

## FOI Tips and Tricks / Research Notes

These one page research notes are intended as a resource for those within the broader social science community who would like to use FOI as a method. The goal of these research notes is to provide tips and tricks to overcome common challenges and difficulties when using FOI as a method. Each of the authors have drawn from their own experiences and used this as the context from which to provide advice to other researchers.

The research notes are organized by country through the links below. Thank you to the authors.

This effort is a natural extension of the goals of the CAIJ and the Study Up Journal and is being overseen by Dr. Kevin Walby and Dr. Ciara Bracken-Roche.

We accept one-page research notes on new topics on an ongoing basis. Please reach out to Dr. Kevin Walby ([k.walby@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:k.walby@uwinnipeg.ca)) and Dr. Ciara Bracken-Roche ([Ciara.brackenroche@mu.ie](mailto:Ciara.brackenroche@mu.ie)) if you would like to submit or discuss a new research note.

## Standing on the shoulders of muckrakers: Finding previously filed Access to Information requests by Jamie Duncan, University of Toronto

Filing Access to Information and Freedom of Information (ATI/FOI) requests can take forever! Canadian federal institutions often delay disclosing information to requesters, which can pose challenges to undergraduate or graduate researchers working to tight deadlines. This doesn't mean we can't use materials obtained through ATI/FOI in our research though. This guide offers some tips and tools for efficiently obtaining previously filed ATI/FOIs.

Canada's Open Government website contains a database of previously filed ATIs, extending back two-years.<sup>1</sup> You can search requests using the online portal, or by downloading a .csv file of request summaries. Once you find a relevant ATI, you can request it by filling out a webform under each request record in the system. Typically, these requests arrive within 6 weeks and often well before.

While the portal is useful for recent requests, the interface isn't really designed to promote the free flow of information. You need to complete a separate webform for each request of interest. I use the Piggyback auto-filler created by data journalist, Tom Cardoso to speed things up.<sup>2</sup> It is also good practice to be explicit about *how* you want to receive information. Using the "Additional Comments" field, I have Piggyback request all documents via email, and if they are too large to send via email then I request them on a USB key (it is common to receive CD-ROMS by default).

The Open Government portal is the easiest way to access federal records, but two years is a short timeframe. There are ways to find older Canadian ATI/FOIs online. For example, the (now-inactive) ATIP Bot (@cdnati) on Twitter posted almost 500 ATIs from between 2013 and 2019 and stored them in an online database.<sup>3</sup> Another way to track down previously requested ATIs is through the original requestor. Sometimes requestors proactively publish materials online.<sup>4</sup> Even better, some journalists or academics will link to or embed documents in their work.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, there are many times that digging around in secondary sources doesn't produce the actual documents.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://open.canada.ca/en/search/ati>

<sup>2</sup> <https://tomcardoso.github.io/piggyback/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.documentcloud.org/public/search/Group:%20muckrock-canada>

<sup>4</sup> <https://warriorpublications.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/project-sitka-report.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.vice.com/en/article/8xmk8a/canadian-police-tracked-a-black-lives-matter-vigil-in-vancouver>

After exhausting other available avenues, it is appropriate to politely reach out to requestors who have published about them – typically people who use ATI/FOI are friends of transparency. When reaching out, it never hurts to (concisely) indicate that you have found value in their work. More importantly, help them locate the document by indicating where you read about the request, the request number (if they listed it), and any other details that might help contextualize the search. Not only are people often pleased to help out a student, but this is also a great way to connect with professionals in your field – as you publish, you may have students reaching out to you for your files as well.

Canada's ATI/FOI regime often fails to provide efficient access to information but there are still many creative ways to use ATI/FOI requests in your work. You can speed up the process of obtaining previously filed requests from the open government portal with Piggyback. You may also track down documents published online in cloud repositories, on requestor websites, or embedded in journalistic content. When these options don't work, politely asking the original requestor to share their files is an option. It is easy to get discouraged when trying to navigate complex and often opaque government institutions. Using previously filed requests is a great way to get your feet wet with ATI/FOI or to track down information relevant to your research on a shorter timeline than original requests would allow.