FOLLOW THE FILES

How to investigate what the records actually say

An illustrated, plain-English field guide and working course in documentary investigation.

A headline reports a $48,000 payment. The first treasury record shows no payment by its reporting cutoff. Where would you look next? This book teaches that entire investigation, from the first question to a publishable finding.

REFERENCE ADD-ON / 22-CHAPTER CURRICULUM / OCTOBER 2026

YOUR COURSE

Begin with one claim. Follow the files.

Every chapter teaches a different record system or investigative decision. The fictional case is continuous so you can use earlier work instead of starting over.

01 Did the board actually pay $48,000?

02 A later ledger changes the story

03 Which Dock Heritage organization?

04 The page that changed after publication

05 Ask for the document that can settle it

06 A nonprofit filing raises a different question

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09 A lawsuit is listed. What was decided?

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18 Is that photograph from the inspection?

19 A leaked document names the project. Is it authentic?

20 Why did a name-match spreadsheet create a false network?

21 What should never enter the public evidence pack?

22 Can another investigator reproduce the result?

BEFORE YOU OPEN A DATABASE

What you will do with this book

The goal is to investigate a claim from beginning to end and leave behind a case file another person can verify.

Read it with a real question in mind

Each chapter begins with a documentary problem that an investigator could encounter: a public claim, a copied article, a financial entry, an unknown organization, a court filing or a changed web page. You will examine the exact fields that answer the question. The fictional Harbor Board documents are plainly labeled, so they cannot be confused with public evidence.

Use the annotated record before the blank page

A complete working example appears before every practice page. The exercise then asks you to make a locator, comparison, search plan, review decision or publishable sentence of your own. The answer key explains what the exhibit supports and what it leaves open.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH
>
> A **source receipt** is your note of exactly what record you opened, where you found it, when you retrieved it and what saved copy you kept. A screenshot without a locator or date is a much weaker research artifact.

Move between the book and the tools

The teaching text works on paper. The public **Follow the Files Research Directory** and **Source Trails** show where to investigate in real systems. The offline Investigator's Field System contains the 110 existing worksheet templates and lets you preserve research artifacts. ProofDesk and Open Publishing Studio are separate software products, whose current availability must be verified on the website before purchase.

All simulated dates, keys, people, organizations and financial entries in the Harbor Board case are fictional. This edition uses original teaching language and documentary examples; it does not reproduce the text or trade dress of other guidebook series.

CHAPTER 01 / START WITH THE CLAIM

Did the board actually pay $48,000?

A newspaper says a harbor project has received its money. The board minutes and treasurer have a more careful story to tell.

The fictional Harbor Board voted on May 8, 2025, to authorize spending of up to $48,000 on the Dock Archive Restoration Project. Its approval depended on an inspection and an executed vendor agreement. A local article reported that the money had been "released." A reader could reasonably interpret that as a completed payment.

The treasury extract for period ending May 21 recorded a $48,000 commitment for project DA-17 but $0 disbursed. The documents support a vote and a recorded commitment. They do not demonstrate payment by that cutoff. The first investigative task is to ask a question a record can actually answer.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: AUTHORIZATION
> Permission to spend within stated conditions. The document authorizing expenditure is not a record that cash changed hands.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

EX-04 / Treasury commitments extract

Line	Project	Committed	Disbursed	Period
208	DA-17	$48,000	$0	May 21

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

LINE 208
This locates the exact entry within the dated extract.

PROJECT DA-17
An identifier ties otherwise separate records to the same project.

DISBURSED $0
This is the field that tests payment. The report has a time boundary.

Follow this research route

01 Find the precise claim
Copy the published wording into a claim card. Identify whether it asserts approval, issue, settlement or receipt.

02 Locate the originating decision
Find the meeting date and motion number rather than citing a second story repeating the same minutes.

03 Retrieve the transactional record
Use treasury expenditures, warrants or accounts-payable reports; preserve the line identifier and coverage period.

04 State the narrow outcome
Write what the document proves as of its reporting date. Specify which later record could change it.

> **COMMON TRAP**
> Two articles repeating the minutes count as one underlying source for the vote. They are not independent proof of payment.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
EX-02	Board minutes dated May 8	Up to $48,000 authorized subject to conditions.
EX-03	Community article dated May 11	Says funds were "released," citing board minutes.
EX-04	Treasury extract through May 21	Project DA-17: $48,000 committed; $0 disbursed.

CHAPTER 01 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE A defensible description is: "The board authorized up to $48,000 for DA-17, subject to conditions. A treasury extract for the period ending May 21 recorded no disbursement." The reporter used a stronger financial verb than the documents support.

1. The claim to test

Use actor, amount, action and cutoff date.

01.1

2. Best record and locator

Name the exhibit, project identifier, field and period.

01.2

3. A competing explanation

Give a routine administrative explanation consistent with the file.

01.3

4. Next record to request

Which dated transaction or clearing record would test a later payment?

01.4

5. Public sentence

Write a two-sentence correction with its time limit.

