

Excerpts from the NATIONAL SECURITY ARCHIVE's

"Making the FOIA Work for You"

1) Do your **RESEARCH** before you file a FOIA request.

- A FOIA request should be a research tool of last resort; it can take a long time to obtain records and can be costly.
- Ascertain whether the documents you are seeking already are publicly available. Review agency websites, including their online FOIA reading rooms.
- Doing your research first will inform you as to the key events and key decision-makers on your topic, help you pinpoint documents and agencies in your requests, and keep you from requesting material extraneous to your interest.

2) Write your request clearly; and **BE SPECIFIC**.

- Overly broad requests are wasteful in time (yours, and the government's) and resources (yours, and the government's). Please keep in mind that agencies only are required to search for documents under the FOIA, not create them. You cannot ask an agency to do your research for you. Only if you are fairly certain that a government agency will have documents should you send a FOIA request.
- Be specific: assume the FOIA officer is not familiar with your topic. As many agencies perform computerized searches for documents, use key words and phrases. For example, an agency may not be able to search "escalation of tension," but be able to search "military assistance." Also, provide accurate titles and dates, full names, and pertinent news stories discussing the subject of your request. In other words, assist the person in doing the search by providing key items of information.
- Keep your request brief, avoiding narratives, as they likely will confuse the FOIA Officer. Don't write two-page supporting essays for your request, as they will only create confusion for the FOIA Officer.
- To see sample FOIA requests [click here](#).

3) **TARGET** your request.

- In addition to researching your topic, research the government to find out where to send the request.
- Send your request to the agency most likely to hold the records. It will save time in referrals between offices.

4) Establish and maintain **CONTACT** with the agency.

- Don't harass your FOIA officer with too many calls or letters. Yours is not the only case the agency has received. Also, consider that at some agencies program (or policy) officers may also handle FOIA requests, and your request is just one of many tasks they must undertake.
- Note all substantive telephone contacts in addition to the agency correspondence you receive.
- Agency response letters often identify a point-of-contact or case officer for your FOIA request. If not, after a reasonable period of time, call and check on the status of your request and identify the case officer. Your effort will indicate to the FOIA officer your continued interest in the request. The FOIA officer can then advise you of estimated fees; can seek clarification of your request; can advise you of delays; and can advise you if extraneous material is located.

5) Stay **ADMINISTRATIVELY** accurate. Understand the FOIA Statutes.

- Carefully follow the agency's own FOIA regulations and instructions in correspondence.

6) **DELAYS** in processing requests, while frustrating, can be expected.

7) Be **REASONABLE**.

- Consider the FOIA officer receiving your request. A well-written request, helpful contact, and a non-confrontational manner on your end will only aid the processing of your request.
- Don't send frivolous letters or file pointless appeals; they will delay processing of yours - and others' - requests. Contact with the FOIA officer will help you ascertain what is a useful exercise.

Source: <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/nsa/foia/tips.html>