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Backing Up Your Collection Catalog and Photos — A Plain-English Guide

Years of work, safe from any single disaster More than one copy, more than one place, one off-site

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1 The Whole Idea on One Page

If you've built a catalog of your collection — a list of what you own, with photos, values, and notes — that catalog is itself a treasure, and losing it would mean losing years of patient work. A single computer crash, a lost phone, or a house fire could wipe out the whole record in an instant, unless you've made sure it exists in more than one place.

This guide shows you how to back up your collection catalog and photos simply and reliably, in plain language, so that record is safe no matter what happens.

The whole art of backup comes down to one idea: your catalog and photos should exist in more than one place, so no single disaster can take them all. You don't need to be technical to achieve this — a couple of straightforward habits, mostly automatic once set up, keep your record safe. We'll walk through exactly how, and how to keep it that way over time.

1. Understand the goal: your catalog and photos in more than one place.
2. Keep your main copy where you work on it — computer, phone, or cloud.
3. Add an automatic cloud backup so it copies itself off-site.
4. Keep a second copy, like an external drive or a printed list.
5. Check now and then that your backups are actually working.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> The entire idea of backup is this: your catalog and photos must exist in more than one place, so no single fire, flood, theft, or crash can take them all. Everything else is just how you achieve that one thing.

2 Why Your Catalog Deserves Backing Up

A collection catalog represents something that can't easily be recreated: years of accumulated knowledge about what you own, what it's worth, where it came from, and why it matters. If a dealer offered you real money for a piece, if a grandchild needs to know which items are valuable, if an insurer needs proof after a loss — all of that lives in the catalog. Losing it doesn't just mean retyping a list; it means losing knowledge that may be gone for good.

The photos are just as precious and just as vulnerable. They're the visual record that proves what you own and its condition, essential for insurance and for your family. Because all of this effort is concentrated in digital files that can vanish in a moment, the catalog is exactly the kind of thing that most rewards a little protection — a small effort now against a potentially irreplaceable loss later.

- A catalog holds years of knowledge that can't easily be recreated.
- It's what tells your family and your insurer what's valuable and why.
- The photos prove what you own and its condition.
- All that effort sits in files that can vanish in a moment.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Losing a collection catalog isn't like losing a shopping list — it's losing years of accumulated knowledge about what you own and what it's worth, which may be impossible to recreate. That's exactly why it deserves careful backing up.

3 The 3-2-1 Rule in Plain English

Experts boil good backup down to a simple, memorable rule called '3-2-1,' and it applies beautifully to a collection catalog. It means keeping three copies of your important files, on two different kinds of storage, with at least one copy kept somewhere other than your home. Follow it and your catalog can survive almost any single disaster.

In practice for a collector, this might look like: your working catalog on your computer or phone (copy one), an automatic copy in the cloud (copy two, and the off-site one), and a copy on an external drive kept at home or, better, at a relative's house (copy three). You don't have to be rigid about it — the spirit is simply 'more than one copy, more than one place, at least one off-site.' That spirit is what protects you.

- Three copies of your catalog and photos.
- On two different kinds of storage (such as a computer and the cloud).
- With at least one copy kept away from your home.
- The spirit: more than one copy, more than one place, one off-site.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> The 3-2-1 rule — three copies, two kinds of storage, one off-site — sounds technical but just means: don't keep your catalog in only one place. A copy on your computer, one in the cloud, and one on a drive at a relative's house covers it beautifully.

4 Where Your Main Copy Lives

Everything starts with your main 'working' copy — the catalog you actually open and update, whether it's a spreadsheet on your computer, a list in a phone app, or a document in a cloud service. This is the copy you keep current; the backups are copies of it. Knowing clearly which is your main copy keeps things from getting muddled, with edits scattered across several versions.

A nice simplification: if your main copy lives in a cloud service to begin with (like a spreadsheet in a cloud drive, or a catalog app that stores everything online), then it's automatically backed up off-site as you work, covering a big part of the job. If your main copy is on your own computer or phone, you'll add the backups separately, which the next chapters cover. Either way, be clear about which copy is the one you trust and update.

- Your main copy is the one you open and keep current.
- Backups are copies of that main copy.

- Be clear which is your main copy to avoid scattered, conflicting versions.
- If your main copy is already in the cloud, it's partly backed up as you work.

> **TIP**
> Decide clearly which copy of your catalog is the 'real' one you keep updated, and treat the rest as backups of it. Scattered edits across several versions is how people end up not knowing which list is correct — one main copy avoids that.

5 The Easiest Backup: The Cloud

The simplest and most powerful backup for most people is the cloud — storing a copy of your catalog and photos with an online service (like a cloud drive or a photo-backup service) that keeps them on its servers, far from your home. Its great virtues are that it happens automatically once set up, and it's inherently off-site, satisfying the hardest part of the 3-2-1 rule without any effort.

For your catalog document, keeping it in or copying it to a cloud drive means it's safe from anything that happens to your house. For your photos, a photo-backup service automatically copies every picture to the cloud. Set these up once, and a large part of your backup runs itself from then on — which is exactly why the cloud is the cornerstone of a sensible backup plan.