01.5

Related Field System templates: 01-01 Investigation question builder; 02-01 Atomic claim card; 02-04 Independence challenge

Open a real source: Source Trails

CHAPTER 02 / FOLLOW THE TRANSACTION

A later ledger changes the story

An $18,000 entry appears after the first reporting period. The difference between issued and cleared becomes the crucial question.

On May 24, the fictional treasurer posted an updated DA-17 extract showing $18,000 disbursed-to-date. A payment journal identifies TX-219-A as issued on May 23. A newsletter dated May 25 nonetheless reports that the entire $48,000 was paid.

The May 21 ledger and May 24 ledger can both be accurate. Each describes a different reporting period. The $18,000 journal entry changes the later picture, but the practice packet contains no bank reconciliation and cannot show whether the vendor received cleared funds.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: REPORTING CUTOFF
> The last date for which a source claims to cover transactions. A later update can add evidence without rewriting the earlier observation.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

SUP-04 / Payment journal

Transaction	Project	Amount	Status	Initiated
TX-219-A	**DA-17**	**$18,000**	**ISSUED**	**May 23**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

ISSUED
The payment has entered the treasury workflow; settlement is not necessarily complete.

DISBURSED-TO-DATE
SUP-03 reports $18,000 at May 24. The ledger has a new period ending date.

SOURCE FAMILY

SUP-03 and SUP-04 share the treasury origin; their agreement does not create a new bank witness.

Follow this research route

01 **Capture both versions**

Keep the May 21 and May 24 exports separately and record retrieval timestamps.

02 **Use the transaction identifier**

Search or request TX-219-A. Amount alone is not a stable transaction key.

03 **Seek the next system**

Identify the reconciliation register or authorized recipient accounting confirmation, with privacy protections.

04 **Correct the headline**

Separate $18,000 issued from the unverified remainder of the $48,000 authorization.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Subtracting the issued amount from the authorization gives $30,000 not shown as disbursed, not a debt, a missing transfer or an amount someone stole.

Watch the evidence change the claim

EX-04: $0 disbursed at that cutoff. Treasury extract, period ending May 21

SUP-03: $18,000 disbursed-to-date for DA-17. Treasury extract, period ending May 24

SUP-04: $18,000 initiated May 23; marked issued. Payment journal, TX-219-A

CHAPTER 02 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE A careful correction reads: "The treasury records show an $18,000 payment issued against DA-17 by May 24. The $48,000 figure is the spending authorization; the reviewed records do not establish disbursement of the remaining $30,000 or bank clearance of the $18,000." The inquiry now targets reconciliation.

1. Version receipt

Record both export dates and the transaction identifier.

02.1

2. What changed

Describe the difference without declaring the earlier extract false.

02.2

3. Independence test

Explain why two treasury documents do not equal bank confirmation.

02.3

4. Reconciliation request

Specify the office, period and transaction to seek.

02.4

5. Corrected claim

Write an accurate public statement about both dollar figures.

02.5

Related Field System templates: 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 04-01 Master dated event line; 02-04 Independence challenge

Open a real source: Source Trails

CHAPTER 03 / VERIFY AN ENTITY

Which Dock Heritage organization?

The payment has a vendor name, but a local flyer promotes a nearly identical organization. Similar names cannot settle legal identity.

The contract identifies Dock Heritage Works LLC as the vendor on project DA-17, using simulated registration key SIM-REG-411. A registry excerpt repeats that same key. A local flyer mentions Dock Heritage Alliance, while another directory lists Dock Heritage Works North LLC under a separate simulated registration.

A blog treats the Alliance as the recipient of the $18,000 payment. The name is superficially plausible. Yet the agreement and registry tie the project to Works LLC. A payment journal still does not give independent evidence of bank settlement or the ultimate receiving account.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: ENTITY RESOLUTION
> The documented decision that two records identify the same legal person or organization. Matching the name alone is insufficient.

How to approach the question

01 **Identify the kind of institution**
A private LLC, charity and political committee are found in different official systems.

02 **Find a stable key**
Prefer state registration numbers, EINs where lawfully available, SEC CIK or FEC committee ID.

03 **Compare time and place**
An organization may change names or addresses; record the effective dates.

04 **Refuse unsupported joins**
Where identifiers conflict or are missing, keep the candidates separate in the matrix.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

ID-01 and ID-02 / Contract-to-registry check

Project	Contract vendor	Registration	Registry match
DA-17	**Dock Heritage Works**	**SIM-REG-411**	**SIM-REG-411**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

CONTRACT IDENTIFIER

Use the registration key plus jurisdiction and date of the agreement.

SIMULATED REGISTRY

The practice keys are invented; look up real entities in the registry appropriate to their legal type.

RECIPIENT UNKNOWN

A matched vendor and issued payment still do not settle the bank destination.

