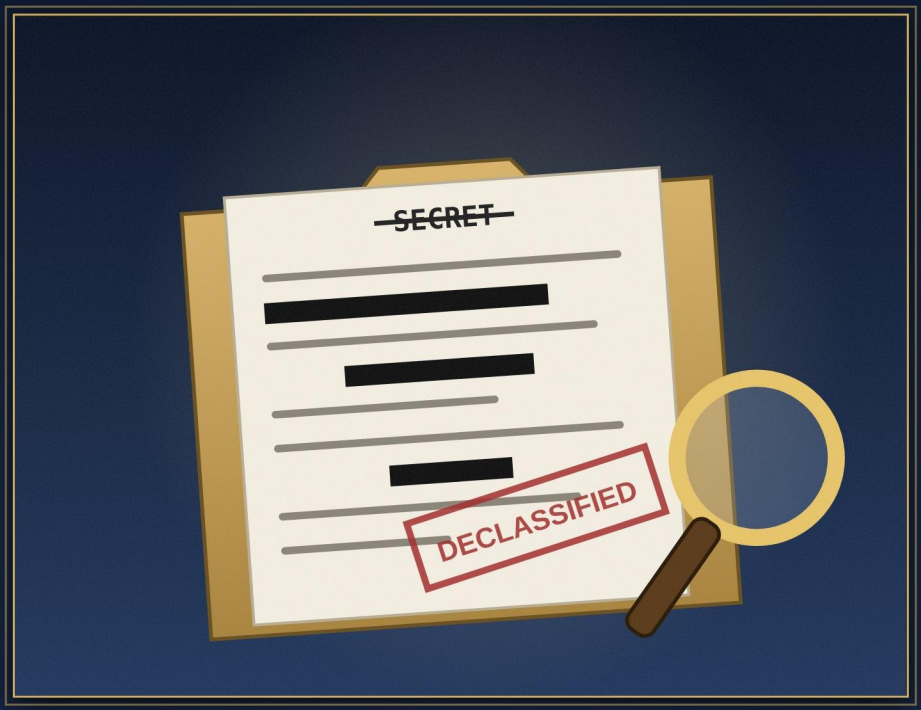
A FACT CHECK SERIES WORKBOOK

How to Read a Declassified Record

Fact Check Series



A Short Guide to Secret Files, Black Bars and Records Requests

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

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How to Read a Declassified Record: A Short Guide to Secret Files, Black Bars and Records Requests

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Before You Begin

“A declassified memo proves it.” You have probably seen that line under a post about some government plot. Sometimes the memo is real and says exactly what the post claims. Often it says less, or something different, and once in a while it doesn’t exist at all.

When I wrote When It Was True, the Fact Check Series book on real government programs and false theories, I read hundreds of once-secret records. Some of them proved things that sound like wild theories, such as the CIA’s MKUltra drug experiments and the FBI’s COINTELPRO campaigns. Others, like the Operation Northwoods memo, get quoted every day as proof of things they never show. The difference almost always came down to reading the record carefully.

This little book teaches you how. You don’t need a law degree or a security clearance. You need to know what you are looking at, and you need some patience.

How This Book Works

There are eight short chapters. Each one ends with a few fill-in questions, some practice questions with room to write, and one habit to try. The answers to the fill-in questions are at the back.

At the back you will also find a worked example using the real Northwoods memo, a made-up practice record to mark up, a one-page Record Check worksheet you can copy, a table of redaction codes, a sample letter for asking for a record, and a list of free places to read declassified files.

Three Promises

This book takes no side. The same reading rules apply to a record that helps your side and one that hurts it.

This book sticks to what the records say. Where I quote a law or a government page, I name it so you can read it yourself. The facts in this book are current as of November 18, 2026.

Some questions stay open. A record can prove something happened. It can rarely prove something never happened. Learning to say “the records stop here” is part of reading them well.

Chapter 1: What Declassified Really Means

Before you can read a declassified record, it helps to know how a record gets classified in the first place, and how it gets out.

The three levels

Today the rules for classified national security information come from Executive Order 13526, signed on December 29, 2009. It allows only three levels.

