

# STATE RECORDS

of South Australia

## FOI and Redaction of Documents

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide agencies with advice on the process of redacting, or blocking out, information determined exempt under the *Freedom of Information Act 1991* (FOI Act), from a document prior to its release.

Under section 20(4) of the FOI Act, agencies must not refuse access to a document if it is practicable to delete the exempt matter and provide access to the document in its limited form.

### What is redaction?

Redaction is the process of obscuring information that cannot be disclosed by blocking out individual words, sentences or paragraphs or removing sections or whole pages from a document prior to its release or publication.

There are several redaction methods, and any may be used effectively according to what best suits the agency and the information concerned. Whichever method is used, the end result must ensure that the text that has been removed from the document cannot be seen or 'guessed' by the reader. This means ensuring that the text in the document is sufficiently obscured so that it cannot be deciphered. In some cases, it may be important to ensure that the length of the blocked out text does not allow the original text to be ascertained.

### Methods of Redaction

There are several redaction methods agencies can use to obscure information that cannot be disclosed. Regardless of the method used or format of the original document, redaction **must always** be carried out on a copy, leaving the original document intact.

Following are explanations of some redaction methods.

#### Manual Redaction

Manual redaction methods to physically obscure text on a paper copy include:

**Cover-up** - involves the use of opaque tape or paper to obscure the text

- » Make a single-sided photocopy of the original document
- » On the copied document use opaque tape or paper to cover up the areas of text to be hidden, ensuring that no parts of the hidden words are visible
- » Make a photocopy of the redacted document

- » Provide the copy of the redacted document to the applicant
- » Retain a copy as a record of what was provided to the applicant.

**Blacking/whiting out** – involves the use of black marker or correction fluid to obscure the text

- » Make a single-sided photocopy of the original document
- » On the copied document use a black marker pen to block out the areas of text to be hidden, ensuring that no parts of the hidden words are visible
- » Make a photocopy of the redacted document
- » Provide the copy of the redacted document to the applicant
- » Retain a copy as a record of what was provided to the applicant.

The same process should be followed when using correction fluid. It is important to make a photocopy of the redacted document when using correction fluid or black marker because the correction fluid can be removed or the redacted text may be viewed from the reverse side of the document.

**Scalpel** – involves the use of cutting tools to remove the text

- » Make a single-sided photocopy of the original document
- » Cut the information to be redacted from the photocopy
- » Make a photocopy of the redacted document
- » Provide the copy of the redacted document to the applicant
- » Retain a copy as a record of what was provided to the applicant.

### Electronic Redaction

Redaction of electronic records must always be carried out on a new version of an electronic document. The context and metadata of the original must be preserved.

Access to electronically redacted information can be provided in three ways:

#### **Electronically redacted and provided physically via printed hardcopy**

If access to a document is being provided via hardcopy (eg printed), information may be redacted electronically in the original application (eg MS Word) using deletion tools or by placing shapes over the text.

#### **Electronically redacted, printed, scanned and provided digitally**

Access can be provided digitally by using a scanner to scan a hardcopy of the redacted document into an appropriate format, such as Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF), and provided to the applicant.

This method can also be applied to manual redaction.

#### **Electronically redacted and provided digitally directly**

If access is provided via digital delivery, without scanning a hardcopy, there are risks in applying the redactions using the original application and format. The redacted information may still be recoverable even after it is converted to an appropriate format.

For example, converting an MS Word document to PDF does not create a clean, single layered document – if a shape has been placed over redacted text, the text is still accessible from the PDF. There is also a risk that the document’s metadata (eg file name / document creator / corrections made) has not been removed.

Effective electronic redaction requires the complete removal of the text or image data from the electronic record to ensure the information cannot be recovered. Some redaction software can be customised to print the FOI exemption clause, used to refuse access, in the space where the information was removed.

Advice from an agency’s ICT team will be useful in establishing a process and system to provide electronically redacted information directly.

### Need further assistance?

**Contact**

**Tel** (+61 8) 8204 8786

**Email** [staterecords@sa.gov.au](mailto:staterecords@sa.gov.au)

**Web** [www.archives.sa.gov.au](http://www.archives.sa.gov.au)

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