> **COMMON TRAP**
>
> A shared street address, familiar surname or similar logo may generate a research lead. None is by itself proof of common beneficial ownership.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
ID-01	Executed agreement	Vendor Dock Heritage Works LLC; SIM-REG-411.
ID-02	Simulated state registration	Works LLC retains SIM-REG-411.
ID-04	Directory entry	Works North LLC holds SIM-REG-742.

CHAPTER 03 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE A supportable identity statement is: "The executed project agreement names Dock Heritage Works LLC as contractor, and the matching simulated registration identifies that same entity." The materials do not support naming Dock Heritage Alliance as the payment recipient or asserting an ownership relationship among the similarly named organizations.

1. Correct match

Which pair of records shares a stable identifier?

03.1

2. Rejected candidate

Give the reason the North LLC should stay separate.

03.2

3. Unknown receipt

Name the evidence missing for final recipient attribution.

03.3

4. Registry route

Describe which real registry you would search first for an LLC.

03.4

5. Public wording

State only what the contract and registry prove.

03.5

Related Field System templates: 05-01 Entity disambiguation grid; 02-08 Source identity uncertainty; 05-10 Network false-positive review

Open a real source: SEC CIK Lookup

CHAPTER 04 / RECONSTRUCT THE WEB

The page that changed after publication

A current web page uses more definitive language than the archive capture. Before assigning intent, establish the exact changed words and versions.

On May 16, a simulated captured Harbor Board webpage described Motion 7B as a conditional authorization. On June 4, the current page described the project as "funded and underway." A screenshot circulates claiming that the agency erased a promise to pay the entire $48,000.

The archive capture and live page have different language. That is worth documenting. The change does not establish that officials intentionally concealed anything, and the captured HTML may omit attachments that were never archived. Start by preserving the original URLs and their capture timestamps.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: CAPTURE TIMESTAMP
> The archive service date on which a particular page representation was saved. It is different from the publication date written inside the page.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

ARCH-01 / Two dated page observations

URL path	Older capture	Current page	Attachment
/projects/da-17	**May 16 snapshot**	**June 4 version**	**Map unavailable**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

ORIGINAL URL

The same path links the two observations, subject to redirects and site migrations.

TEXT DIFFERENCE

Write the exact before-and-after wording, then seek the approval and ledger records.

CAPTURE COVERAGE

A saved page does not guarantee that PDFs, images and scripts were captured.

Follow this research route

01 **Capture the current page**

Save address, timestamp, page title, relevant text and linked file URLs.

02 **Search the Wayback Machine**

Compare dated snapshots of that exact URL; inspect the timestamp in the archived address.

03 **Check embedded resources**

Open attachments individually in the archive. Record missing assets without inventing their contents.

04 **Write a change log**

Identify which version states each claim and what independent official record can test the content.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A missing archived image can result from crawler limitations or site scripts. Do not label its absence as deletion without independent evidence.

Watch the evidence change the claim

ARCH-01: Motion 7B described as conditional authorization. Simulated May 16 capture

ARCH-02: Text calls the project funded and underway. Simulated June 4 page

EX-04 / SUP-03: Different dated accounting records needed to interpret the wording. Treasury extracts

CHAPTER 04 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The supported observation is: "A page captured on May 16 described conditional spending authority; its June 4 version described the project as funded and underway." This establishes a wording difference in the supplied examples. It does not establish a payment amount, motive for revision or history of an uncaptured attachment.

1. Version pair

Record original path and dates for both observations.

04.1

2. Exact difference

Transcribe the two phrases with attribution.

04.2

3. Missing resource

Specify what the archive failed to capture and how to search for it.

04.3

4. Independent check

Which treasury or meeting record tests the wording?

04.4

5. Safe sentence

Write a dated comparison without inferring a motive.

04.5

Related Field System templates: 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 08-01 Records request anatomy; 04-03 Before / after state table

Open a real source: Internet Archive Wayback help

CHAPTER 05 / GET THE MISSING RECORD

Ask for the document that can settle it

A well-targeted request gets closer to the answer than an enormous demand for every document mentioning the organization.

The practice case now has several public records but no bank-clearing confirmation for TX-219-A. A request to the Harbor Board chair for "everything about the $48,000" would be unfocused. A request to the financial records custodian for named reconciliation entries can be searched and answered more precisely.

Federal FOIA is a federal statute. A fictional local government would instead be governed by an applicable state or local public-records law. The training example avoids inventing a state exemption rule, retention period or statutory deadline.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: REASONABLY DESCRIBED
> A request specific enough for the responsible office to identify and search for responsive records.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

REQ-01 / Draft request structure

Custodian	Identifiers	Record type	Date range
Finance office	**DA-17 / TX-219-A**	**Clearing records**	**May 22-June 3**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

CUSTODIAN

Address the office maintaining transaction and settlement records, not an unrelated press contact.

KEYS

Give the project number and payment journal ID, not only the contractor name.

ACCESS RULES

Check the jurisdiction-specific law, fees, redaction rules and appeal process.

Follow this research route

01 **Research the keeper of records**

Inspect agency responsibilities and current request instructions.

