

Overall Notes – ATIP/FOI Assignment

Knowing what record to ask for

- This is one of the most important parts of doing the legwork for this assignment
- A number of requests in the beginning stages of the assignment involved a variety of records ranging from statistics to financial breakdowns to email correspondence
 - o The problem with this is that this broadens the scope of the request too much. As outlined in the Digging Deeper textbook, there are various types of records you can request, but they should relate to each other. For example, if you are asking for data, it's best to stick with data in one request. If you are asking emailed correspondence, it's best not to ask for data too (the only exception I can think of is if you are asking for a very small timeframe, where you need something tallied up in a simple table and correspondence relating to it)

Specifying your request

- This is also an important part of the legwork before submitting. What is the best way to convey what you want to receive to the information officer?
 - o For example, if you are asking for data, asking for data and not specifying what data you want is too broad. This is where you need to research what data the department you're interested in is collecting
 - Say I want to file a record with the Toronto Police. The legwork would include visiting the Toronto Police public website, where you can quickly find that it has an open data portal. I would use the criteria in that portal to help identify what I may want to ask for and how I want it to be organized. It would also help me understand what I can already get, for free.
 - If you aren't sure, this is where journalism work comes in. Send in a request to the media line with a 24 hour deadline and ask if you can get some pointers! Ask to go on a call with the information office. It can only take 15 minutes of your day but make your request that much better
- When it comes to correspondence: think of how many emails you receive in a day...in a week...in a month. Now imagine a whole department receiving emails day in and out. If you request all email correspondence for the past year within Health Canada, for example, imagine how much information you'll get back. You need to specify. Maybe you find a small department within Health Canada when going through its directory. Maybe you find a particular person of interest such as the minister. There is more than one way to specify your request, but not specifying it at all can incur fees or extensions
- A line at the end of your request saying something like "please contact me for revisions" is always encouraged. It lets the FOI/ATIP officer know you are happy to workshop your request and make it something that is obtainable. I

Knowing your departments and ministers

- You are not expected to know every minister and department in the government by heart! But, you need to research and figure out who is responsible for what.
- When it comes to the municipal requests, if you aren't sure whether a department has its own FOI portal, google it. Something as simple as "Toronto Police freedom of information" will yield you a good search result where you should easily tell whether their FOI portal is with the city, or external on their own web page
- Because you are asking for records within a timeframe that could be anywhere from 6 months to a year at its longest, it's always good to also check whether the ministers of the department switched during that time, especially if you are looking for correspondence. It could be that a year ago, there was a different minister than the one that is currently in the position. This is also an easy google search to double check your work!

Having 'wordy' requests

- One difference between journalism and academia is that when you write, you write for everyday audiences to consume and understand. You write so it makes sense to anyone reading
 - o Given this, when phrasing your request, your goal is to be simple and clear. Write out exactly what you want to receive. If you want to request records because you saw something interesting in the news, say that! If you want to request data, describe how you want it to be organized. If you want records that detail reaction, awareness, response, etc. – identify that. As long as it's specific, it doesn't need to sound wordy or crafty. It just needs to be very clear!

Using the internet to get inspiration

- Stuck on the wording of your request or how you can make it better/more specific? The good news is the internet has tons of examples of good ATIP/FOI requests. There are also examples in the textbooks and examples we used in the lecture.
- A great resource is Secret Canada from the Globe and Mail. You can search thousands of records from federal to municipal and get an idea for what typical wording is.

You are a journalist! Use it to your advantage

- You don't have to figure out an ATIP or FOI on your own. If you're lost on how the department works or want to see how they organize their records, send off an email or give the department a call. Ask the questions you want answered!