



# **Tips & Tools for Journalists in New Mexico & El Paso**

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	Page 3
<b>Sunshine Laws</b>	Page 4
New Mexico Open Meetings Act	4
New Mexico Inspection of Public Records Act	4
Texas Open Meetings Act	5
Texas Public Information Act	6
Some IPRA and PIA tips	6
<b>Reporting Tools</b>	Page 8
Covering Crime, Courts & Criminal Justice	8
Covering Politics	9
Covering Business	10
<b>General Reporting Tools</b>	Page 11
<b>Additional Resource</b>	Page 11
<b>Recommended Reading</b>	Page 12
Guides and Technical Books	13
Memoirs, Essays, Graphic Novels, Fiction, True Crime, and Biographies	13

## Introduction

This resource guide for New Mexico & El Paso journalists comes to you courtesy of the Society of Professional Journalists, Rio Grande Chapter.

The Society of Professional Journalists is the nation's most broad-based journalism organization, dedicated to encouraging the free practice of journalism and stimulating high standards of ethical behavior. Founded in 1909 as Sigma Delta Chi, SPJ promotes the free flow of information vital to a well-informed citizenry through the daily work of its roughly 6,000 members; works to inspire and educate current and future journalists through professional development; and protects First Amendment guarantees of freedom of speech and press through its advocacy efforts

The Rio Grande Chapter was reorganized in 2009 after a lengthy hiatus and is dedicated to becoming a force in our state for responsible journalism in all media. We are dedicated to being a force for responsible journalism and empowering journalists to do their jobs well. We represent practitioners from print, online, radio, television and podcasting.

Visit the Rio Grande Chapter's website at [spjriogrande.org](http://spjriogrande.org). Learn more about membership—and forming student chapters—at [spj.org](http://spj.org).

**NOTE:** This resource guide was originally compiled by Alexa Schirtzinger, with contributions from Laura Paskus and Peter St. Cyr. It was updated in 2021 by Ryan Lowery.

Reading recommendations were gleaned from journalists across the western United States.

## Sunshine Laws

In New Mexico, two key laws ensure information is made available to the public. The Open Meetings Act, or OMA, ensures the public has access to meetings held by governmental bodies, and it sets the rules for how these meetings are conducted. The Inspection of Public Records Act, or IPRA, provides access to a lengthy list of documents, as well as audio and video recordings.

Texas also has an Open Meetings Act, OMA, which all members of a governmental bodies are subject to. The Public Information Act, or PIA, provides journalists and members of the public the right to inspect or copy government records.

Nationally, the Freedom of Information Act, or FOIA, provides access to records from federal agencies.

### New Mexico Open Meetings Act

The New Mexico Office of the Attorney General offers more information about OMA, as well as a PDF Compliance Guide and information on training sessions that are free to members of the public, and those working for government entities. Visit [nmag.gov/oma.aspx](http://nmag.gov/oma.aspx) to learn more.

#### New Mexico OMA Basics

- OMA requires all public bodies to hold meetings that are open to the public and journalists. This includes major bodies like city councils, but also commissions and committees created by those larger bodies.
- Any public body must give notice of a meeting, and publish the meeting agenda, 72 hours before the meeting is held.
- A public body must keep written minutes of all its meetings, and a draft of the minutes must be prepared within 10 working days after the meeting.

### New Mexico Inspection of Public Records Act

The New Mexico Office of the Attorney General offers more information about IPRA, as well as a PDF Compliance Guide and information on training sessions that are free to members of the public, and those working for government entities. Visit [nmag.gov/ipra.aspx](http://nmag.gov/ipra.aspx) to learn more.

#### New Mexico IPRA Basics

- You can file an IPRA request with any state, county or local agency – this includes police departments, school districts, county commissions, city councils and others. Private

organizations that hold records for governmental bodies also are covered.