02 **Define the search**

Include title, transaction key, date range, format and any known database.

03 **Ask for segregable responsive material**

State that reasonably releasable portions are useful if some fields are withheld.

04 **Track and evaluate the response**

Log submission date, request number, productions, referral, withholding basis and appeal opportunities.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A delayed answer or a properly supported records exemption is a disclosure event, not itself proof of payment misconduct.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
EX-04	May 21 treasury extract	Disbursement $0 through this date.
SUP-04	TX-219-A payment journal	Payment marked issued on May 23.
REQ-01	Sample targeted request	Requests settlement / reversal / reconciliation for TX-219-A.

CHAPTER 05 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE A specific request would read: "Please provide payment-clearing, reconciliation, reversal, or returned-payment records for transaction TX-219-A connected with project DA-17 for May 22 through June 3, 2025, including transaction date, amount and status, with any legally required redactions." A real request must use the proper jurisdiction and official case identifiers.

1. Correct recipient

Identify the office and explain why it holds the requested data.

05.1

2. Records description

Specify record types, keys and dates.

05.2

3. Release format

Describe a useful electronic export and metadata fields.

05.3

4. Response register

What would you record if the office says "no responsive records"?

05.4

5. Public position

What can the story say until the request is answered?

05.5

Related Field System templates: 08-04 Docket event register; 08-06 Archives discovery map; 03-01 Acquisition receipt

Open a real source: National Archives FOIA guide

CHAPTER 06 / READ TAX-EXEMPT FILINGS

A nonprofit filing raises a different question

The Alliance has a simulated annual filing, but the contract names Works LLC. Learn what a nonprofit return can establish about grants and governance.

A separate Dock Heritage Alliance nonprofit appears in a practice Form 990 worksheet for tax year 2024. The simulated filing reports $6,000 of grants to Harbor Education Fund and lists officers in its governance section. The filing predates the 2025 Harbor Board transaction.

The name resembles the project contractor, yet nothing in the supplied records makes the Alliance the vendor. The $6,000 figure is an unrelated reported grant in a different time period. A Form 990 is valuable for studying disclosed activities and organizations; it must be read according to the schedule, tax year and definitions on the return.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: FORM 990
> An annual information return filed by many tax-exempt organizations. Different schedules disclose different categories of activity; coverage and filing obligations vary.

How to approach the question

01 **Identify the exact filing organization**
Match legal name and EIN in the return; preserve which tax year you opened.

02 **Read the correct part**
Distinguish Part VII compensation, Schedule I grants and Schedule R reported related organizations.

03 **Follow the recipient field**
A grant record identifies a named payee in that filing; compare with recipient records before asserting a transfer occurred.

04 **Check coverage and notes**
Read Schedule O explanations, amendments and nearby filings when their fields qualify a line item.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

TAX-01 / Simulated return extracts

Reporting year	Organization	Grant line	Amount
2024	**Dock Heritage Alliance**	**Schedule I**	**$6,000**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

YEAR

A 2024 tax filing cannot itself document receipt of the 2025 DA-17 transaction.

SCHEDULE I

A reported grant identifies the stated recipient and purpose within the tax-return context.

SCHEDULE R

If relevant, inspect reported relationships. Silence in one schedule does not resolve all ownership questions.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A Form 990 total, Schedule I grant and vendor disbursement are different measures. Comparing the numbers without checking their reporting basis can create an imaginary transfer.

Watch the evidence change the claim

TAX-01: Schedule I grant: $6,000 to Harbor Education Fund. Simulated Alliance Form 990, 2024

ID-01: Names Dock Heritage Works LLC under SIM-REG-411. 2025 project agreement

SUP-04: TX-219-A for $18,000 issued against DA-17. 2025 treasury transaction

CHAPTER 06 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The correct comparison is: "The Alliance training return reports a $6,000 grant in tax year 2024. The 2025 Harbor Board contract names Dock Heritage Works LLC.

1. Filing identity

Record the legal organization, tax year and official identifying field.

06.1

2. Line interpretation

What does the Schedule I $6,000 represent?

06.2

3. False connection

Explain why this grant cannot be joined to TX-219-A.

06.3

4. Follow-up

Which additional source could test a real grant recipient?

06.4

5. Publishable wording

Give a two-sentence finding limited to the filing.

06.5

Related Field System templates: 06-02 Donor-to-vendor pathway; 05-01 Entity disambiguation grid; 02-01 Atomic claim card

Open a real source: IRS About Form 990

CHAPTER 07 / TRACE POLITICAL MESSAGING

A political ad borrows the same headline

A fictional political committee repeats the $48,000 claim. Its advertising expense must not be confused with the Harbor Board contract.

A fictional group called Harbor Progress Committee promotes an election-season advertisement saying the town "delivered $48,000" to restore its dock archives. A simulated committee disclosure lists $4,500 spent with a media contractor for advertising services.

