

FOIA Request Mastery

The Complete Guide to Obtaining Government
Records Through the Freedom of Information
Act

A Jimmy Tools Guide

jimmytools.net

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Chapter 1: Understanding FOIA: Your Right to Know

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is one of the most powerful tools available to American citizens. Signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1966, FOIA establishes the public's right to request access to records from any federal agency. The premise is simple but revolutionary: in a democracy, the government's default should be transparency, not secrecy.

Yet despite its power, FOIA remains underutilized. Most people don't know they can request government records, and those who do often file poorly-crafted requests that get denied or ignored. This guide will transform you from a FOIA novice into a skilled practitioner capable of extracting information that agencies would prefer to keep hidden.

What FOIA Covers

FOIA applies to all federal agencies in the executive branch, including:

- Cabinet departments (State, Defense, Justice, Treasury, etc.)
- Military departments (Army, Navy, Air Force)
- Government corporations (USPS, Amtrak)
- Independent regulatory agencies (SEC, FTC, FCC, FDA)
- Executive Office of the President (but not the President's immediate staff)

⚠ What FOIA Does NOT Cover

Congress, the federal courts, and the President's immediate advisors are exempt from FOIA. State and local governments have their own public records laws (covered in Chapter 10). Private companies are not subject to FOIA, though their communications with government agencies may be obtainable.

What Records Can You Request?

FOIA covers "agency records," which courts have interpreted broadly to include:

- Documents, reports, and memos
- Emails and text messages
- Photographs, videos, and audio recordings
- Maps and charts
- Computer records and databases
- Contracts and grants
- Meeting minutes and calendars
- Scientific data and studies

The key requirement is that the record must already exist—agencies are not required to create new records, conduct research, or answer questions in response to a FOIA request.

Who Can File a FOIA Request?

Anyone can file a FOIA request. You don't need to be a U.S. citizen, journalist, or have any special credentials. Corporations, organizations, and foreign nationals all have equal FOIA rights. You are not required to explain why you want the records, though doing so can sometimes help (particularly for fee waivers).

The FOIA Process Overview

1. Submit your request to the appropriate agency's FOIA office
2. Receive acknowledgment with a tracking number (usually within 10 days)
3. Agency processes your request (20 business days statutory deadline, often longer)
4. Receive determination: full release, partial release with redactions, or denial
5. Appeal if necessary (agencies must respond within 20 business days)
6. Litigation as final recourse if appeals fail

 **Pro Tip: The 20-Day Myth**

While agencies are legally required to respond within 20 business days, the reality is very different. Complex requests can take months or years. The FBI's average processing time exceeds 12 months. Plan accordingly, and consider expedited processing (Chapter 6) for time-sensitive matters.

Chapter 2: Before You File: Research & Preparation

The difference between a successful FOIA request and one that languishes in bureaucratic limbo often comes down to preparation. Before drafting your request, invest time in research—it will save you months of waiting and dramatically increase your success rate.

Check Existing FOIA Reading Rooms

Every federal agency maintains an electronic FOIA reading room containing frequently requested records and previously released documents. Check these first—the records you want may already be publicly available.

Agency	FOIA Reading Room URL
FBI	vault.fbi.gov
CIA	cia.gov/readingroom
State Department	foia.state.gov
DOJ	justice.gov/oip/foia-library
DHS	dhs.gov/foia-library
DOD	open.defense.gov/Transparency/FOIA
NSA	nsa.gov/Helpful-Links/FOIA-Homepage
IRS	irs.gov/uac/foia-library

Search FOIA Logs and Completed Requests

Many agencies publish logs of all FOIA requests received, including descriptions and current status. These logs are goldmines for:

- Finding requests similar to yours (saves time by learning what worked)
- Identifying previously released records you can request copies of
- Understanding how the agency categorizes and processes requests
- Discovering topics others are investigating

Key FOIA Log Resources

- **FOIAonline** (foiaonline.gov) – Shared portal for EPA, Commerce, NARA, and others
- **FOIA.gov** – Central FOIA portal with links to all agencies
- **MuckRock** (muckrock.com) – Database of 100,000+ completed FOIA requests
- **DocumentCloud** – Searchable repository of released documents

Identify the Right Agency (and Office)

Government records are scattered across hundreds of agencies, sub-agencies, and offices. Sending your request to the wrong place delays everything. Research which specific office likely has the records you want.