- You do not have to say why you want to inspect certain records.
- Requests can be made in-person, over the phone, through the mail or email; however, email creates a handy paper trail in case an agency does not respond or denies your request.
- Within three business days, the records custodian must respond to your request, acknowledging they have received the request.
- Generally, your request must be fulfilled within 15 calendar days. However, custodians can request more time, particularly if the request is for several pages of documents. The custodian must notify you of the delay, and explain why they need more time and provide a date for when they expect to fulfill your request.
- If your request is denied, in part or in full, the custodian must explain why.

### **Filing a Complaint in New Mexico**

- If you feel a public agency has violated IPRA or OMA, you can file a formal complaint with the Attorney General's office. However, keep in mind that complaints can take months to investigate, so if your story is time sensitive, it's not likely to help you.
- Complaints can be filed online here: [nmag.gov/file-a-complaint.aspx](http://nmag.gov/file-a-complaint.aspx)

### **Texas Open Meetings Act**

The Texas Attorney General's office offers more information about OMA, as well as a PDF open meetings handbook. Visit [texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government](http://texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government) to learn more.

### **Texas OMA Basics**

- OMA requires all public bodies to hold meetings that are open to the public and journalists. This includes major bodies like city councils, but also commissions and committees created by those larger bodies.
- Any public body must give notice of a meeting, and publish the meeting agenda, 72 hours before the meeting is held.
- OMA allows members of a governmental body to attend a public meeting via a video conference call. However, the public must be able to witness the comments and actions of those

officials attending the meeting remotely via audio and video equipment and be able to participate via the videoconferencing just as they would at a traditional public meeting.

## **Texas Public Information Act**

The Texas Attorney General's office offers more information about OMA, as well as a PDF version of a PIA handbook. Visit [texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government](https://texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government) to learn more.

## **Texas PIA Basics**

- You can file an PIA request with any state, county or local agency – this includes police departments, school districts, county commissions, city councils and others. Private organizations that hold records for governmental bodies also are covered.
- Requests can be in writing through the mail, email or delivered by hand; however, email creates a handy paper trail in case an agency does not respond or denies your request. Some bodies may insist use of an online form, but under law, using an online form is optional.
- Once a request is made, records must be provided within 10 business days.

## **Filing a Complaint in Texas**

- If you feel a public agency has violated PIA, you can file a formal complaint with the Attorney General's office.
- Complaints can be filed online here: [texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/open-records-complaint](https://texasattorneygeneral.gov/open-government/open-records-complaint)

## **Some IPRA and PIA tips:**

- Be specific. For instance, if you're looking for a specific email sent, let's say, during the legislative session, don't ask for "all emails sent or received by Jane Doe." Instead, ask for "all emails sent or received by Jane Doe between Jan. 1, 2021 and March 15, 2021."
- Identify the records custodian before you send your request. (This can usually be accomplished with a quick internet search or phone call to the public agency.)
- Don't be afraid to have a conversation! Many public officials are happy to help you find what you're looking for, so don't be afraid to call and ask. Unless you're working with highly sensitive material, a quick conversation with an agency spokesperson (to the effect of, "how do you file budget documents? what format do you store them in? if I want to compare the past three years, is there any specific document I should ask for?") can eliminate a lot of wasted

time.

- Just ask! Sometimes it's not necessary to file an official request. Once you track down the person in charge of the records you're seeking, let them know what you'd like, and ask if they could email it to you. They may request that you file an official request, but sometimes, they'll send it to you within minutes.

#### Federal Freedom of Information Act – FOIA

- One of the best resources for FOIA tips and tactics is at [foia.gov](https://www.foia.gov).
- For a fee, Muck Rock will handle FOIA requests for you. They also have a lot of FOIA information here: [muckrock.com/about/muckrock-101/](https://muckrock.com/about/muckrock-101/)