- The cloud stores your files on servers far from your home — automatically off-site.
- Once set up, cloud backup happens on its own, with no ongoing effort.
- Keep your catalog in a cloud drive and let a service back up your photos.
- It satisfies the hardest part of 3-2-1 — the off-site copy — effortlessly.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> The cloud is the cornerstone of a good backup plan because it's both automatic and off-site — the two hardest parts to manage by hand. Set it up once, and a copy of your catalog and photos quietly lives safe, far from your house.

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6 A Second Copy on a Drive

For belt-and-suspenders safety, a copy on a physical external drive — a small, inexpensive storage device that plugs into your computer — gives you a second kind of storage that doesn't depend on the internet or a service. You copy your catalog and photos onto it periodically, and you have a tangible backup in your own hands, independent of the cloud.

This guards against the rare case where you lose access to a cloud account, and it's reassuring to have something you can hold. The real power comes from where you keep it: an external drive stored at a relative's house, a safe deposit box, or anywhere other than your home becomes your off-site copy too. Even kept at home, it's a valuable second copy on different storage.

- An external drive is a small, cheap storage device that plugs into your computer.
- Copy your catalog and photos onto it periodically for a second kind of copy.
- It doesn't depend on the internet or a cloud account.
- Kept away from home, it also serves as your off-site copy.

TIP

An external drive kept at a relative's house is a powerful backup — it's a second kind of storage AND off-site at once. Even one kept at home is valuable; just remember to copy your catalog and photos onto it from time to time.

7 Backing Up the Photos

Your catalog's photos deserve particular attention, because they often live separately from the catalog document itself — the list might reference 'photo of item 14,' but the actual pictures sit in your phone's gallery or a folder. A backup that saves the list but not the pictures is only half a backup, so make sure the photos travel with the record.

The simplest approach is to keep the photos in the same cloud account or folder as the catalog, so they're backed up together. If your photos live in your phone's gallery, ensure that gallery is set to back up to the cloud automatically. The key is to treat the photos as an inseparable part of the catalog, backed up with the same care, so a value next to 'item 14' always has its picture to go with it.

- Photos often live separately from the catalog document — don't forget them.
- A backup of the list without the pictures is only half a backup.
- Keep photos in the same cloud account or folder as the catalog.
- If photos live in your phone's gallery, ensure it backs up to the cloud.

WATCH OUT

Make sure your backup includes the photos, not just the catalog list — they often live separately. A list that says 'photo of item 14' is no use if item 14's picture wasn't backed up too. Treat the photos as part of the catalog.

8 Setting Up Automatic Backup

The single best thing you can do is make your backup automatic, so it happens without you having to remember. A backup you have to remember to do by hand is a backup that eventually lapses; one that runs on its own keeps protecting you even when life gets busy. Most cloud services are built to do exactly this once switched on.

For your photos, turn on automatic photo backup in your phone's settings or photo app. For your catalog, keeping it in a cloud drive means it saves itself as you edit. If

you also use an external drive, some backup software can copy to it automatically on a schedule, though many people simply do the drive copy by hand periodically. The more of it that's automatic, the more reliably your catalog stays safe.

1. Turn on automatic photo backup in your phone or photo app.
2. Keep your catalog in a cloud drive so it saves as you edit.
3. For an external drive, set up scheduled backup software, or copy by hand periodically.
4. The more automatic it is, the more reliably it protects you.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Make as much of your backup automatic as you can — a backup you must remember to do by hand is one that eventually lapses. Automatic photo backup and a cloud-based catalog keep protecting you even when you're not thinking about it.

9 Making Sure It's Actually Working

A backup you believe is running but isn't is worse than none, because it gives false comfort. So the one habit that completes a backup plan is to check, now and then, that it's actually working — that your photos really are appearing in the cloud, that your catalog's latest version is saved, that your external drive copy isn't months out of date. A few minutes of checking is cheap insurance against a nasty surprise.

Checking is simple: open your cloud account from another device or the web and confirm your catalog and recent photos are there; glance at the date of your last external-drive copy. Do this occasionally, and especially after adding a lot to your collection. Confirming your backup works is the difference between hoping you're protected and knowing you are.

- A backup you think is running but isn't gives false comfort — worse than none.
- Occasionally confirm photos are appearing in the cloud and the catalog is current.
- Check the date of your last external-drive copy.
- Do this especially after adding a lot to your collection.

WATCH OUT

Don't just assume your backup is working — check it occasionally by opening your cloud account and confirming your catalog and recent photos are really there. A backup silently failing for months is exactly the nightmare backups are meant to prevent.

10 Keeping Backups Current

A catalog grows and changes — new acquisitions, updated values, items sold — so a backup is only as good as how recent it is. A copy from two years ago misses everything since. The good news is that automatic cloud backup keeps itself current as you work, which is much of why it's so valuable; the thing to watch is any manual copy, like an external drive, which only reflects the last time you updated it.

Build a simple habit around your manual copies: update the external drive whenever you've made significant additions, or on a regular schedule like the start of each season. For the automatic cloud copies, just confirm occasionally they're keeping up. Keeping backups current means that if the worst happens, you recover an up-to-date catalog, not a stale one missing your recent treasures.