Example: Investigating a Government Contract

You want records about a \$50 million IT contract. Your options:

- **Contracting agency** – Has the contract itself and performance evaluations
- **GSA** – May have records if contract used GSA schedule
- **GAO** – May have audit records (note: GAO isn't subject to FOIA, but publishes reports)
- **SBA** – May have records if small business set-aside was involved
- **Inspector General** – May have investigation records if fraud alleged

You might need to file with multiple agencies to get the complete picture.

Understand the Agency's Records Systems

Before requesting, learn how the agency organizes its records:

- **Records schedules** – Posted on NARA's website, show what records exist and retention periods
- **Privacy Act Systems of Records Notices (SORNs)** – Describe databases containing personal information
- **Agency organizational charts** – Help identify which division has your records
- **Previous FOIA responses** – Reveal how the agency describes and categorizes records

Narrow Your Request Strategically

FOIA requests fail for two main reasons: too broad or too narrow. Finding the sweet spot requires understanding the tradeoffs:

Request Type	Pros	Cons
Very Broad	Catches everything relevant	Expensive, slow, may be denied as "unreasonably burdensome"
Very Narrow	Fast, cheap, easy to process	May miss important records, agency interprets narrowly
Strategic (Ideal)	Comprehensive but focused	Requires research and knowledge of agency systems

The "Reasonably Described" Standard

FOIA requires requests to "reasonably describe" the records sought. This means an agency employee familiar with the subject should be able to locate the records with a reasonable amount of effort. If your request is so vague that no one could find what you're looking for, it can be denied.

Chapter 3: Crafting the Perfect FOIA Request

A well-crafted FOIA request is precise, professional, and anticipates agency objections. This chapter provides the framework and language that maximizes your chances of success.

Essential Elements of Every Request

1. **Clear identification as a FOIA request** – Put "FOIA Request" in the subject line and first sentence
2. **Specific description of records sought** – Be precise about what you want
3. **Date range** – Specify the time period covered
4. **Format preference** – Request electronic records in native format
5. **Fee category declaration** – State whether you're media, commercial, educational, or other
6. **Fee waiver request** – If applicable, include justification (see Chapter 5)
7. **Contact information** – Full name, address, phone, email

The Magic Words That Work

Certain phrases signal to FOIA officers that you know what you're doing:

- **"All records, including but not limited to..."** – Prevents narrow interpretation
- **"Electronic records in native format"** – Gets you searchable documents, not printed PDFs
- **"Communications including emails, text messages, instant messages, and messaging app communications"** – Covers modern communication channels
- **"Final and draft versions"** – Drafts often contain information removed from finals
- **"Please search all locations where responsive records may be stored, including personal devices and accounts used for government business"** – Covers Hillary Clinton-style private servers

FOIA REQUEST TEMPLATE

[Date]

FOIA Officer

[Agency Name]

[Address]

RE: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552.

I request copies of all records, including but not limited to documents, memoranda, correspondence, emails, text messages, reports, studies, data, photographs, and audio/video recordings, concerning [SPECIFIC SUBJECT].

Please search for responsive records created or received between [START DATE] and [END DATE].

Specifically, I request:

1. [Specific record type #1]
2. [Specific record type #2]
3. [Specific record type #3]

Please search all locations where responsive records may be stored, including but not limited to electronic systems, paper files, and personal devices or accounts used for government business.

I request that records be provided in electronic format, in their native file format where possible (e.g., .docx, .xlsx, .pdf), delivered via email or secure file transfer.