- **Top Secret** is for information whose release "reasonably could be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to the national security."
- **Secret** is for information whose release could cause "serious damage."
- **Confidential** is for information whose release could cause "damage."

That's it. The order says that, except where a law provides otherwise, no other terms are to be used to identify classified information. So if you see other words stamped on a record, they are not extra levels of classification under this order.

What can't be hidden

Here is a part of the order most people never hear about. Section 1.7 says information may never be classified to "conceal violations of law, inefficiency, or administrative error," or to "prevent embarrassment to a person, organization, or agency."

That doesn't mean it never happened. Some of the programs in When It Was True were hidden for exactly those reasons. But it

means that hiding wrongdoing was never a lawful reason to stamp a page Secret.

How records get out

Records leave the classified world in a few ways.

1. **By date.** Under section 3.3 of the order, classified records of permanent historical value are automatically declassified on December 31 of the year they turn 25 years old, unless an agency has a listed reason to keep part of them closed.
2. **By exemption running out.** Some information can be held past 25 years, such as the name of a human source or the design of a weapon of mass destruction. Even then, the order sets later deadlines at 50 and 75 years.
3. **By request.** Anyone can ask for a record through the Freedom of Information Act or a Mandatory Declassification Review. Chapter 8 shows how.
4. **By order.** A President can order a group of records released. In January 2025, Executive Order 14176 ordered the release of the remaining records on the assassinations of President Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Declassified is not the same as released

This trips up a lot of people. A record can be declassified and still sit in a box nobody has scanned. It can be released with parts blacked out for reasons that have nothing to do with national security, such as personal privacy. And the National Archives, which holds most of these records, says on its own JFK page that it “does not have authority to declassify records.” The agency that created the record makes that call.

So when someone says “the government declassified it,” ask two follow-up questions. Was it released to the public? And was it released in full, or in part?

Fill It In

1. It allows only _____ levels. **(Chapter 1)**

2. Information may never be classified to “prevent _____ to a person, organization, or agency.” **(Chapter 1)**

3. Classified records of permanent historical value are automatically declassified on December 31 of the year they turn _____ years old. **(Chapter 1)**

Practice

1. In your own words, what is the difference between a record being declassified and a record being released?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Think of a “secret document” claim you have seen. Did the person say whether it was released in full or in part?

   _____

   _____

   _____

One Habit This Week When you hear "declassified," ask "released in full, or in part?"

Chapter 2: Where Declassified Records Live

The good news is that you can read most famous declassified records yourself, for free, without leaving home. The trick is knowing where to look.

The National Archives

The National Archives and Records Administration, usually called the National Archives, keeps the permanent records of the federal government. Its online catalog is at catalog.archives.gov. Many records are scanned, and many more can be read in person at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Records at the Archives are grouped by "record group," usually one per agency. For example, the Archives' guide lists the records of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as Record Group 263. The guide dates them from 1894 to 1993, with most from 1947 to 1974. The CIA itself was set up in 1947, so the earliest dates come from older material in its files, such as records of the Shanghai Municipal Police that the guide lists.

The Archives also runs the National Declassification Center, which reviews older classified records and posts lists of what has been newly released.

Agency reading rooms

Many agencies keep their own online reading rooms of records they have already released.

- The CIA's FOIA Electronic Reading Room is at cia.gov/readingroom.

- The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) posts released files in The Vault, at vault.fbi.gov, including its COINTELPRO files.
- The Office of the Director of National Intelligence posts declassified intelligence assessments at dni.gov.

Congress and the courts

Some of the best records came out through Congress. The Senate Intelligence Committee posts the Church Committee's reports from the 1970s at intelligence.senate.gov. GovInfo, at govinfo.gov, holds laws, hearings and reports, including the 1977 Senate hearing on MKUltra and the 9/11 Commission Report.

Private collections

The National Security Archive at George Washington University, at nsarchive.gwu.edu, is a private research group that gets records released, often through records requests, and posts them with summaries. Its summaries are helpful, but they are someone's description. Always open the scanned record itself and read it.

