



NUMBER 15  
REVISED MARCH 2000  
**2. ACCESS REQUEST STAGE**  
**2.1**



# IPC Practices

PUTTING ONTARIO'S INFORMATION AND PRIVACY LEGISLATION TO WORK  
INFORMATION AND PRIVACY COMMISSIONER/ONTARIO  
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## Clarifying Access Requests

Individuals who request access to information under the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* or the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (the *Acts*) do not always know the kinds of records a government institution has, or how it keeps its records. For this reason, clarification is often required.

The purpose of this issue of *IPC Practices* is to remind institutions of the legislative requirements regarding the clarification of requests; and to emphasize that clarification will make things easier for everyone concerned — the institution; requesters, appellants and affected persons; and the Information and Privacy Commissioner/Ontario (IPC).

It is vital that government institutions have a clear understanding of the nature and scope of requests in order to process them efficiently.

### Requirement for Requesters

The *Acts* specify that a person seeking access to a general record or to his or her own personal information shall provide sufficient detail to enable an experienced government employee to identify the record.

### Requirement for Institutions

The *Acts* also state, that if the request does not sufficiently describe the record sought, the institution “shall inform the applicant of the defect and shall offer assistance in reformulating the request.”

### Manner of Clarification

In most cases, it would be more expeditious and productive to have the employee who is most knowledgeable about the requested records communicate directly with the requester.

While a letter may be appropriate in some instances, speaking with a requester offers an invaluable opportunity to provide explanations, answer questions and resolve issues on the spot.

### “Clarify” or “Narrow?”

It is important that institutions understand the difference between a *clarified* request and a *narrowed* request. To “clarify” is to make clear what the requester is seeking. For example, a requester wants “a job competition file”, but has provided no further information. Clarification is needed. To “narrow” is to reduce the scope of the request, i.e., decreasing the number of records requested.

### Standard Questions

The following are some typical questions that may be used by an institution as it attempts to clarify a request:

- Are you interested in any particular records? Please elaborate.
- Do the records you are requesting involve a specific incident? Please elaborate.



- Are you interested in access to another individual's personal information?
- Do the records in which you are interested involve a specific time period? (For example, "...all information related to X, between April 1, 1991 and March 31, 1992.")
- Are you seeking records from a particular branch or from a particular geographic region?
- Have you already spoken with a specific branch or with particular individuals from the

government organization? Can you name the branch or individuals? (This may help avoid a duplication of effort.)

## More Information

Institutions with questions concerning clarification of a request may contact a Policy Adviser at the Freedom of Information Branch, Management Board Secretariat.

Regarding the clarification of requests, the important provisions of the *Acts* are: sections 24, 47(1)(b), 48(1), and 48(2) of the provincial *Act*; and 17, 36(1)(b), 37(1), and 37(2) of the municipal *Act*.

## IPC Practices

is published regularly by the **Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner**.

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ISSN 1188-7206