

FILE NAMING PROTOCOLS

I. PREFACE

Ever wonder why a library catalogue leads you on an alphanumeric hunt rather than a search for a book's title? The short answer is that a library catalogue is an atlas to a world of resources, each of which is branded with a set of coordinates to help you locate it. San Diego County Branch librarian and PPI Investigator Tim Mountain adds, "These coordinates not only help the public find what they're looking for, they help the staff as well. Plus, they're the same at each library." By "coordinates" we mean a coordinated taxonomy of information to sort holdings into categories, subjects and genres. This is also why you can browse other related titles on the same shelf as the book you looked up. Without a cataloguing system, a library couldn't function reliably.

There are numerous, smaller versions of libraries in our personal day-to-day lives that we try to manage through cataloguing systems. Whether it's an ample iTunes database or a passel of Bradford Mint commemorative plates, the value of systematic cataloguing becomes apparent the moment you need to retrieve a particular item from out of a large collection. Such a system begins with the sorting hat: the specific and general attributes of a thing are inventoried and used to assign it an identity, then that identity is used to assign it a unique address in your library.

Now, if you're the kind of fun-seeking paranormal hobbyist who'd rather skulk around graveyards with a buddy and a smartphone voice recorder app, instead of amassing a library of "evidence," then perhaps using your EVP's caption to name its digital file is more than enough. However, if you're an amateur paranormal *researcher* sharing media and data files with others, then protocols are a practicality. "It's better to spend more time listening to your data than looking for your data," say Tim Mountain, "and if you've been doing this for a while, you can accumulate a *lot* of data. Nothing will aggravate you more than having to admit, 'I've got this thing and it's really good, but I can't find it!'" That's why it helps to name your files according to a taxonomy that brands each with a unique identity and an address in your database.

And uniqueness and specificity are key. After all, how many times can you name a photo file "Creepy Shadows.JPG"? How will "Orbs-3.avi" and "Orb #57.avi" differ from the other sixty or so orb videos you captured? And what will a file named "whispers get out.mp3" mean to anyone else but you, especially if someone else is searching for the same breathy event in their own recordings from that night? In point of fact, what would such a file name mean to you five years hence? How would you be able to connect it to the place you investigated, much less the moment you captured it? These are the practical concerns that accompany the naming of files when team members cross-check and peer review one another's findings. Any investigative group trying to build its own paranormal library of evidence must, out of necessity, use a system of file naming protocols to make cataloguing possible. However, in the case of client outreach, they must do so for reasons of even greater importance.

PPI first began using a consistent system of file naming protocols in 2008. I won't lie. There was resistance at first—primal "fight or flight" resistance. (Remember that first time a teacher required correct bibliographic citation style? That's the sort of panic I'm talking about.) Regardless, since we were beginning to offer clients fully detailed case reports, we had to find a legally protective standard to safeguard against disclosure of private information, such as names and addresses. Although a little tedious to master at first, once protocols were adopted, they became crucial to our reputation for professionalism, to protecting us from liability, and to the organization of our growing database of paranormal research.

If your involvement in paranormal research and outreach is limited, you might not even need to make your own file names as complicated as PPI does. However, if you can appreciate why proper storage for an organized album of photos is better than keeping shoeboxes of them crushed under your bowling trophies at the back of a closet, then you'll savor the clarity that protocols of cataloguing can sensibly bring into your lifelong stash of paranormal findings!

II. PROTOCOLS: WHY WE NEED THEM

Four main concerns require us to adopt an official set of protocols in our naming of “evidence” files and documents.

1. **Uniformity:** With every investigator reviewing his or her own recordings from a case, and collectively contributing to the review of DVR and digital audio recordings, it becomes imperative to use one consistent and uniform style of file naming. Such protocols and style define, in part, our professional nature.
2. **Organization:** Any group that calls itself an “organization” depends on a hierarchical structure, not only within its management, but also within its services and products. PPI is, both, an educational organization and a volunteer public service. The data we gather becomes an integral part of our research and services and must, therefore, be easily accessible and catalogued so that others may quickly identify it. Protocols ensure that all evidence or documents we generate can be accurately catalogued, reflect a taxonomy of information, and be arranged chronologically and alphabetically in our server files, computer files, and data storage media.
3. **Information:** Every officially recognized style used to compose bibliographic citations (“Works Cited”) designates certain kinds of information as necessary to the identification of a source. In a very real sense, this gives every artifact of writing—whether a book, a magazine article, a medical abstract, or an e-

mail—an address; the information contained in a citation is a set of coordinates to locate the source. The very same is true of file naming protocols, which provide a sensible left-to-right, general-to-specific address for our findings and data (barring a couple incidental exceptions).

