

How to research an individual's background

If you know where to look—and have a little luck on your side—you may be able to find out a lot about a person through online research. Below you will find a series of online tools that can help you find out a person's address, phone number, salary, lobbying, political donations, home ownership, etc. But remember, these tools cannot and should not replace good old-fashioned reporting, including calling people, their friends, relatives, classmates and acquaintances.

One important word of caution: Information from online databases can be wrong, out of date or misleading. Check it out as you would anything else before using it in a story.

Contact information, affiliations, basic information

Reporter's Desktop – Who is John Doe -

<http://www.reporter.org/desktop/tips/johndoe.htm>

<http://pipl.com> (hit or miss in terms of accuracy)

<http://www.zoominfo.com>

<http://www.zabasearch.com> (addresses and phone numbers)

<http://www.whitepages.com>

<http://www.spokeo.com>

<http://www.isearch.com>

Also consider LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites.

For government officials: <http://www.whorunsgov.com/> - a wiki by the Washington Post, has profiles of top government officials.

It's always a good idea to search for yourself, your friends and relatives. That will give you a good idea of what you can—and cannot--find.

Commercial Portals

If you're willing to spend money, you might be able to find some additional information. Lexis/Nexis and Accurint are good sources of information on people's relatives, properties, address history, professional licenses, etc. Here are some other sites that may have for-pay components (some parts may be free).

- Search Systems – <http://publicrecords.searchsystems.net> – run by a for-profit commercial vendor, this site links to free public record sites for counties and states. You can search by type of public record, state, zip code.
- BRB Publications – <http://www.brbpub.com> – like Search Systems, a commercial vendor that links to county and state public records
- Criminal information can be found at <http://www.criminalsearches.com>. A basic search is free, but details cost money. And not all jurisdictions report this information.
- One website (<http://www.Pretrieve.com>) includes details on relatives free, but you need to pay to get details.
- <http://Referenceusa.com> is available in the Columbia Library. You can find information there on individuals and businesses. They also have a database of physicians and dentists as well as U.S. consumers.
- To verify a person's educational background, check with the university's registrar. Many schools contract this out to a company. You can learn more at www.studentclearinghouse.org. There is a fee for this.

Court Records

Court files are a mine of information about individuals. Check if the person you are researching has been sued or filed a lawsuit. Litigation opponents are a great source, as are lawyers.

- To find court cases in Federal Courts, check PACER - the US Party Case Index at https://pacer.login.uscourts.gov/cgi-bin/login.pl?court_id=00idx. There is a fee for searching and for downloading.
- You can also download the Firefox extension at <https://www.recapthelaw.org>, which will allow you to view for free court documents that have been downloaded from PACER by others
- Justia - <http://dockets.justia.com/> - a free site that has most of the cases on PACER, but not all
- Westlaw - a subscription database that has state and federal court documents. Teacher's College has a subscription that you can access at <http://vq2st5lq8v.search.serialssolutions.com/#databases>
- Not all court records are online. And even those courts that post, only include a limited number. Check Search Systems and BRB Publications (above) or links to district and county courts. You can also hire a records retriever to do searches for you for a fee.

Researching Nonprofits

- Guidestar -- www.guidestar.org - Repository of Form 990s, IRS forms nonprofits are required to file. You must register so you can search -- a lot of the searches are for free.

- An alternative resource is this page in Charity Navigator (<http://www.charitynavigator.org/index.cfm?bay=content.view&cpid=847>). There's a 990 Finder in a widget box on that page. A 990 is the form that nonprofits are required to submit to the Internal Revenue Service -- it provides financial and other information, including assets and salaries of top five highest paid officials. A guide to reading 990s is here: http://www.npcny.org/Form_990/990.htm .)
- The IRS has a master list of tax-exempt organizations. You'd need to download the tables by state: <http://www.irs.gov/taxstats/charitablestats/article/0,,id=97186,00.html>

Campaign Contributions

- Federal Election Commission – searchable database - http://www.fec.gov/finance_reports.html - lists individual donors, PACs, etc.
- A more easily searchable database is provided by a nonprofit, the Center for Responsive Politics -- <http://www.opensecrets.org/> or from the Sunlight Foundation at <http://transparencydata.com/#>.
- Another way to visualize the information is on www.fundrace.org.
- For campaign financing in states: <http://followthemoney.org>
- For a crash course on campaign finance: <http://www.campaignfinanceguide.org/>
- A commercial site that could be useful is CQ Moneyline.