Beware the copy of a copy

Records get passed around online as screenshots, retyped quotes and cropped images. A screenshot can't show you the page before, the page after, the date stamp or the handwritten note in the margin. Whenever you can, get the record from the place that holds it, not from a post about it.

Fill It In

1. The Archives' guide lists the records of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as Record Group _____. **(Chapter 2)**

2. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) posts released files in The _____. **(Chapter 2)**

3. Always open the scanned record _____ and read it. **(Chapter 2)**

Practice

1. Pick one of the places in this chapter and look up a record you have heard about. Where did you find it, and was it the full record?

_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Why is a screenshot of a record weaker than the record itself? Name two things a screenshot can hide.

_____

_____

_____

One Habit This Week Before you trust a quote from a "secret file," find the file on the website of the agency or archive that holds it.

Chapter 3: What Kind of Record Is It?

This is the most important chapter in the book. Most mistakes I see online come from reading one kind of record as if it were another.

Records that show an idea

A **proposal**, a **plan**, a **study** or a **draft** shows what someone was thinking about or asking for. It does not show that anyone said yes. Government offices write plans for all sorts of things that never happen. That is part of their job.

Records that show a decision

An **approval**, an **order**, a **signed directive** or the **minutes of a meeting** where something was decided shows what officials allowed. That is a step further than a proposal, but it still doesn't prove the thing was carried out.

Records that show something happened

Contracts, **payment records**, **travel orders**, **progress reports** and **after-action reports** are what help show that something was actually done. Money and people leave paper.

MKUltra is the best example I know. The CIA destroyed most of the program's files in 1973. But boxes of financial records survived because they had been stored somewhere else. They were vouchers, spending approvals and accountings. Nobody wrote them to prove anything to the public. They were written to get paid, and that is exactly why they were so convincing at the 1977 Senate hearing.

Records that look back

Investigations, **inspector general reports**, **court rulings** and **congressional reports** were written later by people trying to figure out what happened. They often quote the earlier records, so follow their footnotes back to the originals when you can.

The ladder

Here is a simple way to remember it. Think of a ladder with four rungs.

Rung	Kind of record	What it can show
1	Proposal, plan, study, draft	Someone thought about it or asked for it
2	Approval, order, meeting decision	Someone in charge allowed it
3	Contract, payment, report from the field	It was actually done
4	Investigation, court ruling, later report	What others later found

When someone says a record "proves" a thing happened, ask which rung it is on. A rung 1 record can't carry a rung 3 claim.

A famous example

The Operation Northwoods memo of March 13, 1962, is quoted every day as proof that the government stages attacks. Read it and you will find it calls itself "a preliminary submission suitable for planning purposes" and recommends that it be sent to the Secretary of Defense "for approval." It is a rung 1 record. The worked example at the back of this book walks through it.

When the records stop

Sometimes the trail just ends. You find the proposal but no approval, or an approval but no payment. When that happens, the honest answer is "the records stop here." Write down what new record would settle the question, and leave it open.

Fill It In

1. That shows what officials _____. **(Chapter 3)**

2. Money and people leave _____. **(Chapter 3)**

3. Ask which _____ it is on. **(Chapter 3)**

Practice

1. Put these on the ladder: a budget voucher, a memo asking for permission, a Senate committee report, a signed order.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Why were MKUltra's payment records stronger evidence than a later interview would be?

   _____

   _____

   _____

One Habit This Week Every time you read about a "secret plan," ask: is this a plan, a decision or proof it was done?

Chapter 4: Reading the Markings

A declassified record is often covered with stamps, letters and numbers. They look like clutter, but each one tells you something.

The banner

At the top and bottom of each page you will usually see the record's highest classification level, such as SECRET. On a released record it is often crossed out, with a declassification stamp nearby.

Portion marks

Under Executive Order 13526, a classified record is supposed to show which parts are classified and which are not. That is why you will see short letters in parentheses at the start of a paragraph.

Mark	Meaning
(TS)	Top Secret
(S)	Secret
(C)	Confidential
(U)	Unclassified

Portion marks help you see which part of a record was the sensitive part. A memo stamped Secret may have only one Secret paragraph.