# Reporting Tools

## Covering Crime, Courts & Criminal Justice

- New Mexico courts have a searchable database that allows you to find criminal and civil cases: [caselookup.nmcourts.gov/caselookup/](http://caselookup.nmcourts.gov/caselookup/)
- New Mexico courts also offer more case details and online court records through a secure access portal, though you will need to apply for access. Your editor can likely help you gain access, even if you're a freelancer. [securecourtcaseaccess.nmcourts.gov](http://securecourtcaseaccess.nmcourts.gov)
- El Paso and other Texas criminal, civil, probate and family court cases are available in a searchable database: [casesearch.epcounty.com/PublicAccess/default.aspx](http://casesearch.epcounty.com/PublicAccess/default.aspx)
- Opinions filed in the New Mexico Supreme Court are available here: [supremecourt.nmcourts.gov/supreme-court/opinions-rules-and-forms/opinions/](http://supremecourt.nmcourts.gov/supreme-court/opinions-rules-and-forms/opinions/)
- Opinions filed in the Texas Supreme Court are available here: [txcourts.gov/supreme/orders-opinions/](http://txcourts.gov/supreme/orders-opinions/)
- Opinions filed in the New Mexico Court of Appeals are available here: [coa.nmcourts.gov/home/formal-opinions/](http://coa.nmcourts.gov/home/formal-opinions/)
- Opinions filed in the Texas Court of Appeals are available here: [txcourts.gov/3rdcoa/recently-released-orders-opinions/](http://txcourts.gov/3rdcoa/recently-released-orders-opinions/)
- Federal lawsuits along with criminal, civil and bankruptcy cases and records can be found through PACER, though there can be a fee for searching this database, and an account is required. [pacer.uscourts.gov](http://pacer.uscourts.gov)
- And if you use PACER, you need RECAP (it's PACER spelled backwards.) RECAP is a browser plugin that will save you from paying fees on many searches, and help other journalists avoid fees too! Check it out here: [free.law/recap/](http://free.law/recap/)
- The New Mexico Corrections Department keeps a searchable database of current and former offenders, with some detail about convictions, and the site usually offers a downloadable mug shots. [search.cd.nm.gov/](http://search.cd.nm.gov/)
- Texas Department of Criminal Justice maintains a searchable database of current and former offenders, with detail on convictions: [offender.tdcj.texas.gov/OffenderSearch/start](http://offender.tdcj.texas.gov/OffenderSearch/start)
- When someone has been recently arrested or are awaiting trial, they're typically held at a county jail (often called a detention center in New Mexico). Many of these jails offer an online database. An internet search is your best bet, but here are a couple of the big ones:



- MDC – Albuquerque: [gtlinterface.bernco.gov/custodylist/](http://gtlinterface.bernco.gov/custodylist/)
- Santa Fe County Adult Detention Facility: [santafecountynm.gov/inmate\\_lookup.php](http://santafecountynm.gov/inmate_lookup.php)
- Doña Ana County Detention Center: [donaanacounty.org/inmates](http://donaanacounty.org/inmates)
- Sandoval County Detention Center:  
[sandovalcountynm.gov/departments/detention-center/inmatesearch/](http://sandovalcountynm.gov/departments/detention-center/inmatesearch/)
- El Paso County jail: [casesearch.epcounty.com/PublicAccess/default.aspx](http://casesearch.epcounty.com/PublicAccess/default.aspx)
- The New Mexico Department of Public Safety hosts a convicted sex offender database here: [communitynotification.com/cap\\_main.php?office=55290](http://communitynotification.com/cap_main.php?office=55290)
- The Texas Department of Public Safety hosts a convicted sex offender database here: [publicsite.dps.texas.gov/SexOffenderRegistry](http://publicsite.dps.texas.gov/SexOffenderRegistry)
- The FBI’s Uniform Crime Reports are available here: [fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr](http://fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr)