Fee Category: I am [a representative of the news media / an educational institution / other]. [Brief justification if claiming reduced fees.]

Fee Waiver Request: [If applicable, see Chapter 5 for language]

Expedited Processing: [If applicable, see Chapter 6 for language]

If any responsive records are withheld in whole or in part, please provide an index identifying each withheld record, the FOIA exemption(s) claimed, and a brief explanation of how each exemption applies.

If you have any questions about this request, please contact me at [phone] or [email]. I look forward to your response within the 20 business days required by law.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Address]

[Phone]

[Email]

Describing Records: Techniques That Work

The Subject + Date + Author/Recipient Method

The clearest requests specify the subject matter, date range, and who created or received the records:

Example

"All emails sent or received by Assistant Secretary John Smith between January 1, 2023 and December 31, 2023 containing the words 'Project Atlas' or 'Atlas contract.'"

The Document Type Method

When you know a specific document exists, describe its type and purpose:

Example

"The Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the proposed Willow Project oil drilling in the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, including all draft versions and public comments received."

The Event-Based Method

For records about a specific incident or event:

Example

"All records relating to the January 15, 2024 chemical spill at the XYZ Manufacturing facility in Houston, Texas, including inspection reports, enforcement actions, correspondence with the facility, and internal memoranda."

Avoiding Common Mistakes

DON'T: Ask Questions

Wrong: "Why did the agency approve this permit?"

Right: "All records documenting the agency's decision to approve Permit No. 12345, including staff analyses, recommendations, and decision memos."

DON'T: Request "Any and All Records"

Wrong: "Any and all records about immigration."

Right: "All policy memoranda issued by the Office of Immigration Policy between 2022-2024 concerning asylum eligibility standards."

DON'T: Forget Date Ranges

Open-ended requests invite delays. Always specify dates, even if broad (e.g., "2000–present").

Chapter 4: Agency-by-Agency Guide

Each federal agency has its own FOIA culture, quirks, and processing times. This chapter provides insider knowledge on navigating the most-requested agencies.

FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)

Average processing time: 12-18 months

Submission: efoia.fbi.gov (electronic) or FBI FOIPA Request, Attn: FOIPA Request, 200 Constitution Dr., Winchester, VA 22602

The FBI maintains extensive files on individuals, organizations, and events. Their FOIA operation is the largest in the government, processing over 15,000 requests annually.

What Works with the FBI

- Request by file number if you know it (format: 100-HQ-12345)
- Include subject's full name, DOB, and SSN for background files
- Check The Vault first – thousands of files already released
- Request specific field office files in addition to HQ files

FBI-Specific Exemptions to Expect

- b(7)(A) – Records compiled for law enforcement that could interfere with proceedings
- b(7)(C) – Personal privacy of third parties (names often redacted)
- b(7)(D) – Confidential source information
- b(7)(E) – Law enforcement techniques and procedures

CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)

Average processing time: 2-5 years

Submission: cia.gov/readingroom/foia_request or CIA, FOIA, Washington, DC 20505

The CIA is notoriously slow and secretive. However, they have released millions of pages over the years, and persistence pays off.

What Works with the CIA

- Request historical records – Better success with records 25+ years old
- Use the CREST database – 13 million pages searchable online
- Cite Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) – Separate process that sometimes works better than FOIA
- Request specific documents by name when possible

State Department

Average processing time: 2-4 years (complex), 6-12 months (simple)

Submission: foia.state.gov

State Department FOIA is overwhelmed with requests, particularly for diplomatic cables and communications.