Classification information

Section 1.6 of the order says that, when a record is first classified, it should show who classified it, the agency and office it came from, and when it is set to be declassified. Older records from

before this order may not have all of this, but they often have some of it.

The declassification stamp

A released record usually carries a stamp or typed line showing that it was declassified, often with an authority, a date and sometimes the initials of the reviewer. The exact form depends on the agency and the year. What matters to you is that the stamp tells you when and under what authority the record was released, which helps you tell an official release from a leak or a fake.

Document numbers

Records also carry file numbers, so they can be found again. For example, records in the President John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection are sorted by a Record Identification Form number, such as 104-10130-10026. Write down any number like that. It lets you, or anyone checking your work, find the exact same record.

Handwriting

Look in the margins. Initials, dates, "OK," "No," "See me" or a signature can tell you whether anyone with authority read the record, and what they thought. A blank "Approved" line is also a clue. It may mean nobody signed this copy.

Fill It In

1. A classified record is supposed to show _____ parts are classified and which are not. **(Chapter 4)**

2. Records are sorted by a Record _____ Form number. **(Chapter 4)**

3. Look in the _____. **(Chapter 4)**

Practice

1. A memo is stamped SECRET at the top, but paragraph 3 is marked (U). What does that tell you about paragraph 3?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Why does it matter whether the "Approved" line on a memo is signed or blank?

   _____

   _____

   _____

One Habit This Week When you read a record, write down its date, its author and its file number before anything else.

Chapter 5: Reading Around the Black Bars

The black bars are what most people picture when they think of a declassified record. They make records look sinister. Here is what they actually tell you, and what they don't.

Why parts get blacked out

Under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), an agency must release "any reasonably segregable portion of a record" after deleting the parts that are exempt. In plain words, the agency can't hold back a whole page because one line is secret. It has to black out the line and release the rest.

The same law says the amount of information deleted, and the exemption used, "shall be indicated on the released portion of the record," unless saying so would itself harm the interest being protected. That is why you often see a code written next to a black bar.

The FOIA codes

The FOIA has nine exemptions, listed in section 552(b) of Title 5 of the United States Code. The code (b)(1) means exemption 1, and so on. The ones you will see most often are these.

Code	What it covers
(b)(1)	Properly classified national defense or foreign policy information
(b)(3)	Information another law says must be kept from the public
(b)(5)	Internal agency memos and drafts, such as advice before a decision
(b)(6)	Personnel, medical and similar files where release would be a clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy
(b)(7)	Certain law enforcement records

The full list of nine is at the back of this book. Declassification reviews also use codes from Executive Order 13526, such as 1.4(c) for intelligence sources and methods in younger records, or 3.3(b)(1) for a human source in records over 25 years old. The National Archives posts a list of these redaction codes on its declassification pages.

What a black bar tells you

A code tells you the reason the agency gave. That is useful. A (b)(6) bar on a name is very different from a (b)(1) bar on a paragraph. Many redactions in famous records are names of private people, phone numbers and file numbers, not hidden plots.

What a black bar doesn't tell you

A black bar does not tell you what is under it. It is tempting to fill in the blank with whatever fits your theory. Don't. If you write "the redacted part shows that…" you are making it up.

Compare versions

Here is a trick researchers use. The same record is sometimes released more than once, with fewer redactions each time. Lay the versions side by side and you can see exactly what was hidden before.

The Kennedy assassination records are a good example. On March 18, 2025, the National Archives began posting records from the collection that had been withheld for classification, and it said they "were released without redactions." Researchers can now compare those pages with earlier, blacked-out versions of the same records.

Fill It In

1. An agency must release "any reasonably _____ portion of a record." **(Chapter 5)**

2. The FOIA has _____ exemptions. **(Chapter 5)**

3. A black bar does not tell you what is _____ it. **(Chapter 5)**

Practice

1. A name in a released FBI file is blacked out with the code (b)(6). What is the most likely reason?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Why is it a mistake to say "the redacted part proves" something?

_____

_____

_____

One Habit This Week When you see a black bar, read the code next to it before you guess at what is under it.

Chapter 6: Who, When and To Whom

A record is a message from one person to another at one moment in time. To understand it, you need all three: who wrote it, when, and who received it.

