

# 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 a number of 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 a number of redaction methods agencies can use to obscure information that cannot be disclosed. Regardless of the method used, 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 are those that agencies can use to physically obscure text on a paper copy of the document prior to publication or release.

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

- » Make a photocopy of the original document
- » On the copied document use 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 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 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

As with manual methods of redaction the original version of an electronic record must never be redacted. Redaction of electronic records must always be carried out on a new version of an electronic document.

Records may be redacted electronically in their original format (eg MS Word) using deletion tools. However, agencies must exercise caution if using this method. It is possible that deleted information may still be recoverable because there is a potential for information to remain hidden within non-displayable portions of the document. In addition, converting an MS Word document to Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) does not automatically remove all of the document's metadata. (*Metadata is the information about the document, eg file name / document creator / corrections made*).

Documents that have not been redacted using specific redaction software (see below), should only ever be provided in hardcopy format. However, if the redacted copy is required in an electronic format, agencies could use a scanner to scan a hardcopy of the redacted document into an appropriate format, such as PDF, and provide the applicant with a PDF version of the document.

## Redaction Software

Effective electronic redaction requires the actual removal of the text or image data from the electronic record. That is, the text and images are completely removed from the document 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.

If agencies wish to use redaction software they should seek advice from the appropriate Information Technology personnel in their agency.

Need further assistance?

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Date approved	Approved by	Date for review	Version
13/02/2019	Manager, Policy and Legislation	13/02/2020	1.2