What Works with State

- Use the Virtual Reading Room – Many cables already released
- Request specific embassy/consulate cables rather than all cables on a topic
- Cite case numbers from previous releases to get related documents

Department of Defense

Average processing time: Varies widely by component (30 days to 2+ years)

Submission: Varies by component – must submit to specific service/agency

DOD is actually dozens of separate FOIA operations. You must identify the correct component:

- Army – armyfoia.army.mil
- Navy – secnav.navy.mil/foia
- Air Force – efoia.af.mil
- NSA – nsa.gov/foia

- DIA – dia.mil/foia
- NRO – nro.gov/foia

Department of Justice

Average processing time: 6-18 months

Submission: Varies by component (FBI, DEA, ATF, BOP, etc. have separate FOIA offices)

Key DOJ Components

- Office of Information Policy (OIP) – Sets FOIA policy, handles appeals
- Criminal Division – Prosecution records
- Civil Rights Division – Civil rights enforcement
- EOUSA – U.S. Attorney office records
- OIG – Inspector General investigations

IRS (Internal Revenue Service)

Average processing time: 30-90 days

Submission: irs.gov/uac/freedom-of-information

The IRS is relatively efficient but heavily protects taxpayer information. You cannot FOIA someone else's tax returns or individual tax information.

What You CAN Get from the IRS

- Internal policy documents and guidance
- Statistics and aggregate data
- Your own tax records (use Form 4506-T instead)
- Organization exemption applications (Form 1023/1024) – public for 501(c)(3)s
- Private letter rulings (with identifying info redacted)

Chapter 5: Fee Waivers: How to Get Records for Free

FOIA allows agencies to charge fees for searching, reviewing, and duplicating records. However, agencies must waive or reduce fees when disclosure "is in the public interest because it is likely to contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government and is not primarily in the commercial interest of the requester."

The Fee Waiver Test

To qualify for a fee waiver, you must demonstrate:

1. **Subject matter** – The requested records concern government operations or activities
2. **Informative value** – Disclosure is likely to contribute to public understanding
3. **Public benefited** – The public, not just the requester, will benefit
4. **Significance** – The contribution will be significant
5. **Non-commercial** – Disclosure is not primarily for commercial purposes
6. **Ability to disseminate** – You have the ability and intent to share information publicly

Fee Waiver Language That Works

FEE WAIVER REQUEST

I request a waiver of all fees associated with this request pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a) (4) (A) (iii).

Public Interest: The requested records concern [specific government activity]. Disclosure will contribute significantly to public understanding of [specific issue] by revealing [what information will show]. This information is not currently publicly known and will shed light on [government operations/decisions/activities].

Dissemination Ability: I am [a journalist / researcher / public interest organization representative] with the ability and intention to disseminate this information to the public through [publication, website, academic research, etc.]. [Describe your platform, audience, or past publications.]

Non-Commercial Purpose: I have no commercial interest in these records. This request is made solely to inform the public about government activities, not for any commercial purpose.

Based on these factors, I request that all fees be waived. In the alternative, I request that fees be reduced to the level appropriate for [news media / educational institution] requesters.

Fee Categories

Requester Type	Search Fees	Review Fees	Duplication Fees
Commercial	Yes	Yes	Yes
News Media	No	No	First 100 pages free
Educational/Scientific	No	No	First 100 pages free
All Others	First 2 hours free	No	First 100 pages free

Qualifying as "News Media"

You don't need to work for a major newspaper. The definition includes anyone who:

- Publishes a blog, newsletter, or website with news content
- Contributes to publications (even occasional freelance work)
- Documents research for public dissemination
- Operates a podcast or YouTube channel covering news/public affairs

Start a Substack

A free Substack newsletter documenting your FOIA work can help establish you as "news media" for fee purposes. Even a small subscriber base demonstrates intent to disseminate information publicly.

Chapter 6: Expedited Processing: Fast-Tracking Your Request

Standard FOIA processing can take months or years. Expedited processing moves your request to the front of the line—but only if you meet strict criteria.