4. **Legal Protection:** We make a point of safeguarding the client's privacy, especially when we have not been given legal permission to do otherwise. File naming protocols make it possible to create a “plain brown wrapper” for evidence we collect. Should we post evidence to our website, it must be free of our client's name (first or last), street address, or any other references that might provide clues to the identity and whereabouts of the client. (This concern extends as well to the names of folders we use on servers to warehouse the evidence.) One may think this a petty concern at best, but we are a visible agency during any investigation we conduct; our logo and insignia identify us as a paranormal group to passing strangers, who frequently stop to enquire about our activities. It is imperative that curious neighbors or interested passersby never associate our posted evidence with any location where we have been seen in public. Furthermore, should a breach of security occur—such as computer hacking, or theft of information sent to the client through the mail—anonymous file names offer nothing more sensitive than dates and hours.

III. GENERAL FILE TAXONOMY

For PPI, the logistics of any file name require arranging information in it from the most general to the specific. We frequently upload files to servers as part of a peer review process; because blank spaces translate poorly into URLs and server pathways, underscores (not hyphens) are used instead to separate one datum from another in the file name:

`###_yymmdd_type_loc_timestamp_alt_investigatorinitials.ext`

For example:

`087_170527_AVP_KT_021557_A_MB.mp3`

For you, however, “general” and “specific” might depend on whatever you recognize those to be. If you're not involved in private case work but instead investigate public or historical venues, then perhaps some simpler, more straightforward variation on this taxonomy will work just fine:

`yymmdd_state-city_venue_rm-loc_timestamp_type_alt_authorship.ext`

For example:

`150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav`

IV. TAXONOMIC COMPONENTS

1. Case Numbers: ###_

For any PPI investigation, we create a three digit case number to indicate the sequence of the case (handy if you're doing more than one case in a short span of time). If you don't need a case management system, then you can skip this and start with a date instead.

For example:

087_150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav

2. Date: yymmdd_

For references to case files, or for the name of document files pertaining to an investigation, PPI uses the scheduled start date of an investigation and presents it as a six-digit number representing year-month-day: (yymmdd).

For example:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav

For specific media files gathered from the investigation, the same protocols are implemented, but because investigations can last beyond midnight and go on into the next day, the actual date, not the investigation start date, must be used. (You'd be surprised how many people forget to do this.)

For example:

If you start investigating on the evening of December 31, 2016 and capture something at 2:04 AM, then your date must be rolled over into the next day: "**170101_**" Instead of "161231_."

3. State (Province or Country), City, and Venue: state-city_venue_

PPI makes it a point not to reveal the location in the name of its files because of the legal liability of that. However, if we're investigating a public venue, especially one where paranormal investigations are routine (say, for instance, the Queen Mary II in Long Beach), then we're free to include state, city, and venue in our file names.

For example:

150919_ **CA-Long-Beach_QMII_**RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav

Your habit may be to put state or country *after* the city, but, remember, the taxonomy of a file name should move from the general to the specific, the same way a library catalogue number does.

4. Room / Location: rm-loc_

At any venue, whether large or small, outdoors or indoors, specific rooms or areas are selected for closer investigation. These should be indicated using a common set of initials or abbreviations that will be clearly recognized by all who read the file name.

For example:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_ **RM14_**204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav

More esoteric venues with specialized rooms might require of you some creativity to think up the right abbreviations, but here are some fairly typical household abbreviations used by PPI:

LR_	living room	HWY_	hallway
FR_	family room	STR_	stairs, stairway
KT_	kitchen	DR_	dining room
BR1_	bedroom 1	OFC_	office
BTH_	bathroom	MR_	music room
MB_	master bedroom	GRG_	garage
MBTH	master bathroom	PTY_	pantry

5. Timestamp: timestamp_

Locations and time stamps are probably the most important data in the address of a media clip because they leave breadcrumbs by which others might locate something in their own sources. This is to say, one event can be referenced in multiple sources as long as other devices were recording at the same location and time. This is why, at the start of an investigation, everyone should synchronize their devices, and the time should be regularly announced every 20 minutes or so. After the investigation, though, and during the review process, events of interest should be noted with real-time timestamps.