The ad may help explain how a claim circulated, but the campaign committee is a different financial actor from the Harbor Board. The $4,500 media expense is not evidence that the public body paid its vendor. Start by identifying the committee and the exact reporting schedule before drawing any connection.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: COMMITTEE ID
> An identifier used by an election regulator for a registered political committee; inspect the correct jurisdiction and filing to avoid mixing entities.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

ADV-01 / Simulated committee spending line

Committee	Expense	Payee	Purpose
HPC-FAKE-01	**$4,500**	**Harbor Media Co.**	**Digital ads**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

COMMITTEE
This is a separate organization with a separate ledger from the Harbor Board.

PAYEE
The media contractor is paid for advertising, not necessarily a grant recipient or public contractor.

AD CLAIM
Advertisements can quote, characterize or misstate underlying events; retrieve the original source.

Follow this research route

01 Resolve the committee
Use regulator identifiers and election period rather than a similar group name.

02 Open the original report
Preserve report type, covered period, amendment status and line number.

03 Inspect the expenditure category
A political ad purchase tells you about campaign activity and its stated recipient.

04 Trace the ad claim back
Find the original board decision and treasury records before evaluating what the ad says happened.

> **COMMON TRAP**
> An entity receiving a political-media payment has not thereby become controlled by the committee. A publicity relationship requires direct evidence before attribution.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
ADV-01	Simulated campaign expense	$4,500 for digital advertising to Harbor Media Co.
ADV-02	Simulated ad transcript	Says the town "delivered $48,000" to archives.
SUP-03	Treasury extract	Records $18,000 as of May 24.

CHAPTER 07 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The proper comparison is: "A campaign advertisement described the archive project as funded at $48,000, but the treasury documents reviewed for May 24 recorded $18,000 as disbursed-to-date. Separately, the advertising committee reported a $4,500 media purchase." No evidence in these documents establishes editorial direction by the grant recipient or financial transfer between the committee and the Harbor Board.

1. Committee identity

What regulator and stable filing key would you inspect?

07.1

2. Payment type

Explain what the $4,500 transaction reports.

07.2

3. Claim dependency

Trace the $48,000 advertising statement to the earliest source.

07.3

4. Unsupported inference

Write one connection the file does not prove.

07.4

5. Public comparison

Write the ad-versus-ledger comparison precisely.

07.5

Related Field System templates: 06-03 Contract obligation canvas; 02-04 Independence challenge; 05-10 Network false-positive review

Open a real source: FEC report retrieval

CHAPTER 08 / PUBLISH WHAT SURVIVES

The record that finally answers the question

A later reconciliation arrives. Decide which claims should change, which stay narrow, and how a reader can independently verify the result.

In the final training packet, a simulated reconciliation entry (REC-01) says that TX-219-A for $18,000 cleared on May 27 to Dock Heritage Works LLC, with project DA-17 and the matching vendor code. A June 3 extract (REC-02) still shows only $18,000 disbursed-to-date.

The new record directly improves the answer about the payment. It does not establish that the board spent the other $30,000 after June 3, and the unrelated nonprofit or political ad remains outside the confirmed transaction chain. The investigation can now publish a time-bounded account with its best underlying records.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: CLAIM-EVIDENCE MATRIX
> A record of individual factual claims, the documents that directly support them, source dependence, uncertainties and publication decisions.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

REC-01 / Simulated settlement entry

Transaction	Vendor code	Amount	Cleared
TX-219-A	**V-077**	**$18,000**	**May 27**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

IDENTIFIER JOIN

Match transaction TX-219-A and project DA-17 to prior documents.

RECEIVING PARTY

The simulated reconciliation names Works LLC, answering the prior payee uncertainty in this training case.

LIMIT

REC-02 runs only to June 3. The practice record cannot rule out later activity.

Follow this research route

01 **Update the evidence register**

Add REC-01 and REC-02 with their origin families and dates, preserving earlier records.

02 **Separate each claim**

Authorization, issue, settlement, recipient identity and remaining authorization each need their own source.

03 **Check for contradictions**

Test alternative interpretations and ask a reviewer to follow your source locators.

04 **Publish qualified findings**

Attribute source dates, avoid inferring intention and establish a procedure to correct the article if later records change.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A verified $18,000 settlement cannot be stretched into proof that a $48,000 project was fully funded, that a different organization benefited, or that a later unreviewed payment never occurred.

Watch the evidence change the claim

EX-02: Conditional authorization of up to $48,000. Board minutes

SUP-04 / REC-01: TX-219-A issued and later cleared for $18,000. Journal plus simulated reconciliation

REC-02: Disbursed-to-date remains $18,000 at cutoff. June 3 ledger

CHAPTER 08 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The final fictional report can say: "The Harbor Board authorized up to $48,000 for DA-17. An $18,000 transaction was issued May 23 and is shown as cleared May 27 to Dock Heritage Works LLC.

1. Claim-evidence table

Pair approval, issue, clearing, recipient and remaining allocation with source IDs.

08.1

2. Source dependence

Name which records share an originating system.

