos.

Pigment inks last longer than dyes: Printer makers like dye-based inks because they produce great looking color photos, Wilhelm said. But dye inks simply don't last as long as pigmented inks. That's not to say dye inks fade quickly - some will last for 100 years - but if you want the longest possible lasting photo, you'll need to find a printer that uses pigmented inks. Unfortunately, it's not always clear whether a certain ink is pigmented or not - even in the fine print.

Keep it in the family: Whether you have a dye or pigment-based system, to get the longest-lasting prints, it's important to only buy the paper and ink made by the same company that manufactured your printer, Wilhelm noted. You may be tempted by lower cost paper and inks (or may want to try to refill existing inkjet cartridges with third party inks) but in testing these products, Wilhelm found a sharp decrease in longevity. "If there's one categorical piece of advice I would give it would be to avoid those products," he said. In some cases, yellowing of photos exposed to air occurred within weeks.

Staying within the manufacturer's brand also gives you a few simple ways to get higher quality photos too, Wilhelm said.

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Printer manufacturers load what are called paper "profiles" into their software. If you go into your printer's menu, you'll usually see this as the options to choose a paper type, usually a specific brand name. When you make that selection, you're enabling the printer to better match the ink output to the kind of paper being used.

Storage knowledge: How you store your photo is as important, if not more, as how you print. Photos stored in the open air with some exposure to sunlight will fade the fastest. Placed in an album and stored in a room with moderate humidity that's not subject to wild temperature swings, you can expect a properly produced inkjet print to last decades.

So the moral of the story is clear. While we can't answer Siegler's original question of how long it will be until we no longer need to print anything, we can safely say today that if there's a photo you absolutely want to endure for future generations, the safest and most sure-fire approach to take is to print it out with an inkjet printer using pigment inks and high-quality photo paper (supplied by the same company that made the printer) and slip it into an album.

Go figure.

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Greg Scoblete (@GregScoblete) is the editor of RealClearTechnology and an editor on RealClearWorld. He is the co-author of From Fleeting to Forever: A Guide to Enjoying and Preserving Your Digital Photos and Videos.

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