- A backup is only as good as how recent it is.
- Automatic cloud backup keeps itself current as you work.
- Update manual copies (like an external drive) after significant additions.
- Current backups mean recovering an up-to-date catalog, not a stale one.

TIP

Tie updating your external-drive copy to a regular moment — the start of each season, say, or after any big addition to the collection. Automatic cloud backup keeps itself current, but a manual copy is only as fresh as the last time you did it.

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11 Protecting Against Theft and Disaster

The off-site part of backup earns its keep precisely in the disasters people least like to think about — a house fire, a flood, a burglary that takes your computer and drives. In those cases, an on-site-only backup burns, floods, or walks out the door along with everything else. Only a copy kept elsewhere — in the cloud, or on a drive at another location — survives to let you recover.

For a collector, this is doubly important: not only might you lose the collection itself in such an event, but the catalog that proves what you had, for insurance purposes, is exactly what you'll desperately need. A backup safely off-site means that even in the worst case, you can show your insurer what was lost and begin to recover. It turns a catastrophe into something survivable.

- Fire, flood, and theft can take your computer and home backups at once.
- Only an off-site copy survives such events.
- After a loss, the catalog proving what you had is exactly what you need.
- An off-site backup makes even the worst case survivable.

WATCH OUT

The off-site copy is the one that matters most in a fire, flood, or burglary — the very events that would also take an on-site backup. Make sure at least one copy of your catalog lives somewhere other than your home.

12 Sharing Access With Family

A backup protects your catalog from disasters, but there's another kind of loss to plan for: the catalog being safe yet inaccessible to your family when they need it. If your backups are locked behind passwords only you know, they do your heirs no good. So part of a complete plan is making sure a trusted family member can reach the catalog when the time comes.

This needn't mean handing out passwords today. You can share the catalog with a family member now (view-only is fine), note where the backups are and how to access them in your important papers, or use a service's feature for a legacy or emergency contact. The point is that your careful backup actually reaches the people it's meant for, rather than becoming a locked box nobody can open.

- A backup that's safe but inaccessible to family does them no good.
- Make sure a trusted family member can reach the catalog when needed.
- Share it now (view-only), or note access in your important papers.
- Some services offer a legacy or emergency contact feature.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> A perfectly backed-up catalog still fails its purpose if your family can't get into it. Share it with a trusted relative, or note how to access it in your important papers, so your careful record actually reaches the people it's for.

13 Avoiding Common Backup Mistakes

A few predictable mistakes undermine otherwise good intentions, and all are easy to avoid once you know them. The biggest is keeping the only copy in one place — the whole thing this guide exists to prevent. Others include forgetting the photos, letting backups go stale, never checking they work, and relying on a single device (like one USB stick) that can itself fail or be lost.

Avoiding these is mostly a matter of the habits already covered: more than one copy, including the photos, kept current, confirmed to work, with at least one off-site. Steer clear of these common traps and your backup plan will do exactly what you need it to. The mistakes all share a root — treating backup as a one-time task rather than a simple ongoing habit.

- Keeping the only copy in one place — the mistake to avoid above all.
- Forgetting to back up the photos along with the list.
- Letting backups go stale, or never checking they work.
- Trusting a single device, like one USB stick, that can fail or be lost.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Never trust a single USB stick or one drive as your only backup — they fail and get lost like anything else. The whole point is more than one copy in more than one place; a lone device is barely better than no backup at all.

14 A Simple Plan to Follow

Pulling it together, here's a straightforward backup plan that any collector can set up and maintain with little effort. It satisfies the 3-2-1 principle without jargon, and once in place it mostly runs itself.

1. Keep your catalog in a cloud drive (or copy it there) so it's saved off-site automatically.
2. Turn on automatic photo backup so your item photos are saved to the cloud.
3. Copy catalog and photos to an external drive periodically, kept at a relative's house if you can.
4. Share the catalog with a trusted family member, or note access in your papers.
5. Check every so often that it's all working and current.

> *A collection catalog is years of love and knowledge in digital form. Protecting it takes just one steady habit: more than one copy, in more than one place, with one kept safely away from home.*

15 Recap

Your collection catalog and its photos are a treasure in their own right, and losing them to a crash, theft, or disaster would mean losing years of irreplaceable work. The fix is simple and mostly automatic: keep more than one copy, on more than one kind of storage, with at least one off-site — the 3-2-1 rule. Lean on the cloud for effortless off-site backup, add a drive copy, include the photos, keep it current, and make sure family can reach it.

- Keep your catalog and photos in more than one place — the whole idea.
- The cloud gives effortless, automatic, off-site backup — the cornerstone.
- Add an external-drive copy, ideally kept away from home.
- Back up the photos with the list, keep backups current, and confirm they work.
- Make sure a trusted family member can access the catalog.

GOOD TO KNOW

The years you spent building your catalog deserve a few minutes spent protecting it. Set up automatic cloud backup, add an off-site copy, include the photos, and check it occasionally — and your record is safe from almost anything that could happen.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

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GOOD TO KNOW

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