Delaware Public Archives
Government Services
Guidelines on the Use of PDF/A

What is PDF/A?

Portable Document Format (PDF) is a file format that can be used to capture information from almost any application and create documents that can be easily accessed and shared. However, the feature-rich nature of the format can create difficulties in preserving PDF files over the long-term, and some useful features of the format are incompatible with the demands of long-term preservation. For example, PDF documents are not necessarily self-contained, sometimes drawing on system fonts and other content stored external to the original file. As time passes, and especially as technology changes, these external connections can be broken, and the dependencies cause information to be lost. Additionally, because of the lack of standardization among the many PDF development tools on the market, there is inconsistency in the implementation of the file format, which also impedes long-term preservation.

A PDF/A file is more suitable for long term preservation as it is more self-contained, self-describing and more device-independent than traditional PDF files. PDF/A aims to preserve the static visual appearance of electronic documents over time whilst also supporting future access and migration needs.

There are three versions of the PDF/A standard: **PDF/A-1** (issued in 2005, based on PDF 1.4), **PDF/A-2** (issued in 2011, based on PDF 1.7) and **PDF/A-3** (issued in 2012, based on PDF 1.7). Any variety of PDF/A is an acceptable preservation format; PDF/A-2 does not replace or supersede PDF/A-1 but simply adds additional features. The decision as to which PDF/A to use depends on whether the extra features of PDF/A-2 or PDF/A-3 would preserve or enhance the functionality or representation of a document in a way that PDF/A-1 would not.

Text in PDF/A-1, PDF/A-2 and PDF/A-3 files can be searched. If the PDF file was created from a document created electronically (e.g. a Word file), the text should automatically be searchable. If the PDF was created from a scanned version of a paper document, Optical Character Recognition (OCR) will need to be applied to make the text searchable.

For more information about these standards, please contact the Delaware Public Archives.

When should PDF/A be used?

The Delaware Public Archives (DPA) recommends the use of the PDF/A file format for the long-term preservation of text and graphic based records, whether electronic originals or digital reproductions of analog originals. It is also a suitable format for preserving digital versions of other types of record, such as blueprints and other technical documents. Where records are being digitized/scanned, DPA strongly recommends the application of OCR to ensure that the resulting PDF/A files support full-text search functionality wherever the content allows it.

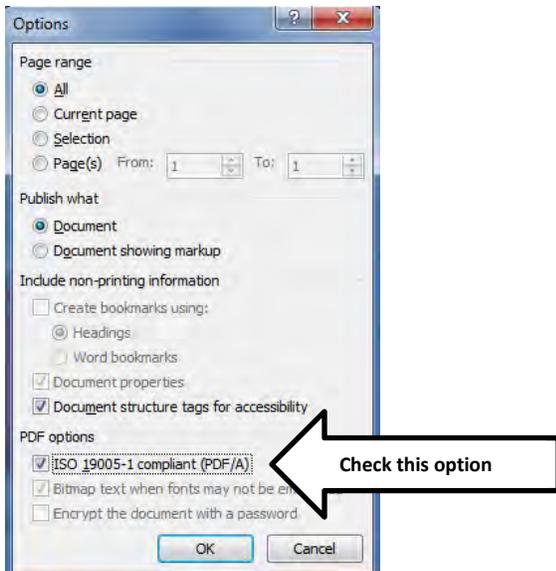**How to save a document as PDF/A in Microsoft Office programs:**

This guideline was originally created as a Microsoft Word document; it was then saved as a PDF/A-1 compliant file as follows:

Go to **Save As** > **Save As Type** - choose **PDF**; then select **Options**
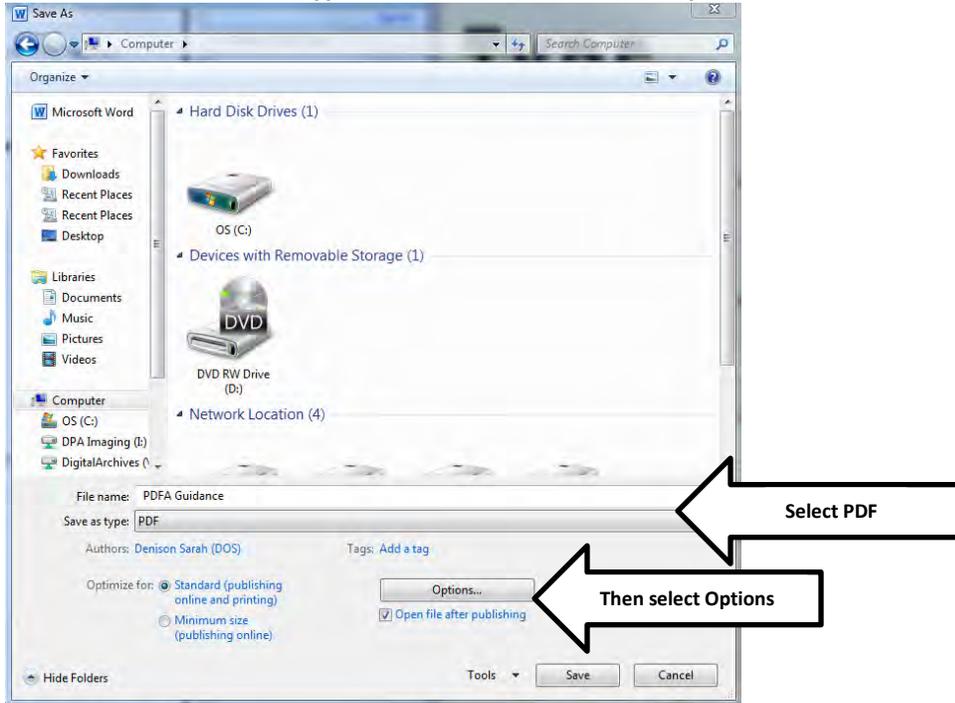
Then select Options

From the **Options** menu, check **ISO 19005-1 compliant (PDF/A)**; then click **OK** and **Save**:

For additional guidance, please contact your analyst.