Grounds for Expedited Processing

Agencies must grant expedited processing when the requester demonstrates:

1. **Imminent threat to life or safety** – Circumstances where delay could cause someone physical harm
2. **Urgency to inform the public** – For those primarily engaged in disseminating information, an urgency to inform the public about actual or alleged government activity (news media standard)
3. **Loss of due process rights** – Records needed to preserve someone's legal rights
4. **Humanitarian need** – Some agencies recognize this as additional grounds

Meeting the "Urgency to Inform" Standard

This is the most commonly claimed basis. To succeed, you must show:

- **You are "primarily engaged in disseminating information"** – Journalist, blogger, researcher with public platform
- **The matter involves current events or breaking news** – Not historical research
- **There is genuine urgency** – The news value will diminish with delay
- **The information concerns government activity** – Not private matters

EXPEDITED PROCESSING REQUEST

I request expedited processing of this FOIA request pursuant to 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6) (E).

Basis: I am primarily engaged in disseminating information to the public as [describe your role: journalist, researcher, blogger for X publication]. There is an urgency to inform the public about the government activity described in this request because [explain the current news event or urgent circumstances].

Time Sensitivity: [Explain why delay would harm the public interest. Is there pending legislation? An ongoing controversy? An approaching deadline?]

Certification: I certify that my statements supporting this request for expedited processing are true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

[Signature]

[Date]

⚠ False Certification Consequences

Your request for expedited processing must include a certification that your statements are true. Making false statements can result in penalties, so only request expedited processing when you have genuine grounds.

Chapter 7: Understanding Exemptions & Redactions

FOIA requires disclosure unless records fall within one of nine specific exemptions. Understanding these exemptions helps you anticipate what you'll receive and craft appeals when agencies overreach.

The Nine FOIA Exemptions

Exemption	Protects	Common Usage
(b)(1)	Classified national security information	CIA, NSA, DOD, State Dept
(b)(2)	Internal personnel rules and practices	HR policies, building security
(b)(3)	Information protected by other statutes	Tax returns, census data, grand jury
(b)(4)	Trade secrets and commercial information	Contractor proposals, business data
(b)(5)	Privileged inter/intra-agency communications	Draft documents, deliberations
(b)(6)	Personal privacy	Names, addresses, personal info
(b)(7)	Law enforcement records	FBI, DEA, investigations
(b)(8)	Financial institution records	Bank examination reports
(b)(9)	Geological/geophysical data on wells	Oil and gas exploration

The Most Abused Exemption: (b)(5)

Exemption 5 protects "inter-agency or intra-agency memorandums or letters that would not be available by law to a party other than an agency in litigation." Agencies invoke this exemption to withhold:

- **Deliberative process privilege** – Draft documents and internal recommendations
- **Attorney-client privilege** – Legal advice to agency

- **Attorney work product** – Materials prepared for litigation

This exemption is frequently overused. Key limits to remember:

- Only protects **pre-decisional** documents – final decisions must be released
- Only protects **deliberative** content – factual information must be segregated and released
- Does not apply to documents 25+ years old (recent amendment)

Reading Redacted Documents

Even heavily redacted documents contain valuable information:

- **Document dates and types** – Show timeline and what records exist
- **Classification markings** – Indicate sensitivity and originating agency
- **Distribution lists** – Reveal who was involved
- **Page numbers** – Show document length and potential missing pages
- **Redaction sizes** – Suggest how much was withheld
- **Exemption codes** – Reveal why information was withheld

Chapter 8: The Appeals Process: Fighting Denials

When your FOIA request is denied or you receive excessive redactions, you have the right to appeal. Appeals are free, require no lawyer, and succeed more often than you might think—agencies grant relief in about 25% of appeals.

When to Appeal

- Request fully denied
- Excessive or unjustified redactions
- Fee waiver denied
- Expedited processing denied
- Agency failed to respond within statutory timeframe
- Agency claims no responsive records exist (when you know they do)
- Search was inadequate

Appeal Deadlines

You generally have **90 days** from the date of the adverse determination to file an appeal. Don't miss this deadline—it's strictly enforced.

Crafting an Effective Appeal

FOIA APPEAL TEMPLATE

[Date]

[Agency Appeals Officer]

[Address]

Re: Freedom of Information Act Appeal

Original Request: [Request number/date]

Dear Appeals Officer:

This is an appeal under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(6).

