

HOW TO FOIA

As The Washington Post's Freedom of Information Act director, I help reporters get as many government records as they can.

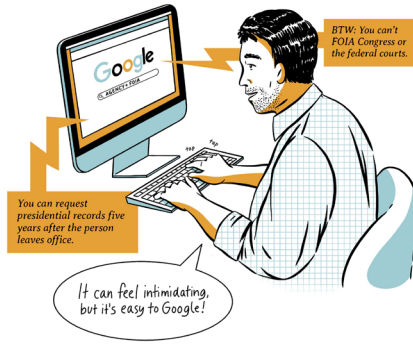


Federal records are governed by the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA. Each state has its own version of the law.



STEP 1

Find out which state or federal agency has the records you want.



STEP 2

Decide what to request. Most laws only cover existing records. Try asking for completed forms, contracts, databases, memos and reports. Check if they're already publicly available.



STEP 3

Draft and file your request. Be specific, so it's easier for officials to find the records. Ask that any denials be in writing and include a legal justification for their decision — and what you'd need to do to appeal or sue.



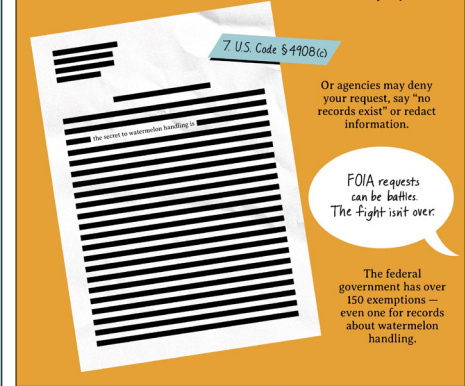
STEP 4

After you file, get a tracking number for your request. Don't hesitate to follow up!



STEP 5

You get your records! Congratulations. How you use them is up to you.



STEP 6

Appeal any full or partial denial. Send a letter explaining why you believe the agency was wrong to use the exemptions they cited.



STEP 7



If the appeal fails, consider a lawsuit. The Post has sued to win the release of important records.

Requesting public records can be tricky, but it's worth the fight to keep a watchful eye on what your government is up to.