## **Covering Politics**

### State Politics

- The New Mexico Secretary of State’s website has a searchable campaign finance information system, as well as a list of all registered state lobbyists and other election information.  
[sos.state.nm.us](http://sos.state.nm.us)
- El Paso and other parts of Texas offer a searchable database of Campaign finance reports at:  
[ethics.state.tx.us/search/cf/](http://ethics.state.tx.us/search/cf/)
- El Paso and other parts of Texas offer information on lobbyists, as well as a downloadable database of lobbyists here: [ethics.state.tx.us/search/lobby/](http://ethics.state.tx.us/search/lobby/)
- The New Mexico Legislature offers a searchable database of all bills, along with voting and attendance records here: [nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Bill\\_Finder](http://nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Bill_Finder)
- Other New Mexico legislative information is available here:  
[nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Legislation\\_List](http://nmlegis.gov/Legislation/Legislation_List)
- Information on bills and other legislative actions in Texas can be found here:  
[capitol.texas.gov/search/billsearch.aspx](http://capitol.texas.gov/search/billsearch.aspx)

## Federal Politics

- Open Secrets offers a comprehensive search of campaign donations, campaign spending, lobbying and PAC spending: [opensecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org)
- Seveeral areas of federal campaign finance information can be found at [fec.gov](https://www.fec.gov)

## Other Resources

- New Mexico offers a Sunshine Portal with information on spending, budgets, revenues, employees, contracts and more. [ssp.nm.gov](https://ssp.nm.gov)
- Federal funding and contract spending is available here: [usaspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov)
- US Census Bureau data is available here: [census.gov](https://www.census.gov)

## Covering Business

- In New Mexico, all LLCs, corporations and partnerships must register with the Secretary of State's office. Search here: [portal.sos.state.nm.us/BFS/online/corporationbusinesssearch](https://portal.sos.state.nm.us/BFS/online/corporationbusinesssearch)
- Publicly traded companies must file quarterly reports (called 10Qs) and annual reports (called 10Ks) with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Those are available here: [sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/companysearch.html](https://sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/companysearch.html)
- GuideStar offers information on nonprofits and charities: [guidestar.org](https://www.guidestar.org)
- The New Mexico Regulation & Licensing Division maintains records of all licenses and licensees, from contractors to nursing homes: [rld.state.nm.us/LicenseeSearchIndex.aspx](https://rld.state.nm.us/LicenseeSearchIndex.aspx)
- The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation maintains records of licenses and licensees here: [tdlr.texas.gov/verify.htm](https://tdlr.texas.gov/verify.htm)
- Federal lawsuits and bankruptcy cases and records can be found through PACER, though there can be a fee for searching this database, and an account is required. [pacer.uscourts.gov](https://pacer.uscourts.gov)
- And if you use PACER, you need RECAP (it's PACER spelled backwards.) RECAP is a browser plugin that will save you from paying fees on many searches, and help other journalists avoid fees too! Check it out here: [free.law/recap/](https://free.law/recap/)

# General Reporting Tools

## Searching Social Media & the Internet

Almost everyone is on at least one social media platform, making it easy to find sources and information on the people you're covering.

- Twitter advanced search is a great tool to find old tweets, or tweets about specific events: [twitter.com/search-advanced](https://twitter.com/search-advanced)
- Facebook search can be found at [facebook.com](https://facebook.com), at the top of the page.
- Who Posted What is a third-party Facebook search tool: [whopostedwhat.com](https://whopostedwhat.com)
- The “Way Back Machine” is a useful tool to search past versions of websites: [archive.org/web/](https://archive.org/web/)
- Signal is phone app that provides centralized encrypted messaging service as well as phone calls. A great tool for communicating with sources. [signal.org](https://signal.org)

## Additional Resource

- The New Mexico Foundation for Open Government offers a wealth of information about OMA and IPRA, and can answer many questions for you. It's also a great source quotes for stories. [nmfog.org](https://nmfog.org)
- The Sunlight Foundation strives to make government and politics more transparent to all. It also stores a bunch of data on its website: [sunlightfoundation.com](https://sunlightfoundation.com)
- The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press is an awesome resource for journalists around the country; they have a team of lawyers who provide legal advice to journalists, free of charge. [rcfp.org](https://rcfp.org)
- The Electronic Frontier Foundation is a great resource for online and digital issues. It also offers several browser plugins to protect your privacy online. [eff.org](https://eff.org)
- The New Mexico Bar Association published a Legal Guide for Journalists (updated in 2020): [nmcourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Legal-Guide-for-Journalists-State-Bar-of-NM.pdf](https://nmcourts.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Legal-Guide-for-Journalists-State-Bar-of-NM.pdf)
- The Society of Professional Journalists has a Journalist's Toolbox: [journaliststoolbox.org](https://journaliststoolbox.org)

