

Docs on the Beat:
The Lazy Guide To
Great Exclusive Stories



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Filed 21,000 requests in
all 50 states + federal.

Released over 970,000
pages of documents.

Filed with 5,000 agencies.



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I've seen it all



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I've seen it all

- Delays



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I've seen it all

- Delays
- Denials



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I've seen it all

- Delays
- Denials
- Deception



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I've seen it all

- Delays
- Denials
- Deception
- High Fees



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I've seen it all

- Delays
- Denials
- Deception
- High Fees
- Redacted Pages



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I've seen it all

- Delays
- Denials
- Deception
- High Fees
- Redacted Pages
- “Dolphins have
medical privacy”



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Create a request

Not sure where to start? [We can help.](#)
Out of ideas? [Try cloning a request.](#)
Want to send a multirequest? [Click here.](#)

Pick a Title

Write one sentence describing what you're looking for. The more specific you can be, the better.



LOCAL



STATE



FEDERAL

Create



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What does a request
look like?



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Hi,

I'd like a copy of your
most recent employee
newsletter.

Thanks!
Sam Reporter



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Don't worry about special forms.

No special language.

Email, fax, mail — or, in many places, even in person.



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What matters most is attitude:

They are not doing you a favor.
You are exercising your rights.



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**But some things can help
you exercise those rights.**



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Dear Record Custodian,

Pursuant to the Massachusetts Public Records Law (G.L. c. 66), please provide a copy of your most recent employee newsletter. I expect a response with the 10 business days the law demands.

Sincerely,
Sam P. Reporter

16 Percent Faster!



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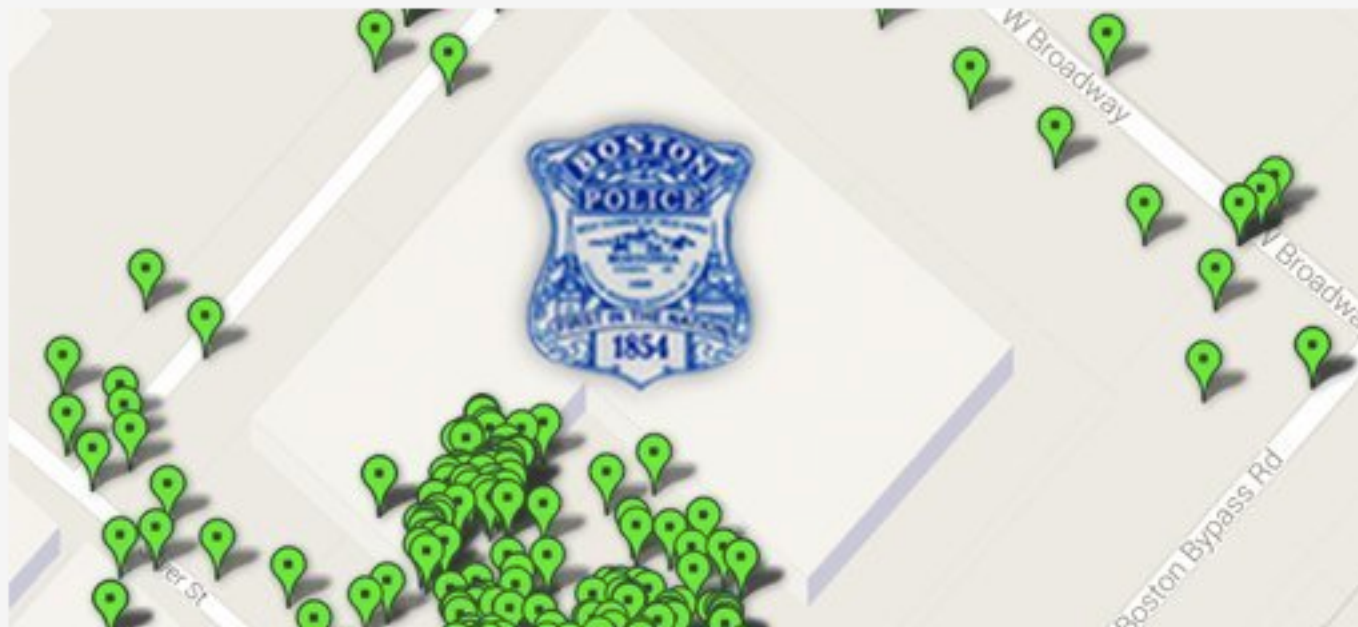
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Public records are still
an incredible reporting
superpower anyone can use



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After public records request, Boston Police suspends license plate scanner surveillance program

Even as program ramped up, department mishandled data, database shows



December 15, 2013
by Shawn Musgrave



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Records released include:

- Protest footage
- Information on surveillance tech
- Olympic Bid Docs
- Voting machine issues
- Parking ticket data
- Lawsuits and settlements
- Source Code!



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Learn to think like a middle manager



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What makes a good request?

- Clearly defined
- Set date parameters
- Tips on who might have it and how to find it
- Explain your media status
- Cite how you know it exists
- Be creative



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Creative requests we've seen:

- Agency intranet pages
- Agency Talking Points
- Get manuals, data inventories, other metadata
- Follow up on little things, official stickers, signs
- Look for annual reports
- “Pre-File”
- Outsourcing Contractors



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On Google:
site:.gov filetype:ppt

site:myschool.gov filetype:xls

DocumentCloud

GovernmentAttic.org (Federal)



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Other tips:

- Always assume good faith
- Call to make sure they received it
- Let them know when you expect a response
- Interview the response: It can lie, too
- Appeal!



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Appealing can be very simple:

Hi,

I'd like to appeal the attached public records rejection, because ...

Sincerely,
Sam Reporter

Check out RCFP OGG in advance!



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Key Considerations

- Make sure they cite **valid** exemptions
- Part of document being exempt doesn't mean all of document is exempt: Ask for "segregable" information
- FERPA is not get out of jail free
- A lot of times, you know the law better than they do



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