08.2

3. Refutation test

What kind of later record would change the remaining-balance statement?

08.3

4. Two-sentence report

Publish the verified result with dates and named recipient.

08.4

5. Correction plan

Describe how the story and source archive would be updated.

08.5

Related Field System templates: 02-10 Claim language precision; 09-03 Weakest-link detector; 11-01 Evidence-to-paragraph map

Open a real source: Source Trails

CHAPTER 09 / READ THE COURT DOCKET

A lawsuit is listed. What was decided?

An archived article mentions a contract dispute involving the vendor. The docket establishes the existence and sequence of filings, while the filed orders determine what a court actually ruled.

After the harbor-payment report, a reader points to an old civil case involving Dock Heritage Works LLC. The fictional docket DOCK-01 includes a complaint by a subcontractor, a motion to dismiss and an order granting an extension. A newsletter calls this a finding of fraud. The docket entry has no such finding.

The investigator must retrieve the underlying order, test whether the filing concerns the same legal entity, and distinguish the plaintiff's description from the court's own action. The case might be relevant to vendor history. Its mere presence cannot decide the Harbor Board payment question.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: DOCKET
>
> A chronological index of filings and court activity. Individual entries can refer to documents that must be read before a substantive ruling is described.

How to approach the question

01 **Locate the exact docket**

Search party plus jurisdiction, then preserve the court and case number.

02 **Open the original document**

Retrieve the complaint or order by docket entry and filing date.

03 **Identify the speaker**

Label party assertions separately from judicial findings.

04 **Review subsequent entries**

Check amended filings, orders, appeal activity and final disposition.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

DOCK-01 / Simulated docket index

Case	Entry	Document	Status
26-CV-117	**No. 18**	**Time order**	**No merits ruling**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

CASE NUMBER

Capture court, division, case number and the correct parties.

ENTRY NUMBER

Docket entry 18 is an index reference. Inspect its linked order.

RULING SCOPE

An extension of time is a procedural act; the record contains no fraud finding.

> **COMMON TRAP**
>
> A complaint alleges; a docket indexes; an order decides the issue it actually addresses. Court filing existence does not prove the truth of a party's claim.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
DOCK-01	Fictional civil docket	Complaint and extension order; no merits finding.
EX-02	Board minutes	Conditional $48,000 authorization.
REC-01	Treasury reconciliation	Separate $18,000 settlement in the harbor case.

CHAPTER 09 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The proper note is: "A simulated subcontract dispute was filed against an entity named Dock Heritage Works LLC. The retrieved docket lists an extension order and does not contain a judicial finding of fraud." Even a later adverse judgment would require its exact holding, parties and period to be considered before relating it to the Harbor Board contract.

1. Case locator

Record court, year, case number and docket entry.

09.1

2. Speaker

Distinguish the complaint's claims from the court's action.

09.2

3. Original order

Identify which filed item you must read before writing about the decision.

09.3

4. Identity test

Describe how to match the legal party to the harbor vendor.

09.4

5. Bounded sentence

Write a source-faithful summary with its limit.

09.5

Related Field System templates: 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 05-01 Entity disambiguation grid; 02-01 Atomic claim card

Open a real source: PACER find a case

CHAPTER 10 / READ THE SEC FILE

A familiar investor name appears in a filing

A filing may identify executives, shareholders, subsidiaries or risk disclosures, but the form, reporting date and issuer determine what that information establishes.

A fictional search for the harbor vendor returns an SEC filing for similarly named Dock Heritage Holdings Inc. The filing names a board member with the same surname as someone quoted in a harbor newsletter. A social post claims the investment company owns the municipal vendor.

In SEC-01, the table describes a different issuer's historical investment in a logistics affiliate, and no filing in the packet establishes ownership of Dock Heritage Works LLC. The safe route is to identify the filer by CIK, inspect the filing cover and exhibits, trace any subsidiary schedule and match actual legal identifiers.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: CIK
>
> The Central Index Key assigned by the SEC to a filer. It identifies a filer within EDGAR, not every similarly named private company.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

SEC-01 / Simulated filing excerpt

Filer key	Form	Period	Affiliate
CIK 000XXXX1	**10-K**	**2024**	**Harbor Logistics**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

FILER KEY

A mocked identifier is included for training and cannot be searched.

FORM AND PERIOD

Annual disclosures are tied to an issuer and fiscal period.

AFFILIATE NAME

The excerpt does not identify Dock Heritage Works LLC as a subsidiary.

Follow this research route

01 **Use EDGAR search**

Search exact name and possible earlier names; compare candidate CIKs.

02 **Open the filing record**

Record accession number, form, accepted date and reporting period.

03 **Locate the relevant section**

Read subsidiaries or related-party disclosures with adjacent notes.

04 **Cross-check outside EDGAR**

Match the legal company in a secretary-of-state or contract register.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Ticker, trading name, surname, shared mailing address and similarly named affiliate are different identifiers. No one of them substitutes for a dated ownership record.