Who wrote it

Look at the "From" line and the signature. Was the writer a junior officer floating an idea, or the head of an agency giving an order? A memo from a staff office carries less weight than one signed by the person in charge. Also ask whether the writer was in a position to know. A field officer reporting what he saw is different from someone repeating a rumor.

When

Dates matter more than almost anything else. Write down the date on the record and compare it with what was happening at the time. A memo proposing something after the event can't have caused it. A report written years later may be relying on memory.

Also watch for two different dates: the date the record was written and the date it was released. Posts often mix them up. "A 2025 document shows…" may really mean a 1962 document that was released in 2025.

To whom

The "To" line and any "cc" list tell you who saw the record. If a memo went only to one office, you can't assume the President knew about it. If it went to a long list of officials, more people were in a position to act on it, or to object.

Draft or final

Look for words like “Draft,” “Preliminary” or “For discussion.” Look for typed text that is crossed out or written over. A draft shows what someone was considering, not what was finally sent.

Context

Finally, read the pages around the one that’s being quoted. A single page pulled from a long file can mean something very different on its own than it does in context. If a post only gives you one page, go find the rest.

Fill It In

1. To understand it, you need all _____: who wrote it, when, and who received it. **(Chapter 6)**

2. Watch for two different dates: the date the record was written and the date it was _____. **(Chapter 6)**

3. A _____ shows what someone was considering, not what was finally sent. **(Chapter 6)**

Practice

1. A post says, “A new 2025 government document proves they planned it.” What should you check first?

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. A memo went to one office, with no copies to anyone else. What can and can’t you say about who knew?

_____

_____

_____

_____

One Habit This Week For every record you read, write one line: who wrote it, when, to whom.

Chapter 7: Checking One Record Against Others

One record is a lead. Several independent records reaching the same conclusion is evidence. This chapter is about getting from one to the other.

Look for the paper trail

A real program leaves a trail. A proposal is followed by an approval, then a budget, then reports, then sometimes an investigation. When you find one record, look for the ones that should come before and after it. If a memo asks for approval, look for the answer. If a report mentions a contract, look for the contract.

Look for independent sources

Ask whether people with different interests agree on the core facts. MKUltra was confirmed by a presidential commission, a Senate committee and the CIA Director's own sworn testimony in 1977. Those are three different sources, and the CIA had no reason to admit it if it weren't true. That is about as strong as it gets.

Watch for circles

Sometimes ten websites all say the same thing, and it looks like ten sources. Trace them back and they all quote one post. That is one source repeated ten times. Always ask where each source got its information.

What silence means and doesn't mean

If you find no record of something, that does not prove it never happened. Records get lost, and some were destroyed, like most

of the MKUltra files. But silence still matters. Real programs need money, people and orders. A claim that requires thousands of people to stay quiet for decades, with no record ever surfacing, is asking for something no proved case in When It Was True has shown.

The fair way to say it is this: "I looked in these places and found no record. Here is what record would change my mind."

Separate the parts

Most claims bundle a true part with a stretched part. Sort each piece into three piles: confirmed by the records, not shown either way, and contradicted by the records. Then give your verdict on each piece, not just the whole claim.

Fill It In

1. One record is a _____. **(Chapter 7)**

2. A real program leaves a _____. **(Chapter 7)**

3. But _____ still matters. **(Chapter 7)**

Practice

1. You found a proposal memo. List two other kinds of records you would look for next.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Ten websites quote the same “leaked file.” How would you tell whether they are ten sources or one?

_____

_____

_____

One Habit This Week When you find one record, ask: what record should come next, and can I find it?

Chapter 8: Asking for a Record Yourself

If the record you want isn't online, you can ask for it. You don't need a lawyer, and you don't need to explain why you want it.

The Freedom of Information Act

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) became law on July 4, 1966. It applies to federal executive branch agencies. FOIA.gov, the government's FOIA website, says, "Generally any person - United States citizen or not - can make a FOIA request." The same site says there is "no initial fee required to submit a FOIA request," and that there is "usually no charge for the first two hours of search time or for the first 100 pages of duplication."

