

Good, Better, Best --- Cutting Down Paper Waste

Earth911

This is the first in a series of articles about reducing household waste generated by the most common materials in the waste stream.

Paper is one of the easiest materials to recycle, but it still makes up the largest component of Americans' garbage.

A full 25 percent of municipal solid waste (MSW) in America is paper and paperboard (also called "cardboard"). Eliminating paper waste completely would require a Herculean effort for most people, but whether you want to do good, better, or best, you can reduce your paper waste and recycle more of the paper you do use.

Paper Waste

Perhaps as a result of [China's ban](#) on imported recyclables, or perhaps due to the increase in [consumer spending](#), American recycling efforts seem to have stalled out. The [total generation](#) of municipal solid waste in 2017 (the most recent year for which EPA has data) was 267.8 million tons. That's 4.51 pounds of garbage per person every day. It's also about 5.7 million tons more than in 2015, and a big jump up from 208 million tons generated in 1990 when recycling hadn't yet caught on nationwide.

We throw away about [67 million tons](#) of paper and paperboard each year, and recycle roughly [44 million tons](#). Despite the overall increase in waste generation, paper waste has been declining since 2005.

Less paper is being generated to throw away, thanks to increasing digitization. But with paper filling a full quarter of our garbage bins, there is still a lot of it going to waste.

Good

You can take [simple steps](#) to reduce the amount of paper you use. Despite China's ban disrupting the [curbside recycling](#) system in America, paper is still recyclable in most communities. Paper recycling takes almost no effort and makes a big difference to the planet.

Here is how to be good about paper waste:

- The simplest way to reduce the amount of paper and cardboard you throw away is to [recycle paper](#) through your curbside program.
- Recycle only clean paper. [Wishful recycling](#) of soiled paper can contaminate the entire load.
- Subscribe to the digital version of the newspaper instead of print — just consider that the Sunday edition of the New York Times requires [75,000 trees](#)

[to produce.](#)

- Set your printer to two-sided printing, and reuse paper before recycling it.
- Choose paper products made with recycled content.

Better

If you want to do better than good, or if your community does not have curbside recycling, a little effort goes a long way.

Contact your local solid waste utility to let them know you value recycling (use your garbage bill to find out whom to call). To manage paper waste better, you'll need to recycle more and gradually replace paper products with reusable ones:

- Download the [iRecycle app](#) or search the Earth911 [recycling database](#) on your computer to find a recycler near you. Even if you have curbside service, use the database to find out where you can recycle other types of paper like paperback books or drink boxes.
- Dirty paper towels, disposable napkins, and pizza boxes cannot be recycled. But they can be composted. Find out if your community offers [yard waste recycling](#). If they don't, start a [home compost](#) bin.
- Avoid the paper or plastic problem with [reusable shopping](#) and tote bags.
- Replace sack lunches with a lunchbox or [furoshiki](#) (these can also replace disposable gift wrap).
- Digitize everything you can. Use note-taking apps and electronic calendars instead of notebooks; sign up for [electronic billing](#) and digital magazines.
- Register your mail preferences with the [Direct Marketing Association](#) and contact the Consumer Credit Reporting Industry's Opt-Out Program to not receive credit card and insurance offers by calling 1-888-567-8688 or [registering online](#).

Best

Because paper is easily recyclable, paper products are often the greener choice among materials. So while plastic-free is a goal for many, few people seriously attempt a paper-free lifestyle.

To achieve [zero waste](#), do the best you can to eliminate paper and recycle everything you do use. If you've already accomplished the Good and Better goals, you will have noticed that food packaging makes up most of the paper waste you have left.

- Zero waste [grocery shopping](#) requires a major shift in shopping habits — seeking out new stores and bulk products, carrying reusable containers, and making a lot more food from scratch — but it will have a big impact on the amount of paperboard you use.
- Eliminating pizza boxes and take-out containers will require more home cooking.
- Next, consider napkins, tissues, and paper towels. Switching to cloth napkins is easy, while handkerchiefs may be a little harder. Breaking the [addiction to paper towels](#) instead of just composting them will require rethinking how you clean. But sponges, scrub brushes, and [cloth towels](#) work just as well or better than paper.
- While giving up toilet paper may be a stretch for many Americans, [bidets](#) offer a paper-free alternative. And if that seems too extreme, consider switching to

bamboo or [hemp toilet paper](#). While not zero waste, it's a much more sustainable solution than regular paper.

You Might Also Like...