Watch the evidence change the claim

SEC-01: Names Harbor Logistics as an affiliate of a distinct filer. Simulated 10-K snippet

ID-01: Dock Heritage Works LLC has its own legal identifier. Fictional registry

REC-01: Names Works LLC as the actual recipient. Treasury settlement

CHAPTER 10 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE SEC-01 documents a disclosure by a fictional issuer about Harbor Logistics for a specified annual period. It does not name Dock Heritage Works LLC as a controlled entity and cannot independently link the investment company to the harbor transaction.

1. Exact filer

Preserve the full issuer, form, accession and CIK.

10.1

2. Entity match

Which field does not match Works LLC?

10.2

3. Claim

Write the social post's assertion as a testable statement.

10.3

4. Next record

Identify a direct ownership source.

10.4

5. Research note

Write what SEC-01 actually supports.

10.5

Related Field System templates: 05-01 Entity disambiguation grid; 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 09-03 Weakest-link detector

Open a real source: SEC Search Filings

CHAPTER 11 / PROCUREMENT RECORDS

Which contract did the government sign?

A procurement portal shows a large ceiling price. The actual executed agreement has milestones and amendments that narrow the financial statement.

The Harbor Board procurement portal contains a fictional announcement for an archive restoration contract with a ceiling of $48,000. A vendor invoice for $18,000 appears nearby, and a revised scope estimates additional preservation work. The date of the scope estimate is later than the payment journal.

PROC-01 is a notice, not a signed agreement. PROC-02 is an executed agreement requiring inspection milestones. PROC-03 is an unsigned draft change order. The presence of the unsigned document cannot increase a verified contract value or prove more money was paid.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: CHANGE ORDER
> A document proposing or recording a modification to an agreement. Its effect depends on authorization, execution and the contract's rules.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

PROC-02 / Simulated agreement

Contract	Ceiling	Trigger	Executed
HB-DA17	**$48,000**	**Inspection**	**May 12**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

CONTRACT ID

The identifier should recur on invoices and change orders.

CEILING

Maximum permissible amount differs from certified work and amount paid.

EXECUTION

A signature date affects whether a particular version took effect.

Follow this research route

01 **Find the awarded vendor**

Use procurement ID, title, date and entity identifier.

02 **Retrieve signed terms**

Locate signature blocks, attachments and payment milestones.

03 **Trace modifications**

Check change-order approval signatures and effective date.

04 **Match disbursement**

Reconcile invoice number, contract, payee and journal transaction.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Procurement portals mix proposed, authorized and performed amounts. The highest total shown on a portal may be a ceiling rather than actual expenditure.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
PROC-01	Award notice	Advertises contract ceiling; no disbursement.
PROC-02	Executed contract	Conditions tied to approved work and inspection.
PROC-03	Unsigned draft change	Proposes an additional task; not shown in force.

CHAPTER 11 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The fictional vendor held an executed agreement with a $48,000 ceiling. The record includes an unsigned proposed change order, which is not evidence that the ceiling rose or the government paid the proposed extra work.

1. Contract key

Record the signed agreement number and parties.

11.1

2. Version

Which instrument is unsigned?

11.2

3. Payment join

Which fields join an invoice to a treasury transaction?

11.3

4. Limit

What can the award notice not prove?

11.4

5. Follow-up

Specify the executed amendment or completion certificate needed.

11.5

Related Field System templates: 06-01 Payment lifecycle ledger; 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 02-10 Claim language precision

Open a real source: USAspending data

CHAPTER 12 / MAP THE RIGHT PLACE

Is the address a location or a mailing line?

A company address connects to a parcel map in an online summary, but the original registry shows a registered agent and the building is leased by several tenants.

A fictional reader sends a screenshot of a parcel near the dock and claims the vendor owns it. The property tax file PAR-01 names the city as landowner. The vendor registry ID-01 lists a mailing address elsewhere and identifies a commercial registered agent.

A matching street or city does not demonstrate common ownership. Parcel boundaries, recording dates, legal descriptions and taxpayer names need to be checked in their issuing systems. The project location is the archive site; the payee's registered office can be somewhere else.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: PARCEL IDENTIFIER
>
> A jurisdiction-specific key used to describe a unit of land in a property tax or cadastral system. It does not identify every occupant or business at the address.

How to approach the question

01 **Resolve the actual location**
Find coordinates or parcel number from the issuing authority.

02 **Check jurisdiction and year**
Identify assessor, recorder, zoning authority and current tax year.

03 **Inspect ownership history**
Open deeds or instruments and verify transfer recording dates.

04 **Separate relationships**
List landowner, tenant, registered agent and contractor as distinct roles.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

PAR-01 / Simulated assessor row

Parcel	Situs	Owner	Tax year
017-004	**Pier 7**	**City of Harbor**	**2025**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

SITUS

The physical property address is distinct from mailing address.

OWNER FIELD

The tax roll lists a municipality at its reporting date.