On [date], I submitted a FOIA request seeking [brief description]. On [date], [agency component] responded by [describe adverse determination: denying the request, withholding records under exemptions, etc.].

I appeal this determination for the following reasons:

1. [First argument]

[Explain why the exemption was improperly applied, the search was inadequate, etc.]

2. [Second argument]

[Continue with additional arguments]

Foreseeable Harm: The agency has not demonstrated that disclosure would cause any foreseeable harm. Under the 2016 FOIA Improvement Act, agencies may only withhold information if disclosure would cause a foreseeable harm to an interest protected by a FOIA exemption or is prohibited by law.

Segregability: Even if some information is properly exempt, the agency must release all reasonably segregable non-exempt information. I request that the agency conduct a line-by-line review and release all segregable portions.

Relief Requested: I request that [the withheld records be released / the redactions be reduced / the fee waiver be granted / etc.].

Thank you for your consideration of this appeal.

Sincerely,

[Your name and contact information]

Enclosures: [Original request, agency response, any supporting documents]

Appeal Arguments That Win

Challenging Exemption (b)(5) – Deliberative Process

- Document is not pre-decisional (decision already made)
- Document is not deliberative (purely factual)
- Document is over 25 years old
- Factual portions are segregable from deliberative portions
- Agency failed to show foreseeable harm from disclosure

Challenging Exemption (b)(6) / (b)(7)(C) – Privacy

- Individual is a public figure
- Individual's role was governmental, not personal
- Public interest in disclosure outweighs privacy interest
- Information is already publicly available
- Individual is deceased (reduced privacy interest)

Challenging "No Responsive Records"

- Cite evidence that records should exist (news reports, other documents)
- Request description of search conducted
- Suggest additional locations agency should search
- Note that agency is legally required to search all likely locations

Chapter 9: FOIA Litigation: When to Sue

If your appeal is denied, you can sue the agency in federal court. FOIA litigation is one of the few areas where citizens can sue the government with a realistic chance of winning.

When Litigation Makes Sense

- Records are clearly important and agency is stonewalling
- You've exhausted administrative remedies (appeal denied or not responded to)
- You have resources (time and money) to pursue litigation
- The legal issues favor disclosure (agency overreached on exemptions)
- You have evidence of bad faith or improper withholding

The FOIA Litigation Advantage

FOIA plaintiffs have significant advantages:

- **No deference to agency** – Courts review de novo (fresh look)
- **Burden on agency** – Government must prove exemptions apply
- **Attorney fees available** – If you substantially prevail, agency may pay your legal costs
- **In camera review** – Judge can review documents privately to check agency claims

Finding a FOIA Lawyer

Several organizations provide free or low-cost FOIA legal assistance:

- **Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press** – Free legal help for journalists
- **ACLU** – Takes cases with civil liberties implications
- **Electronic Frontier Foundation** – Technology and surveillance cases
- **National Security Archive** – National security and foreign policy
- **Law school clinics** – Many schools have FOIA/First Amendment clinics

Constructive Exhaustion

If an agency fails to respond to your appeal within 20 business days, you have "constructively exhausted" your administrative remedies and can proceed directly to court without waiting for a response.

Chapter 10: State Public Records Laws

Every state has its own public records law (sometimes called "sunshine laws" or "open records acts"). While similar to federal FOIA, state laws vary significantly in strength and procedure.

