

Tips for making a public-records request *

These suggestions for making a public-records request are designed to help public offices respond fully and accurately and help requesters obtain the records they want.

- **Provide as much specific information as possible.** Giving the public office specific information – dates, cases, and/or topics, for example – helps the office identify responsive records. Try to provide the names of the relevant individuals instead of organization names (e.g., “anyone working on behalf of XYZ Organization”) or email domain names (e.g., “anyone with an email address ending in @xyzorganization”), and the type of record you want (e.g., asking for a type of file or report instead of “all records about Joe Smith”).
- **Familiarize yourself with the public office.** Public offices in Ohio vary widely in size, mission, and organizational structure. Some public offices have only a few employees and focus on narrow areas or issues. The Ohio Attorney General’s Office, on the other hand, has roughly 1,500 employees spread across many service divisions and subsections, with each representing distinct clients and collectively handling a wide range of issues. Understanding how the office is organized and what it does can help you narrow your request and ensure that it goes to the right place.
- **Review the public office’s records-retention schedules.** Records-retention schedules show how an office is organized, the types of records the office keeps, and how long the records are kept. Many offices make their retention schedules available online or will send copies to you.
- **More is not necessarily better.** Erring on the side of overinclusion (e.g., listing all possible keywords, correspondents, or email domain names) may make it more difficult for an office to identify responsive records. The “fishing expedition” approach to public-records requests is not productive for either the office or the requester.
- **Ask for records, not information.** A public-records request must ask for records, not information. Asking a public office why it did something or asking the office a question may not be a proper public-records request.
- **Work with the public office to get the records you want.** If a public office denies your request because it is overly broad or ambiguous, consider calling the office or scheduling a time to talk to someone there. Discussing a request, instead of going back and forth with responses or turning to the courts, is more productive for everyone. You may also want to consider explaining why you want the records. Although (with some narrow exceptions) you *do not* have to tell a public office why you want records or how you intend to use them, providing some context about why you want the records may help you get what you want.

* This information is strictly for practical use; it is neither legal advice nor an opinion on whether any specific request is proper or legally enforceable. Only a court can decide whether a request is proper under the Public Records Act.