



HOW TO STRATEGICALLY USE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT TO ACCESS FEDERAL RECORDS

Transparency isn't just a principle—it's your right. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), enacted in 1966, gives every person the legal right to access records from federal government agencies. Whether you're investigating a federal program, seeking clarity on national policy decisions, or holding federal agencies accountable, this guide walks you through how to file a FOIA request effectively—and with confidence.

WHAT IS A FOIA REQUEST

A FOIA request is a formal request for access to records held by federal government agencies. Established under the Freedom of Information Act of 1966, the law gives any person—regardless of citizenship—the right to inspect or obtain copies of federal records unless the information is protected by one of nine exemptions (such as national security or personal privacy). FOIA empowers individuals to investigate how federal agencies operate, make decisions, and spend taxpayer dollars.

WHEN WOULD YOU SUBMIT A PUBLIC RECORD'S REQUEST

You should file a FOIA request when the information you're seeking from a federal agency is not already publicly available. If you're looking for internal communications, reports, contracts, inspection records, or other documentation related to federal decision-making, a FOIA request is the official channel to obtain those records. Whether you're fact-checking a public claim, reviewing federal spending, or investigating agency conduct, FOIA provides the legal pathway to access what's on the record.

AGENCIES SUBJECT TO PUBLIC RECORDS REQUEST LAWS

FOIA applies exclusively to federal government agencies. Some of the most commonly requested departments include:

- Federal Bureau of Investigation FBI
- Department of Justice
- Food and Drug Administration FDA
- Department of Human Services
- Department of Interior
- Department of Defense
- Citizenship and Immigration Services
- Central Intelligence Agency
- National Archives and Records Admin
- Office of Personal Management
- Department of Education
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Department Of Labor
- Department of Transportation
- Department of State
- Department of Treasury/IRS
- Securities and Exchange Commission
- Federal Communications Commission
- National Security Agency
- Department of Housing and Urban Development

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How to File a FOIA Request

1 IDENTIFY THE RIGHT FEDERAL AGENCY

Start by pinpointing which federal agency is most likely to hold the records you need. Think about who created or oversees the information—whether it's immigration, education, law enforcement, or public health. FOIA only applies to federal agencies, so make sure your request isn't better suited for a state or local office.

2 LOCATE THE FOIA SUBMISSION PAGE

Use a simple Google search like "FOIA request [Agency Name]" to find the agency's official submission page. Most federal agencies have a dedicated FOIA portal or an email listed for submissions. Look for links labeled "FOIA," "Public Records," or "Open Government." **Pro tip: Bookmark the agency's submission page if you plan on filing again in the future.**

3 WRITE A CLEAR, SPECIFIC REQUEST

Be clear and detailed about the records you want. Include a date range, specific individuals or departments involved, and keywords or topics that would appear in the documents. The more focused your request, the faster and more accurate the response. For example:

"Pursuant to the Freedom of Information Act, I request all internal memos from the Department of Education sent between January 1 and March 1, 2024, that reference 'Title IX enforcement' or 'school discipline policy.' Please provide electronic copies if available."

4 MONITOR THE RESPONSE TIME

Each agency accepts FOIA requests differently—some require online submissions through a portal, others accept email or mail. Follow the instructions on the agency's FOIA page to ensure proper delivery.

5 FOLLOW-UP POLITELY

Agencies are required to respond within 20 business days, but delays can happen. Most federal portals offer tracking numbers. If you don't receive a confirmation or update, it's reasonable to follow up with a polite status inquiry.

6 REVIEW AND RESPOND

When your records arrive, review them carefully. If anything is missing or redacted, you may appeal or request clarification. Agencies must cite legal exemptions when denying access to any part of your request.