States with Strong Public Records Laws

- **Florida** – Extremely broad, fast response times required
- **Texas** – Strong presumption of openness
- **California** – Broad coverage, attorney fees available
- **New York** – Good access to local government records
- **Virginia** – Strong with criminal penalties for violations

States with Weak Public Records Laws

- **Pennsylvania** – Many exemptions, complex procedures
- **New Jersey** – Slow response times common
- **Mississippi** – Limited coverage
- **Wyoming** – Broad exemptions

Key Differences from Federal FOIA

Issue	Federal FOIA	State Laws (Varies)
Response time	20 business days	3-30 days depending on state
Fees	Complex fee structure	Often simpler, some states free
Appeals	To agency head	Varies (agency, AG, or court)
Enforcement	Federal court	State court, sometimes AG

Attorney fees	If substantially prevail	Varies by state
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Finding State FOIA Resources

- **Reporters Committee** – rcfp.org/open-government-guide (all 50 states)
- **State press associations** – Often publish guides
- **State AG websites** – Many publish sample forms and guidance
- **NFOIC** – National Freedom of Information Coalition (nfoic.org)

Chapter 11: Advanced Techniques & Pro Tips

The Parallel Request Strategy

Submit the same request to multiple agencies simultaneously. Records about a single topic are often scattered across agencies, and each may have documents the others don't. Cross-referencing responses can also reveal inconsistencies and gaps.

The Historical Records Backdoor

Records over 25 years old may be subject to automatic declassification under Executive Order 13526. For historical records, consider:

- Mandatory Declassification Review (MDR) – Alternative to FOIA for classified records
- National Archives – Historical records are transferred and often more accessible
- Presidential libraries – May have records not available elsewhere

The "Reasonably Segregable" Weapon

Agencies must release all "reasonably segregable" portions of documents, even if parts are exempt. When you receive heavily redacted documents, appeal arguing that more information is segregable. This forces line-by-line review.

Using Other FOIA Requests

Search MuckRock, DocumentCloud, and agency reading rooms for requests similar to yours. If someone else already obtained records, you can:

- Request the same records (usually faster since already processed)
- Use their successful request language as a template
- Identify related documents to request

The FOIA Ombudsman

The Office of Government Information Services (OGIS) mediates FOIA disputes. They can't force agencies to release records, but can often resolve problems informally. Contact: ogis.archives.gov

Build Relationships with FOIA Officers

FOIA officers are often overworked and underappreciated. Professional, courteous communication—and occasional appreciation—can make your requests go smoother. Don't be adversarial unless necessary.

Track Your Requests Systematically

Create a spreadsheet tracking:

- Request date, agency, tracking number
- 20-day deadline and actual response date
- Outcome (full release, partial, denial)
- Appeal deadline and status
- Documents received and key findings

Chapter 12: Templates & Resources

Standard FOIA Request Template

[Date]

FOIA Officer

[Agency Name]

[Address]

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear FOIA Officer:

Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552, I request access to and copies of [describe records].

Please search for records dated between [start date] and [end date].

I request records in electronic format where available. If fees exceed \$[amount], please contact me for approval before processing.

[I request a fee waiver because... OR I am a representative of the news media and request reduced fees.]

Please contact me at [email/phone] if you have questions.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Address]

[Phone]

[Email]

Key FOIA Websites

- [FOIA.gov](#) – Central government FOIA portal
- [FOIAonline.gov](#) – Multi-agency request portal
- [MuckRock.com](#) – File, track, and share requests
- [DocumentCloud.org](#) – Document repository
- [RCFP.org](#) – Reporters Committee resources
- [OGIS.archives.gov](#) – FOIA ombudsman
- [Archives.gov](#) – National Archives

Recommended Reading

- *The Art of Access* by David Cullier and Charles Davis
- *Freedom of Information* by Harold Cross (historical classic)
- DOJ Guide to the Freedom of Information Act ([justice.gov](#))
- RCFP Federal FOIA Guide ([rcfp.org](#))

Agency FOIA Contact List

Agency	FOIA Portal
FBI	efoia.fbi.gov
CIA	cia.gov/readingroom
State	foia.state.gov
DOJ	justice.gov/oip
DHS	dhs.gov/foia
DOD	open.defense.gov
EPA	foiaonline.gov
SEC	sec.gov/foia

FTC	ftc.gov/foia
HHS	hhs.gov/foia

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