The request must be in writing and must reasonably describe the records you want. Each agency has its own FOIA office, and you can find them through FOIA.gov.

How long it takes

The law gives an agency 20 working days to decide whether it will comply with a request and to tell you. That is the decision deadline, not a promise you'll have the records in a month. FOIA.gov says the time it takes "will vary depending on the complexity of the request" and any backlog. Big agencies can take a long time.

If the answer is no

If an agency turns you down or holds back parts, it must tell you about your right to appeal. The law gives you at least 90 days from the denial to file an appeal with the head of the agency. FOIA.gov says there is no fee for an appeal.

You can also ask the Office of Government Information Services, part of the National Archives, for help. It offers mediation between people who ask for records and the agencies, as an alternative to going to court.

Mandatory Declassification Review

For a classified record you can identify specifically, there is a second route. Section 3.5 of Executive Order 13526 lets anyone ask the agency for a Mandatory Declassification Review. The request has to describe the record well enough that the agency can find it "with a reasonable amount of effort."

If you ask under both FOIA and this review at the same time, the National Archives says the agency will make you pick one. If the agency turns down a review request and then your appeal, you can take it to the Interagency Security Classification Appeals Panel. FOIA denials can't go to that panel.

Tips for a good request

1. Be specific. Give names, dates, places, office names and any file numbers you have.
2. Ask for records, not answers. An agency has to search for documents, not answer questions.
3. Keep it narrow. A request for "everything about UFOs" will take years. A request for one office's reports for one year may not.
4. Say how you want the records. The law says an agency must provide records in the form you ask for if they can easily reproduce them that way, such as electronic copies.
5. Keep copies of everything, and write down your tracking number.

One honest warning

Sometimes an agency will say it can neither confirm nor deny that a record exists. Section 3.6 of the order allows that when the existence of the record is itself classified. It is frustrating. It is not an admission that the record exists.

Fill It In

1. "Generally any _____ - United States citizen or not - can make a FOIA request." **(Chapter 8)**

2. The law gives an agency _____ working days to decide whether it will comply with a request. **(Chapter 8)**

3. Ask for _____, not answers. **(Chapter 8)**

Practice

1. Write a one-sentence description of a record you would like to see. Make it specific enough that a clerk could find it.

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. An agency says it can neither confirm nor deny a record exists. What can you honestly conclude?

   _____

   _____

One Habit This Week Find the FOIA office for one agency you care about, and read its instructions page.

Worked Example: The Northwoods Memo

Here is the method applied to one of the most quoted declassified records on the internet. The full story is in Chapter 9 of When It Was True.

The claim: "A declassified memo proves the government stages fake attacks."

Find the record. The memo is dated March 13, 1962. It went from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, signed by General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Its title is "Justification for US Military Intervention in Cuba." The National Security Archive posted it with a summary on April 30, 2001.

Markings. It was classified TOP SECRET.

What kind of record (Chapter 3). The memo calls itself "a preliminary submission suitable for planning purposes" and recommends that it "should be forwarded to the Secretary of Defense for approval." That puts it on rung 1 of the ladder: a proposal.

What it says. It lists ideas for staging incidents to blame on Cuba, including "we could blow up a US ship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba." These are disturbing ideas, and there is no reason to soften them.

What came next (Chapter 7). Three days later, on March 16, 1962, President Kennedy met with his top advisers on Cuba, including General Lemnitzer. A State Department record of that meeting says the President "expressed skepticism" that

circumstances would arise to justify using American forces for open military action. That note is an official's summary, not the President's exact words. I could not find a record that any of the staged incidents was approved or carried out, and I could not open a written rejection of the memo either.

Separate the parts. Confirmed: top military leaders put these ideas in writing and asked for approval. Not shown: that any of them was approved or done. Not supported by this record at all: the claim that it proves some later event was staged.

> **Verdict: Partly true.** Proposed in writing, yes. Carried out, no record shows it. The memo can't carry a claim about a later event.

Practice Record

Below is a made-up record I drew for practice. It is not a real government record. Use Chapters 3 to 6 to answer the questions, then check your answers in the Answer Key.

