

Last updated: 2023-10-03

What is this document?

This is a sample records request asking for the banned book list and publication policy from a state department of corrections.

Note: This request is a starting point. We encourage you to adapt this document to your organization's standard practices, to your state, and based on your reporting.

If you are a journalist who wants to pitch a story about banned books, check out our [sample pitch](#) to help get you started.

Elevate your work

Our goal is to get these issues more attention and contribute to a growing body of reporting on this national issue.

We ask that anyone who uses our resources to report on this issue write to us using this [form](#). We will publish a link to your work on our website, so that others can see how banned books data and reporting are being used.

Read before sending

We recommend contacting your corrections department's PIO to determine the best way to shape the information request, and asking about the caveats below:

- Your state may have a data portal that you should check for this information before filing a request
- We recommend sending separate requests (policy and list) because the policy is often easy to find, and will be held up while the list is tracked down and prepared.
- Some states keep separate lists of books for outside vendors or senders, and for books banned from the prison library. You may need to specify which one you want in your request.
- The lists sometimes contain codes corresponding to the reason for the ban. When you talk to the PIO, ask if that's the case in your state and request a data dictionary or key to decipher the codes. The format of the list should be a CSV or an Excel doc, whenever possible. Try to avoid PDFs because those are often hard to parse and interpret.

- There are states with no lists. These states must, however, document the receipt and adjudication of each book. Consider requesting the rejection documents themselves. Some states won't turn them over because they are about specific incarcerated people. Some will.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions, please reach out to bookbans@themarshallproject.org.

And please let us know how it goes. Your experience will help make this sample request better for everyone.

Request for Banned Book List

Dear RECIPIENT NAME:

I am a reporter for PUBLICATION, and I'm making an open records request for a list of all books and other printed publications that are banned or otherwise not permitted by STATE prisons. Please include the title and author of the publication. If available, please include the reasons for prohibiting the publication, as well as the date of the decision.

If possible, please send this information in a searchable spreadsheet format, such as an Excel file or a CSV file.

If this request requires an undue amount of work or time, please let me know, and we can discuss narrowing or amending it — and if there is any additional information you need from me to complete this request, please let me know.

Thank you for your time,

YOUR NAME

YOUR CONTACT INFO

Request for Department of Corrections Publication Policy

Dear RECIPIENT NAME:

I am a reporter for PUBLICATION, and I'm making an open records request for any policies regarding banned or permitted books, and the process for banning or allowing them through the mailroom and through the library.

If this request requires an undue amount of work or time, please let me know, and we can discuss narrowing or amending it — and if there is any additional information you need from me to complete this request, please let me know.

Thank you for your time,

YOUR NAME

YOUR CONTACT INFO