

Write a FOIA Request That Names the Records

FOIA works on agency records. The more clearly a request describes those records, the easier it is for an agency to identify the right systems, offices, and date range.



A public-records request workspace with scanner, envelope, calendar, and folders. Original TargetedArmy editorial image generated for this guide.

START WITH THE RECORD

Ask for existing material, not an explanation

The federal Freedom of Information Act provides a process for requesting agency records. It does not require an agency to answer questions, conduct research, create a new report, or explain why an event occurred. Translate your question into documents that would exist if the activity occurred.

Instead of asking who authorized surveillance, identify the record types: memoranda, directives, tasking documents, contracts, purchase orders, email, logs, policies, meeting minutes, reports, or correspondence. Name the office, program, system, sender, recipient, and date range when known.

SCOPE

Give the search a beginning, an end, and a custodian

A focused request states the date range and the offices or custodians likely to hold the records. Use names, titles, contract numbers, project terms, case numbers, locations, and known subject lines. Explain unusual acronyms without turning the request into an essay.

FOIA.gov notes that targeted requests generally move faster than broad, complex requests. If your investigation spans several agencies or unrelated record types, submit separate requests. Each agency searches its own records.

- Identify the correct federal agency
- Search public reading rooms first
- Describe existing records reasonably
- State a date range and likely office
- Request electronic native format when useful
- Keep a copy and tracking number



A practical detail view supporting the article procedure.

FORMAT AND FEES

State how you want the records delivered

Ask for records in electronic form and, when it matters, in their native format with nonexempt metadata preserved. For spreadsheets, request the original spreadsheet rather than a printed PDF. For email, name the fields or attachments you need.

State a fee limit you can accept and ask the agency to contact you before exceeding it. If you seek a fee waiver or preferred fee category, use the agency's published standard and provide the required factual basis. Do not assume the label alone is enough.

TRACK THE PROCESS

Preserve the request, acknowledgment, and every modification

Save the exact submitted text, attachments, portal confirmation, tracking number, acknowledgment, assigned component, estimated completion information, and every call or email. If an agency asks for clarification, answer in writing and preserve the changed scope.

A requester service center or public liaison may help clarify status or identify ways to narrow a difficult search. Be specific and professional. The goal is a record trail that shows what was requested and how the agency understood it.

REVIEW THE RESPONSE

Index what arrived and what did not

Record the response date, page count, file names, exemptions cited, referrals, withheld-page markers, appeal deadline, and any statement that no responsive records were found. Preserve the original delivery before reorganizing copies.

A no-records response may reflect scope, custodian choice, date range, search terms, retention, referral, or the absence of responsive records. Review the agency's explanation and appeal instructions. For legal strategy or deadlines in a consequential matter, consult a qualified attorney.

Sources

1. How to Make a FOIA Request. U.S. Department of Justice

<https://www.foia.gov/how-to.html>

2. FOIA.gov Agency Search and Request Portal. U.S. Department of Justice

<https://www.foia.gov/>

Editorial Notice

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