



How to Request a FOIA

Here's a step-by-step guide to help you fill out and submit a FOIA request. You don't need to be an expert. Simply follow the steps, and you'll get through it!

1. Figure out which federal agency actually has the records.

This matters more than anything else. FOIA is only for federal agencies. So NOT:

- Your city police
- Your county sheriff
- Your state university
- Your local court

Those are state-level public records, and that's a whole different process. FOIA is for places like:

- FBI
- Department of Homeland Security (DHS)
- Department of Justice (DOJ)
- CIA
- State Department
- USPS
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)
- Department of Education

If you're unsure who would have your records, use this easy search tool:

<https://www.foia.gov/agency-search.html>

Pick the agency that makes the most sense. Choose the one doing the work connected to what you're requesting.

2. Get clear on what you're actually asking for.

Before you write anything, take 30 seconds and answer these for yourself:

- What type of record is it? (Emails? Reports? Complaints? Policies? Data? Memos?)
- What's the topic?
- Whose records are involved?
- What date range makes sense?

This protects you from asking for way too much or something impossible to search.

Good, clear examples

- "All emails sent or received by John Smith between Jan 1-Mar 30, 2024, containing the keyword 'contract extension.'"
- "Any internal memos from 2022 discussing the new asylum processing guidelines."

Bad examples (These will get you delayed or denied:)

- “Everything you have about immigration.”
- “All DHS records ever.”

If your request is vague, they can't search it and they'll just bounce it back.

3. Write your FOIA request. Keep it clean and straightforward.

You can use this template.

Sample FOIA Request Text (This is what you copy/paste into the form.)

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

I am requesting copies of [describe the records], covering the date range [dates].

Preferred format: electronic (PDF or email).

If any fees will exceed \$25, please notify me before processing.

Name: [Your Name]

Email: [Your Email]

Mailing Address: [Your Mailing Address]

That's all you need. You do not need fancy wording, legal quotes, or threats. Simple = faster.

4. Submit your request (online is easiest).

Most agencies have web portals where you paste your text and click submit.

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

If your agency isn't on that site, here are common portals:

- FBI: <https://efoia.fbi.gov/#home>
- DOJ: <https://www.justice.gov/oip/make-foia-request-doj>
- DHS: <https://www.dhs.gov/foia>
- State Dept: <https://foia.state.gov/>
- USPS: <https://about.usps.com/who/legal/foia/welcome.htm>
- Department of Ed:
<https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-overview/required-notice/freedom-of-information-act-foia>

When you submit, they'll ask:

- Your info
- Your description of the records
- Whether you want digital or paper copies (choose digital)
- Your fee limit

If you have context (such as a news article, a case number, a policy memo), you can attach it. Not required, but sometimes helpful.

5. Save your tracking number.

Once you submit, they'll email you a tracking number. Screenshot it. Flag the email. Forward it to yourself. You'll need it to check your status here:

1. Determine which federal agency holds the records you requested.
2. Visit the agency's official FOIA website (such as <https://www.hhs.gov/foia/index.html>, <https://home.treasury.gov/footer/freedom-of-information-act/check-the-status-of-a-request>).
3. Use the portal and look for a "Check Status" or "Public Access Link (PAL)" section.
4. Input your unique request number and your last name (and potentially a captcha) to view updates.
5. Check the status guide. They will help you understand statuses like "Received," "In Process," "On Hold," or "Closed".
6. Contact the agency directly. If you can't find a portal, email or call the agency's FOIA office or Public Liaison for an update

6. Know what happens inside the agency.

After you submit, here's what they're doing:

1. Someone reads your request.
2. They figure out what office has the records.
3. They search for them.
4. They review everything to remove sensitive info.
5. They release what they legally can.

If they're confused, they'll email you for clarification. Just answer quickly to avoid delays.

7. How long you'll wait (normal vs reality).

FOIA law says they should reply within 20 business days. In real life, it's slower.

- Simple requests: 1-3 months
- Complicated ones: 6-18 months
- Anything involving emails: slow
- Anything touching multiple offices: slower

You didn't do anything wrong. This is just how FOIA works everywhere.

8. Follow up politely but firmly.

If it's been a while and you've heard nothing, send a quick email:

"Hi, I'm checking on the status of FOIA request #____. Can you provide an update?"

9. If they deny your request.

Denials happen all the time, but every denial letter must include:

- Why they denied it
- What legal exemption they used
- How to appeal

Appeals are free and surprisingly effective. You write a short note saying why you think the denial was wrong.

If you need help navigating submitting a FOIA request, reach out to us at hello@loveyourschool.org!