

“Help! I’m drowning in paper!”

The number-one clutter issue in America, according to surveys? Paper! Luckily our pros have some easy tricks for tackling the piles and taking control of all that paper for good!



1 Prevent piles!

Swap paper for pretty!

Got a spot in your house that’s a paper magnet? Just try replacing the paper with something pretty, suggests organizer Kathi Lipp. “I used to put papers down on a side table, and it was always a mess. So one day I replaced the papers with a decorative pitcher. Once you see something pretty where you used to put papers, it’s a signal saying ‘no!’ to making piles.”

Cull paper clutter in the car!

A sure way to keep excess paper from piling up in your home? Never let it enter in the first place! “When my kids were younger, I’d have them go through their backpacks in the car, and any paper they didn’t need would go into a recycle bag I kept in the car,” says Lipp. “Once you bring papers into the house, you have to start making decisions about what to do with them—and that’s where 90% of paper fatigue comes in!”

Take the ART-istic path!

Too many paper piles? Apply organizer Lorie Marrero’s ART (Action, Reference, Trash) technique: “Take a small stack of papers and separate out those that need action, say, recent bills or forms that need to be filled out,” she says. “Then separate reference papers—those that don’t need immediate action

but that you’d like to keep for future reference like taxes or insurance information. The rest, from expired coupons to old newspapers, is ‘trash’ to shred or recycle.” The finer brush strokes of ART? “After you file away the reference papers, look at your action pile and see what kind of actions pop up most often. For example, it might be ‘pay,’ ‘call’ and ‘discuss’ (anything you need to run by, say, your spouse). Label stackable trays with those actions, then whenever you get a paper, just stick it in the right ‘action tray’ and you’re all set!”

2 Create a system!

Get organized for a year!

Start with a file drawer or box and 12 hanging folders. “On the tabs of each,” says Lipp, “write down a month of the year—January through December.” Next, on 31 file folders write down each day of the month (1 through 31) and put them in the current month. Invitation to a party two months away on August 10? Put that in the August file and when you get to August, you’ll put it into the file folder numbered 10. “Find the perfect card for your sister, but her birthday is months away? Buy it and place it in her birthday month’s file.”



Use your phone!

Take a photo of bus or train schedules, lunch menus for school and other important information, so you have it handy. Then you can toss the paper versions—and your desk and your fridge will stay clear!

Let go of tossables!

How long should you keep important papers? “The IRS advises to keep your taxes for three years,” says organizer Regina Leeds. “But always check with your state, too—in California, for example, it’s four years. Every year when you file your taxes, you can shred the oldest material and file your most recent.” Also have papers worth saving digitally scanned at Staples or a copy center. In most cases—including tax returns—printing out a scanned copy of paperwork is just as good as the original.

Quickie paper organizing tips!

Create a mail station: “Just place a basket and shredder, say, in a corner of your kitchen to create a mail station, where you can go through mail quickly and get rid of it, all in one place,” pro organizer Nealey Stapleton advises.

Toss for 10: Overwhelmed? Set a timer for 10 or 15 minutes and tear through a small pile, tossing or recycling obviously unnecessary items like flyers for sales long past or old catalogues, says Leeds.

—Kristina Mastrocola

Our expert panel



Kathi Lipp is the author of 15 books, including *Clutter Free*, and teaches people the art of decluttering at ClutterFreeAcademy.com.



Organizer **Lorie Marrero**—author of *The Clutter Diet*—is the creator of the Clutter Diet® online program. Learn more at ClutterDiet.com.



Regina Leeds, author of *One Year to an Organized Life* and *The 8-Minute Organizer*, has been a professional organizer for more than 20 years. Visit her at OrganizeWithRegina.com.



Nealey Stapleton—author of *50 Simple Ways To Declutter Those Pesky Paper Piles*—runs The Organizing-Boutique.com, where readers can find more helpful tips.