Scanning Documents

Turning Papers into Digital Documents

An article by **safelyfiled**

In many ways it is easier to manage important documents digitally via services such as SafelyFiled. You have more options for sharing access with key people. You have higher availability regardless of where you are geographically. The documents are not vulnerable to physical threats like fire or flood.

One problem with managing documents digitally is getting electronic forms of the document when all you have is paper. In this article, we outline your options for getting electronic versions of your key paper documents.

The key technology is **scanning** your documents. During scanning, a device takes a picture of your document and saves that image to a computer file. It is like the first step of a copier. In fact, many of today's copiers can also perform scanning.

Seems simple enough, but you have multiple options for doing this scanning. The right choice for you depends on the kind of documents you need to scan, your scanning frequency, your budget, and your comfort with hardware.

Personal Computer Scanners

You can go to your favorite electronics store like Best Buy, Walmart, or Staples and see a wide variety of scanners to choose from. Most of these scanners will work quite well, but you need to consider a few key features to determine which one is the right choice for you.

Page feeding

You can acquire a very portable single page scanner such as the [Vupoint Magic Wand](#) for well under $100.   It is cheap and portable, but if you need to scan documents that are many pages, it will get tedious very quickly. For a cheap and portable solution you may want to investigate a smart phone solution instead (see section below).

Most large scanners used to be flatbed scanners. You had to place the document on the glass like a copying machine, and press the button to scan for each page. Again for multi-page documents, this can be quite tedious. Today many scanners have an **automatic document feeder (ADF)** like the [Epson Workforce](#) or the [Fujitsu ScanSnap](#). You place your documents in the feeder and press start to copy.

Some scanners also provide a **duplex** option. That is, it will scan both sides of the page and put the results in the correct order in the resulting file. The prices of duplex features have come down quite a bit in the past few years, and if you work with double sided documents it can be an essential feature.

Scanning software

Scanning will require some software on your personal computer. Make sure that the software provided with the scanner you select works with the version of the operating system on your PC or Mac.

The ease-of-use of the software is a differentiating feature that is hard to evaluate in the store. For example, the [Fujitsu ScanSnap](#) line has a very good reputation for software usability. Generally, the main difficulty is just in getting things set up. You may want to consider paying your neighbor's teenager to get things set up and show you which programs to run. Once things are set up, it is a matter of starting up the scanning program on your computer, loading the document in the scanner and pressing the scan button.

Some scanners also can be configured to email the resulting document to your email address. This can be very convenient, but it has some security issues. Email is not secure. It is not encrypted while it is being delivered. A hacker who can intercept your email, can read your email. Depending on what you are scanning, this may be a concern that trumps the convenience of the email option.

USB vs networked

Another selection criterion is determining how your computer talks with the scanner. Almost all scanners provide a USB interface. You use a USB cable to plug the scanner directly into your computer. This is an easy option, but then only one computer can interact with the scanner. Many scanners also provide a networked option, and today that is generally a wifi option. If you have wireless set up in your home or office already, then it is just a matter of following the manufacturer directions to connect your scanner to the to the wifi network. The networked scanners also support USB, but you're probably paying an extra $10-$20 for the networking feature.

All-in-one versus single function

You can buy dedicated scanners, but from a price/performance perspective you should also look at the all-in-one machines. These machines do printing, copying, and faxing in addition to scanning, and the cost is competitive with the single function scanning machines. I recently purchased the [Epson Workforce](#) for under $200. I don't use the fax function, but I do use the copying and double-sided printing functions on a regular basis in addition to the scanning.

Smart Phone Scanning

Your smart phone has a high resolution camera, so it meets the hardware requirements of a portable scanner. You could just use the camera app on your iPhone or Android to take pictures of your document, but you should investigate scanning apps. The scanning apps will

- Combine pictures of multiple pages into one document.
- Do image analysis to brighten and re-orient your pages. So even if you are taking pictures in less than ideal light, the resulting page image will look ok

Once you have a file containing your scanned document on your phone, you have several options to get that document into your online document storage account.

- You could email it to yourself (or into your SafelyFiled account), again after considering the security concerns of email.
- You could access the file by plugging the phone into your PC and accessing the scanned document file as you would access your pictures and music files.
- Many document storage services like SafelyFiled provide smart phone apps to upload documents securely into your account directly from your phone.

The two leading scanning apps in the Android space are

- CamScanner
- Handy Scanner

 On the iPhone several scanning apps include

- CamScanner
- TurboScan
- SafelyScan This app uploads the resulting document into your SafelyFiled account

These scanning apps are very handy for scanning small documents on the go (like receipts and warranties). And the quality rivals that of a dedicated scanner, but if you have a document that is 10's of pages long, you will want to find a dedicated scanner with an automatic document feed.

Today you have multiple relatively inexpensive options to scan documents. For less than $10 you can make your smart phone a very capable portable scanner. For under $200, you can bring a scanner into your home or office that is capable of efficiently scanning multiple page documents.

Borrowing or Renting a Scanner

If you don't have your own scanner, don't despair.   There are many places in your community where you can rent or borrow access to a scanner. Think of where you could access a computer or a copying machine. It is likely that you could also access a scanner at that location.

Business support stores

Stores like FedEx/Kinkos, Staples, and Office Depot that support business operations also provide scanning services. They may just take your pile of papers and return a pdf to you, or you might be able to rent access to a scanner and do the job yourself. You have a convenience versus trust trade off having someone scan for you versus scanning yourself.

Here are links to specific store offerings.

- Scanning at Staples
- Scanning at FedEx Office

Libraries and schools

Public facilities like libraries and schools are also likely to provide scanning facilities. For example, in my local library, the archive department provides access to a scanner.   The library at my local university also provides access to scanners to the public. Ask your local librarian. If they don't have scanners, the librarian probably knows where scanning services are available in your community.

Service professionals

It is quite likely that your attorney, insurance agent, or accountant has a scanner in their office. Particularly if the items you need to scan are related to their work (e.g. a will and your attorney), they would probably be happy to scan them for you. Many larger offices now have a scanning option on their copier, so running a few scans is not a big deal. It doesn't use up physical ink or paper like printing does. Since you already have a trust relationship with your professional, there is less of a security concern for having them do the scanning for you.

Professional organizers are a growing set of service professionals. In addition to organizing your physical home or office, many professional organizers will organize documents for you in the digital world. SafelyFiled has been working with members of the National Organization of Professional Organizers (NAPO). SafelyFiled also has a list of professional organizers who work with SafelyFiled and are comfortable with scanning documents.

Work and other organizations

Depending on where you work, your office may well have scanners. If it is ok with your boss, you might be able to scan documents over your lunch hour. Similarly, many churches have

scanners. They might be willing to help members by letting them scan a few documents. It wouldn't hurt to ask.

Find the Right Option for You

As you can see, you have many choices for getting those paper documents into an electronic form. If this is a one-time action for you, then getting someone to scan them for you is probably your best bet. If this is going to be a recurring need, you are probably better off spending some time and money to get your own scanning hardware and processes set up.