Name: _____ Date: _____

How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

Circle group

In a free country, citizens should be able to find out what their government is doing. One tool is a public records law. It lets people ask to see documents held by government offices. The national law is called the Freedom of Information Act. Congress passed it in 1966. Every state has its own version too. The names and details are different.

Say a student wants to know how a town spent money on a new playground. The student can write a request. It should describe the papers as clearly as possible. For example, it might ask for the contract with the builder or the bills the town paid. The request goes to the office that keeps those papers. The office searches for the records. In most cases, it must answer within a set number of days. It may charge a small fee for copies.

Not every record is open. Laws usually protect some kinds of information. Private details about people are one kind. Facts that could put public safety at risk are another. When an office withholds something, it is usually expected to give a reason. The requester can often appeal the decision.

Why does this matter? Records let reporters and residents check facts for themselves. They do not have to trust someone's say-so. Records can show whether money was spent wisely or whether rules were followed. Because the public can look, officials have a reason to keep careful, honest files. The right to ask is simple. It keeps the government answerable to the people it serves.

Questions

1. What does a public records law let people do?

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_____

2. What is the national public records law called?

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3. What might an office charge a small fee for?

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4. What is one kind of information that laws usually protect?

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5. Why should a request describe the papers as clearly as possible?

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6. How does the public's right to look help keep files honest?

_____

_____

Words to know

records: written papers and files that keep facts about what happened
request: a polite and formal ask for something
contract: a written agreement between two sides
withholds: keeps something back instead of giving it
appeal: to ask for a decision to be looked at again

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

Name: _____ Date: _____

How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

Triangle group

In a free country, citizens are meant to be able to find out what their government is doing. One tool for this is a public records law, which lets people ask to see documents held by government offices. At the national level, the law is called the Freedom of Information Act, which Congress passed in 1966. Every state has its own version as well, and the names and details differ.

Suppose a student wants to know how a town spent money on a new playground. The student can write a request that describes the documents as clearly as possible, such as the contract with the builder or the bills the town paid. The request is sent to the office that keeps those papers. The office then searches for the records and, in most cases, must reply within a set number of days. It may charge a small fee to cover copying.

Not every record is open. Laws usually protect certain kinds of information, such as private details about individuals, or facts that could put public safety at risk. When an office withholds something, it is generally expected to give a reason, and the requester can often appeal the decision.

Why does this matter? Records let reporters and residents check facts for themselves rather than rely on someone's say-so. They can show whether money was spent wisely or whether rules were followed. Because the public is able to look, officials have a reason to keep careful, honest files. The right to ask is a simple one, but it keeps the government answerable to the people it serves.

Questions

1. What does a public records law let people do?

_____

_____

2. What is the national public records law called?

_____

_____

3. What might an office charge a small fee for?

_____

_____

4. What is one kind of information that laws usually protect?

_____

_____

5. Why should a request describe the documents as clearly as possible?

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6. How does the public's right to look help keep files honest?

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Words to know

records: written papers and files that keep facts about what happened
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Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

Name: _____ Date: _____

How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

Square group

In a free country, citizens are expected to be able to discover what their government is doing on their behalf. One instrument for accomplishing this is a public records law, which allows people to request access to documents held by government offices. At the national level, the law is called the Freedom of Information Act, which Congress passed in 1966. Every state has enacted its own version as well, and the names and details vary considerably.

Suppose that a student wants to learn how a town spent its money on a new playground. The student can compose a request that describes the documents as precisely as possible, such as the contract with the builder or the bills the town paid. The request is then sent to the office that keeps those papers. The office searches for the records and, in most cases, is obligated to reply within a set number of days. It may charge a small fee to cover the cost of copying.

Not every record is open to the public. Laws usually protect certain categories of information, such as private details about individuals, or facts that could place public safety at risk. When an office withholds something, it is generally expected to explain its reasons, and the person making the request can often appeal the decision.

Why does all of this matter? Records allow reporters and residents to verify facts for themselves rather than relying on someone's say-so. They can reveal whether money was spent wisely or whether the rules were followed. Because the public is able to look, officials have a strong reason to maintain careful, honest files. The right to ask is a simple one, yet it keeps the government answerable to the people it serves.

Questions

1. What does a public records law allow people to do?

_____

_____

2. What is the national public records law called?

_____

_____

3. What might an office charge a small fee to cover?

_____

_____

4. What is one category of information that laws usually protect?

_____

_____

5. Why should a request describe the documents as precisely as possible?

_____

_____

6. How does the public's ability to look encourage honest files?

_____

_____

Words to know

records: written papers and files that keep facts about what happened
request: a polite and formal ask for something
contract: a written agreement between two sides
withholds: keeps something back instead of giving it
appeal: to ask for a decision to be looked at again

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

For the teacher: How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

Each student sheet carries a shape, not a level. The same topic and facts, written three ways.

Circle: How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

Easier · 258 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 5.6

1. Ask to see documents held by government offices.
2. The Freedom of Information Act.
3. Making copies of the records.
4. Private details about people, or facts that could put public safety at risk.
5. So the office can search for and find the right records.
6. Officials have a reason to keep careful, honest files because anyone can check them.

Triangle: How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

This passage · 266 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 8.1

1. Ask to see documents held by government offices.
2. The Freedom of Information Act.
3. Copying the records.
4. Private details about individuals, or facts that could put public safety at risk.
5. So the office can search for and find the right records.
6. Officials have a reason to keep careful, honest files because anyone may check them.

Square: How to Ask a Government Office for Its Paperwork

Harder · 290 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 9.6

1. Request access to documents held by government offices.
2. The Freedom of Information Act.
3. The cost of copying the records.
4. Private details about individuals, or facts that could place public safety at risk.
5. So the office can search for and find the right records.
6. Officials have a strong reason to maintain careful, honest files because anyone may check them.