Before you ever start your analysis:

Be a reporter and research the data you're requesting. Tell government officials that you want to talk to the "data person" about the data -- be clear that it's off the record and just for your own knowledge. Entice them to participate by saying you want to make sure the request is as easy as possible for everyone involved -- especially them.

If you can get beyond a phone call, ask if you could come to their office and have someone show you the data and walk through the record layout.

Find out why the agency must collect the data in the first place. Often, there is a law that mandates the data exist. That law will typically explain how it should be maintained and what information must be included. Reading the law can give you a better understanding of the scope of the data.

Figure out how the agency is obtaining the data. If they collect the information using forms, either paper or online, make sure you look at those to see how they are asking questions. If data is already publicly available, doublecheck the public fields with the list of information collected to make sure nothing has been withheld from the public version.

Some agencies are sticklers for getting a written/formal request first. If that's the case, then include a sentence requesting a phone call to discuss the request before they proceed. Tell them outright in your letter that you broadly worded this request because you don't know enough about the data and that a phone call would help clarify things.

Find government reports, other news articles, possibly even academic studies that used the data you are requesting. Hunt for a methodology that might help shine light on any details about the data that are good to know.

Find the authors of those reports or others who have dealt with the data. Ask them about the data. What problems did they encounter? What advice do they wish someone had given them?

See if you can find a former employee of the agency who handled the data. Talk to them! They might be able to help you craft your request.

Think about anywhere else you could get this data. Is there a federal agency that also collects it? Anywhere else? Be creative.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE DATA:

- What's the official name of the database?
- What software is it in?
- Do you have a standard process for exporting data for other public requests or for making reports? Or would you have to create a new export process?
- What does each record represent? (one incident? One inspection?). This is important to know because sometimes it's not what you'd expect. For example,

sometimes fire department response data has one record for each piece of equipment sent to the scene.

- Can they send a copy of the record layout ahead of time?
- How does the data get in there? Typed by a clerk? Entered by whoever is reporting the information to the agency?
- How many years' of data is in there? (sometimes old data isn't transferred to new data systems)
- If you need data that goes farther back in time, is there a way to get that?
- Other scope questions -- such as whether there's a reporting "threshold" that means some things are in there and some are not? (i.e. crash data often only includes injury and fatality crashes; maybe "serious" damage crashes); What geography does it cover?
- Were there any big changes to how the data is collected or what is collected in recent years?
- Be sure to ask about specific fields of information you know you want. Also ask them if that field is consistently filled in.
- Are there any fields that would be redacted because it's considered private/non-public? (Social Security numbers, etc)
- What do you use the database for? Are there any reports that are routinely generated based on this data? Do you do any analysis? (this question is good for finding out whether materials exist that you might be able to use to double-check your own findings or to get some basic summary analysis, if that's all you need)

OTHER TIPS:

If you are making a really big request, try asking for a small chunk of the data first so that you have time to see if it's going to serve the purposes you need. This could help you avoid wasting an agency's time and resources on a big data dump that turns out to be a dud.

Perhaps even be forthright with them and tell them what you're trying to do -- ask if they think you are heading down the right path (This is tricky and not always a good idea)

Are there any records that would be withheld altogether? (i.e. in MN police are allowed to withhold salary records on undercover detectives; MN birth records on children born to unwed mothers who didn't authorize the record to be made public can also be withheld)

BULK FOIA TIPS:

Be sure your requests are identical for each agency

Use a spreadsheet or similar tool to track progress

Tell the agencies you are asking for data from multiple places

WORDING YOUR REQUEST:

Wording on your request is crucial. Avoid terms like "list" or "report", if you want structured data.

Make it clear you want structured data and perhaps even tell them what software you will be using it in.

 If you are getting multiple years of data and you want it all in one file, tell them that in your request.

 If it's a relational dataset, let them know it's ok to provide the data in multiple files. (MaryJo has encountered agencies that assumed she wanted one big flat file – and charged a huge amount to merge the data)

 Always include a sentence encouraging them to contact you if they have any questions or concerns about your request. Request they contact you via email to keep a paper trail. But also include your phone number, just in case.

 Include the name of the person(s) you talked to at the agency…. "Based on my conversation with person X, I understand the data can be exported….."

 Always ask for any documentation that you'll need to understand the data such as record layout, code sheets, etc.

 Request all the years available even if you think you don't need them. It's useful to have for comparison and chances are you'll end up requesting it later anyway.

 Include a sentence that says something like, "If there will be any cost associated with my request, please provide, in writing, an estimate of the cost and time involved prior to filling my request."

 RESOURCES:

FOIA Machine- https://www.foiamachine.org/

 Committee for Freedom of the Press - Open Government Guide

https://www.rcfp.org/open-government-guide/

 --https://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/open-government-guide-rcfp.php

 Find your state agency/local organizations

 Lots of good tipsheets at IRE, https://www.ire.org/resource-center

MaryJo Webster, Star Tribune, @MaryJoWebster
Jaimi Dowdell, Reuters, @JaimiDowdell
Rob Barry, Wall Street Journal, @rob_barry