Look for contributions on multiple sites. Sometimes, because of the way the sites are indexed, something may show up on one but not another. These reports may also help you locate a person by giving you helpful information on their businesses, etc.

Lobbying information

- Registered lobbyists and lobbying reports submitted to the House - searchable database - <http://disclosures.house.gov/ld/ldsearch.aspx>
- Registered lobbyists and lobbying reports submitted to the Senate – searchable database-<http://soprweb.senate.gov/index.cfm?event=selectfields>
- Open Secrets also has a lobbying database that you can search by issue, lobbyist, client, bill, etc. - <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/index.php>
- White House visitor logs: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/disclosures/visitor-records>

Airplanes and property

Different jurisdictions put different amounts of data online. Some make the information easily accessible. Others do not. Take a look at these three sites to understand the differences:

Harris County (Houston), Texas: www.hcad.org

Los Angeles County: <http://assessor.lacounty.gov/extranet/datamaps/pais.aspx>

New York City: <http://a836-acris.nyc.gov/Scripts/Coverpage.dll/index>

There are two other sites with pretty useful property information--Zillow.com and trulia.com. They list homes for sales, property tax appraisal information, etc.

If records are not online, that doesn't necessarily mean the records are not public. You may simply need to call up the assessor or county clerk and ask. This information is generally public and easy to access.

You can look up airplane owners at <http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/>, but be aware that airplanes can be registered in the names of spouses, trusts, corporations or subsidiaries. So again, be careful.

Once you know an airplane tail number, you can look for recent travels involving the plane at www.flightaware.com.

Other sources of information

Voter registration records –Information about an individual's party affiliation and voting record (which elections he/she cast ballots in) is public information most everywhere. You need to call the registrar of votes or the clerk because it is rarely if ever put online.

Driver's Licenses and Motor Vehicles: States have different policies about how open driving records are. For information in New York, check out the DMV site at: <http://www.nydmv.state.ny.us/abstract.htm#HOWTO>. Without a legally approved use (which you generally would not have), you are only entitled to what is called a masked abstract. That includes details about the type of license a person has, restrictions, accidents, suspensions and revocations and moving violation convictions. It does not include personal information.

Military service records: Limited information is available from the National Personnel Records Center. <http://www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/public/general-public.html>

FBI files: Not released for the living but available for the dead. This site (<http://www.getgrandpasfbifile.com/>) has some information on how to request these files.

New York State info

- Search Corporations: <http://dos.state.ny.us/>
- Fictitious Business Name search: <http://www.knowx.com/fbn/search.jsp>
- UCC Debtor search:
http://appsext8.dos.state.ny.us/pls/ucc_public/web_search.main_frame
- Department of Buildings (search building permits & other information):
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dob/html/bis/bis.shtml>
- Tax liens:
http://www.tax.state.ny.us/enforcement/collections/warrants_liens.htm
- Campaign contributions: <http://www.nyccfb.info/searchabledb/>

Guides to Public Records

- Knight Digital Media Center Public Records Tutorials - <http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/cat/public-records> - has links and instructions on how to access a whole range of public records
- The Investigative Dashboard – <http://investigativedashboard.org> - site by Romanian investigative journalist Paul Radu, it has a list of international investigative reporting resources

This tipsheet is adapted from one provided by Columbia professor Sheila Coronel, with suggestions from ProPublica researcher Lisa Schwartz.