~~SECRET~~

DECLASSIFIED
Authority: E.O. 13526
By: ___ Date: _____

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

FROM: Chief, Field Programs Division
SUBJECT: Proposed Test of a New Radio Relay
DATE: 14 June 1961

1. (C) This memorandum requests approval to test a radio relay at a site near [redacted] (b)(1) during the fall of 1961.

2. (S) The relay would be operated by [redacted] (b)(3) personnel under contract with [redacted] (b)(6) Estimated cost: $48,000.

3. (U) If approved, a final report will be sent to you within 90 days of the test.

RECOMMENDATION: That the Director approve the test described in paragraph 2.

APPROVED: _____ DISAPPROVED: _____

cc: Deputy Director
Comptroller

MADE-UP SAMPLE FOR PRACTICE. NOT A REAL GOVERNMENT RECORD.

~~SECRET~~

A made-up sample record for practice.

1. What was the highest classification level of this record, and has it been declassified?

_____

_____

2. Which paragraph was marked Secret? Which was unclassified?

_____

_____

3. What rung of the ladder is this record on? How can you tell?

_____

_____

_____

4. What does the code (b)(6) next to the last black bar most likely mean?

_____

_____

5. Does this record prove the radio relay test happened? What record would you look for next?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Record Check Worksheet

Copy this page and use it any time.

Question	Your notes
The claim, word for word	
Where I found the record (archive, file number)	
Released in full or in part?	
Date written / date released	
Who wrote it, to whom, copies to	
Classification and portion marks	
Rung of the ladder: proposal, decision, done, looked back	
Black bars: codes and what they cover	
Signed, initialed, or blank?	
Other records that back it up or contradict it	
Confirmed / not shown / contradicted	
My verdict: True, Partly true, False, Inconclusive	

The Nine FOIA Exemptions

These are the nine exemptions in the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 552(b), put in plain words. The law's own text is longer and more exact.

Code	Plain meaning
(b)(1)	Classified national defense or foreign policy information that is properly classified under an executive order
(b)(2)	Records only about an agency's internal personnel rules and practices
(b)(3)	Information another law says must be kept from the public
(b)(4)	Trade secrets and confidential business or financial information
(b)(5)	Internal agency memos and letters that would be privileged in a lawsuit, such as advice before a decision. That privilege doesn't apply to records 25 years old or older.
(b)(6)	Personnel, medical and similar files where release would be a clearly unwarranted invasion of privacy
(b)(7)	Certain law enforcement records, such as those that could interfere with a case or reveal a confidential source
(b)(8)	Reports about banks and other financial institutions prepared for the agencies that regulate them
(b)(9)	Geological and geophysical information about wells

Classification Codes at a Glance

When an agency holds back classified information in a record under 25 years old, the National Archives says it uses one or more of these categories from section 1.4 of Executive Order 13526.

Code	Category
1.4(a)	Military plans, weapons systems or operations
1.4(b)	Foreign government information
1.4(c)	Intelligence activities, sources or methods, or cryptology
1.4(d)	Foreign relations or foreign activities of the United States
1.4(e)	Scientific, technological or economic matters relating to national security
1.4(f)	Programs for safeguarding nuclear materials or facilities
1.4(g)	Weak points or capabilities of systems, installations or plans relating to national security
1.4(h)	Weapons of mass destruction

For records over 25 years old, the codes come from section 3.3(b) of the order instead, such as 3.3(b)(1) for a confidential human source. The full list is on the National Archives' Redaction Codes page.

Sample Request Letter

Change the parts in brackets. Most agencies also take requests through an online form; check the agency's FOIA page first.

[Date]

FOIA Officer

[Agency name and address]

Dear FOIA Officer:

Under the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 552, I request copies of [describe the records as specifically as you can: the subject, the office, the names involved, the date range, and any file numbers].

I would like to receive the records in electronic form if possible. I am an individual requesting these records for personal, non-commercial use. Please contact me before charging fees over [$ amount].

If you withhold any part of these records, please release the parts that can be released and note the exemption for each deletion, as the law requires.

Thank you,

[Your name, mailing address, email and phone]

Where to Find Declassified Records

These are free places to read declassified records. Each address was checked when this book was written. Websites move, so if a link fails, search for the agency's name.