If properly programmed beforehand, many digital cameras and recorders will automatically timestamp files, but when you parse a segment of audio or video to create an “evidence” clip, it should be catalogued and named as a specific real-time moment. The typical time cues that digital recorders use, for example, won’t do the job: it doesn’t help anyone to know that you found something 23 minutes into your audio, because they don’t know at what time you switched on the recorder. Furthermore, timestamps must be calculated down to the second. Twenty-three minutes are an approximation, and others won’t know if you’ve rounded up or down to 23 minutes. For these reasons, you must, *must*, **MUST!** stamp any event by the clock, in your time zone, not by recording cues. Timestamps should be rendered in military time, as “nhmmss.”

For example:

If your source audio began at 8:06 PM and you found an event of interest 37 minutes and 14 seconds into the recording, then the timestamp in your file name will be “204314”:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav

Truly, this is the *only* practical way for everyone to cross-check one another’s findings in their own sources—the only way to categorically pin down an event in time and space so that others may reference it, too.

6. Classification: type_

Classification refers to the type of data represented by the file. In most cases, this would mean a reference to the type of “evidence” you hope to have captured. (PPI prefers to avoid the word “evidence” because of its predictive bias, but you’re welcome to choose otherwise.) We use an abbreviation or acronym so as not to take up too much real estate in the file name.

For example:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM.wav

Here are some typical file and data classifications PPI uses:

For example:

AUD	source audio	106_191123_AUD_203300_DH.wav
AVP	audible/vocal phenomenon	079_171204_AVP_HLWY_001742_CB.mp3
DOC	document	063_100213_DOC_Baselines_DP.doc
EVP	electronic voice phenomenon	071_130203_EVP_MR_224855_TM.mp3
PIC	still image	036_071117_PIC_LR_235722_MB.JPG
VID	video	071_130202_VID_Ch1_222933_BM.avi

7. Alterations: **alt_**

Whenever alterations are made to the original source, whether by editing or by processing, they should be made transparent in the file name:

For example:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_ **A_NR**_TM.wav

This also helps to distinguish one altered clip from another representing the same event. When you change the amplitude of an EVP, for instance, or you equalize it, or you omit and splice parts of the clip for brevity, some note of this should be included in the file title. Once again, here following are the most common initials and abbreviations used by PPI to denote an alteration:

A_	amplified	EQ_	equalized
ABBR_	abbreviated	BB_	bass boost
HPF_	high pass filter	NR_	noise reduction
NRM_	normalized	SLO_	slowed down

Note: Except for very minor enhancements (such as amplifying), you should make every effort not to use filtering tricks. Even well-intentioned alterations can invalidate your findings, because the more filtered a media clip is, the more likely it is to create processing artifacts that you mistakenly interpret as paranormal anomalies. As a rule, you should treat your potential evidence the same as a borrowed quotation: never change, omit, or otherwise add anything that will alter the context, misrepresent its meaning, or otherwise jeopardize its credibility.

8. Authorship: **authorship**

You should always sign a file name with your own initials at the end. That way, if you and a team mate are exchanging media clips of the same event, you'll know whose is whose.

For example:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_ **TM**.wav

Also, since different team members take up different positions in the same location, or they put their recording devices in different locations, this method can help to triangulate the source of an anomaly within that space. (Note: If you are reviewing the media sources obtained by someone other than yourself, use their initials in your file, not your own initials.)

9. File Extension: **.ext**

A file extension is the suffix at the tail end of a file, put right after the period, that identifies the file format.

For example:

150919_CA-Long-Beach_QMII_RM14_204314_EVP_A_NR_TM. **wav**

Some programs offer the option of hiding file extensions. It's not recommended because, when you share your files with others, they need to see the format to know whether the file will open itself into an existing application or require conversion. This is especially important when team members are working in different operating systems, such as PC and Mac.

V. CONCLUSION

Now, did that make your head explode? No, of course not. The truth is, if you can master emoji's, then you can quickly master any uniform set of file naming protocols. In fact, the more files that use your protocols, the more you'll pattern your file names after the precedent you've already set. Furthermore, you'll enjoy the benefit of clearly organized files populating the folders of your hard disk in easy-to-read lists—lists that your team members will know how to read, too. It's a win-win for everyone.