## Recommended Reading

We sent out a call for journalists' favorite books about their craft and trade and compiled this list of awesome books.

### Guides and Technical Books:

- Inside Story: Everyone's Guide to Reporting and Writing Creative Nonfiction, by Julia Goldberg (a New Mexico author and journalist!)
- Doing Documentary Work, by Robert Coles
- Sound Reporting: The NPR Guide to Audio Journalism and Production, by Jonathan Kern
- The Investigative Reporter's Handbook: A Guide to Documents, Databases, and Techniques, by Brant Houston and Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.
- The Associated Press Stylebook (buy the most recent edition, or subscribe online)
- Thinking Like Your Editor: How to Write Great Serious Nonfiction—and Get it Published, by Susan Rabiner and Alfred Fortunato
- The Art and Craft of Feature Writing, by William E. Blundell
- On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction, by William Zinsser
- The Science Writers' Handbook: Everything You Need to Know to Pitch, Publish, and Prosper in the Digital Age, Edited by Thomas Hayden and Michelle Nijhuis
- Working with Words: A Concise Handbook for Media Writers and Editors, by Brian S. Brooks and James L. Pinson
- The Elements of Style, William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White
- Storycraft: The Complete Guide to Writing Narrative Nonfiction, by Jack Hart
- Writing Tools: 55 Essential Strategies for Every Writer, by Roy Peter Clark

**Memoirs, Essays, Graphic Novels, Fiction, True Crime, and Biographies (and just some great non-fiction books written by awesome journalists):**

- At the Precipice: New Mexico's Changing Climate, by Laura Paskus (a New Mexico author and journalist!)
- The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation, by Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff
- News for All The People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media, by Juan González and Joseph Torres
- All the President's Men, by Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward  
Here at the New Yorker, by Brendan Gill
- The Paris Edition: The Autobiography of Waverly Root
- The Press, by A.J. Liebling (read whatever you can by Liebling!)
- American Carnival: Journalism Under Siege in an Age of New Media, by Neil Henry
- Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, by Hunter S. Thompson
- The Rum Diary, by Hunter S. Thompson
- The Boys on the Bus, by Tim Crouse
- To Hell in a Handbasket, by H. Allen Smith
- Deadline, by James Reston
- Personal History, by Katherine Graham
- Journalism, by Joe Sacco
- The New, New Journalism: Conversations With America's Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft, by Robert S. Boynton
- The Face of War, by Martha Gellhorn
- The Soccer War, by Ryszard Kapuscinski
- Imperium, by Ryszard Kapuscinski
- The Shadow of the Sun, by Ryszard Kapuscinski
- Transmetropolitan, by Warren Ellis and Darick Robertson

- Scandalmaker, by William Safire
- Hitch-22, by Christopher Hitchens
- Dispatches, by Michael Herr
- The Journalist and the Murderer, by Janet Malcom
- Remembering Mr. Shawn's New Yorker: The Invisible Art of Editing, by Ved Mehta Travels with Myself and Another: A Memoir, by Martha Gellhorn
- The New Kings of Nonfiction, edited by Ira Glass
- Anything written by John McPhee
- The Death and Life of Dith Pran, by Sydney H. Schanberg
- In Cold Blood, by Truman Capote
- The Executioner's Song, by Norman Mailer
- Shot Through the Heart, by Mikal Gilmore
- The Fly on the Wall, by Tony Hillerman
- Down by the River, by Charles Bowden
- The Right Stuff, by Tom Wolfe