

What are the key best practices for digitising historical maps?

Short answer

Some of the most important best practices in the digitisation process are to use standard terminology and metadata, produce high-quality master files according to recognised imaging guidance, document the digitisation workflow and technical settings, record rights information clearly, and store the files and metadata in a trusted repository or digital preservation environment. (1, 2, 5)

Detailed answer

Successful digitisation is not just about making a scan. A strong digitisation process starts with planning for quality, consistency, and long-term reuse. This entails employing standardised terminology and structured metadata from the outset, enabling later retrieval, comprehension, and system-wide exchange of files. The Library of Congress metadata guidance distinguishes descriptive, administrative, and structural metadata, and METS is one example of a standard that can help express the links between digital objects and their metadata. (2, 3)

Another key best practice is to create high-quality master files using recognised imaging guidelines. The Library of Congress guidance on digital surrogate creation stresses that digitisation should follow defined procedures for creating digital surrogates of analogue collections, while Europeana's digitisation guidance also emphasises future compatibility and the need to consider reuse from the start. In practice, this means creating archival-quality master files first and then generating smaller derivative files for access and web display. (1, 5, 6)

It is also important to document the process itself. Exemplary practice includes recording information about how the digital file was created, what equipment and settings were used, whether any post-processing was applied, and who carried out the work. The Library of Congress Recommended Formats Statement for cartographic and geospatial material explicitly notes that metadata should include available information on how the data was created, collected, and post-processed. (2, 4)

A further best practice is to manage rights and access information clearly. Europe's copyright guidance for cultural heritage institutions stresses the need for clear workflows for rights management because poor rights documentation can limit reuse even when digitisation quality is high. (7, 8)

Finally, digitised files and their metadata should be stored in a trusted repository or preservation environment; they should not be left as disconnected files on local drives. Preservation policies and repository metadata are essential for reducing the risk of loss and supporting long-term access. This is where the digitisation process connects directly to repository planning and digital preservation, rather than ending at image capture. (9)

References

1. [Digital Surrogate Creation and Management](#)
2. [Table of Core Metadata Elements for Library of Congress Digital Repository Development](#)
3. [METS: An Overview & Tutorial](#)
4. [Recommended Formats Statement – GIS, Geospatial and Non-GIS Cartographic Works](#)
5. [Europeana Publishing Guide v1.8](#)
6. [Europeana Publishing Framework v2.0](#)
7. [Copyright Management: Guidelines for Cultural Heritage Institutions](#)
8. [Best Practice Examples in Library Digitisation](#)
9. [Digital Preservation Metadata Standards](#)