What you want	Where to look
Records of most federal agencies, including the Pentagon Papers and 9/11 Commission records	National Archives catalog, catalog.archives.gov
Newly declassified record lists	National Declassification Center, archives.gov/declassification
Kennedy assassination records	archives.gov/research/jfk
CIA records already released	CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room, cia.gov/readingroom
FBI records already released	FBI Records: The Vault, vault.fbi.gov
Declassified intelligence assessments	Office of the Director of National Intelligence, dni.gov
Church Committee reports	Senate Intelligence Committee, intelligence.senate.gov
Hearings, laws and reports	GovInfo, govinfo.gov
Collections with summaries	National Security Archive, nsarchive.gwu.edu
How to make a FOIA request, and agency contacts	FOIA.gov
Help with a FOIA dispute	Office of Government Information Services, archives.gov/ogis

Answer Key

These are the answers to the Fill It In questions.

Chapter 1: What Declassified Really Means

1. Chapter 1: three
2. Chapter 1: embarrassment
3. Chapter 1: 25

Chapter 2: Where Declassified Records Live

1. Chapter 2: 263
2. Chapter 2: Vault
3. Chapter 2: itself

Chapter 3: What Kind of Record Is It?

1. Chapter 3: allowed
2. Chapter 3: paper
3. Chapter 3: rung

Chapter 4: Reading the Markings

1. Chapter 4: which
2. Chapter 4: Identification
3. Chapter 4: margins

Chapter 5: Reading Around the Black Bars

1. Chapter 5: segregable
2. Chapter 5: nine
3. Chapter 5: under

Chapter 6: Who, When and To Whom

1. Chapter 6: three
2. Chapter 6: released
3. Chapter 6: draft

Chapter 7: Checking One Record Against Others

1. Chapter 7: lead

2. Chapter 7: trail
3. Chapter 7: silence

Chapter 8: Asking for a Record Yourself

1. Chapter 8: person
2. Chapter 8: 20
3. Chapter 8: records

Practice Record Answers

1. Secret. Yes, the banner is crossed out and a declassification stamp is in the corner.

2. Paragraph 2 was Secret (S). Paragraph 3 was unclassified (U). Paragraph 1 was Confidential (C).

3. Rung 1, a proposal. It "requests approval," the recommendation asks the Director to approve, and both the Approved and Disapproved lines are blank on this copy.

4. Most likely a name held back for privacy, under FOIA exemption 6.

5. No. It only shows someone asked. Look next for a signed approval, a contract, payment records, or the final report the memo promised within 90 days.

Glossary

Classified: Information officially marked Top Secret, Secret or Confidential because its release could harm national security.

Declassified: No longer classified. It does not always mean released to the public, or released in full.

Executive Order 13526: The 2009 presidential order that sets today's rules for classifying and declassifying national security information.

FOIA: The Freedom of Information Act, the 1966 law that lets any person ask federal agencies for records.

Mandatory Declassification Review: A request, under section 3.5 of Executive Order 13526, asking an agency to review a specific classified record for release.

Portion mark: Letters in parentheses, such as (S) or (U), that show the classification of one paragraph or part.

Record group: The National Archives' way of grouping records, usually one group per agency.

Redaction: A part of a record blacked out or removed before release.

Segregable: Able to be separated. Under FOIA, the parts of a record that aren't exempt must be released.

About This Book

How to Read a Declassified Record grew out of Chapter 21 and Appendix B of *When It Was True*, the Fact Check Series book on real government programs and false theories. It teaches eight steps: know what declassified means, find where the record lives, tell what kind of record it is, read the markings, read around the black bars, check who wrote it and when, check it against other records, and ask for a record yourself.

The laws and rules described here are current as of November 18, 2026. The main sources are the text of Executive Order 13526, the Freedom of Information Act at 5 U.S.C. 552, FOIA.gov, and the National Archives' pages on declassification, redaction codes, Mandatory Declassification Review appeals and the Kennedy assassination records.

The other books in the Fact Check Series are free to download at trinfinityenterprises.com.