VENDOR STATUS

The registry still identifies Works LLC as the contractor, not as parcel owner.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Map pins often collapse parcel, mailing and service addresses. Treat them as separate entities before drawing geographic or financial connections.

Watch the evidence change the claim

PAR-01: Lists city as parcel owner for tax year 2025. Property tax roll

ID-01: Lists a separate business mailing address and agent. Vendor registry

PROC-02: Names the archive project site as place of work. Government contract

CHAPTER 12 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The municipality is the recorded owner of parcel 017-004 in the simulated 2025 roll. Dock Heritage Works LLC is a vendor contracted to work at that site.

1. Parcel

Record key, situs, jurisdiction and tax year.

12.1

2. Roles

Write one record for each entity's role.

12.2

3. Deed

What would prove a sale to the vendor?

12.3

4. Timeline

Why must the recording date be saved?

12.4

5. Public note

Write the property finding without asserting occupancy.

12.5

Related Field System templates: 05-01 Entity disambiguation grid; 04-07 Publication vs occurrence clock; 03-01 Acquisition receipt

Open a real source: USGS National Map

CHAPTER 13 / TRANSPORT AND MOVEMENT

Did that vehicle carry the people named online?

A vessel or flight track can document recorded movement without establishing who traveled, why they traveled, or who authorized a trip.

A later fictional blog claims the harbor vendor moved an official to an inspection meeting aboard a private aircraft. The screenshot MOV-01 shows a flight tracking symbol arriving at the nearest airport on May 16. The registration extract MOV-02 identifies an aircraft operator, but no passenger manifest is in the packet.

Arrival near an event is a location lead. It does not establish the identity of a traveler, attendance at the inspection, or an operational connection to the harbor contract. The investigator needs to confirm aircraft or vessel identity, reporting gaps and the source of any manifest.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: MOVEMENT OBSERVATION
>
> A position or movement recorded by a particular service or sensor. Coverage gaps, timestamp zones and device identifiers may affect its meaning.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

MOV-01 / Simulated flight log

Tail	Date	Destination	Passengers
N-TRN1	**May 16**	**Near Harbor**	**Not listed**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

TAIL OR IMO

Vehicle-specific keys must match the relevant registry.

LOCAL TIME

Convert timestamps only when their original time zone is known.

PASSENGER FIELD

Absent from the simulated tracking extract, so travelers cannot be named.

Follow this research route

01 **Determine the vehicle key**

Inspect registration or vessel identity, including historical changes.

02 **Trace original movement data**

Preserve source, timestamp, coverage and location precision.

03 **Seek independent participation records**

Compare itinerary, attendance, invoice and authenticated manifests.

04 **Record the limit**

Avoid inferring motive, owner direction or passenger identity from route alone.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Transport maps encourage false person-level inference. An aircraft or ship is an observed object; its passenger list and purpose must be established separately.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
MOV-01	Simulated movement log	Vehicle observed near airport on May 16.
MOV-02	Registry extract	Identifies an operator; no passenger list.
EX-05	Inspection invitation	Invites participants but does not confirm attendance.

CHAPTER 13 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The fictional movement record places a vehicle near Harbor on May 16, and the inspection invitation sets a meeting for that day. The packet has no authenticated record connecting a named person to the vehicle or establishing that an inspection took place.

1. Vehicle key

Identify the distinguishing registration or vessel number.

13.1

2. Timestamp

Record source time and conversion details.

13.2

3. Participant

What source could show a passenger?

13.3

4. Coverage

Describe data gaps or location error.

13.4

5. Bounded note

Write the most the two records support.

13.5

Related Field System templates: 05-01 Entity disambiguation grid; 04-07 Publication vs occurrence clock; 09-03 Weakest-link detector

Open a real source: FAA aircraft inquiry

CHAPTER 14 / UPSTREAM FUNDING

Can a grant be traced through a network?

A donor report, nonprofit filing and media invoice may describe different money streams. Cross-organization influence requires independently supported ties.

The fictional Harbor Heritage Fund lists a $15,000 program grant for archival access. A political committee separately paid $4,500 for advertisements mentioning the Harbor Board. An online diagram places both figures beneath one large donor name despite there being no common transaction identifier.

NET-01 contains the fund's grant purpose and year; ADV-01 contains the committee's media disbursement. Both may describe activity related to the harbor, but the current records do not establish a transfer from the nonprofit to the committee, a coordinated campaign or direction of coverage.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: RESTRICTED GRANT
> A funding award designated for a specified purpose. Grant conditions and reporting obligations must be read to determine what restriction or control the award actually imposes.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

NET-01 / Simulated grant schedule

Grantor	Recipient	Amount	Purpose
Heritage Fund	**Archive Circle**	**$15,000**	**Access program**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

YEAR

The tax or donor-reporting period must be stated.

RECIPIENT

Do not join Archive Circle to Works LLC by the shared word "archive".

PURPOSE

Program support is not an instruction to a political advertiser.

Follow this research route

01 **Build one organization per node**

Record EIN, committee ID or official registration key where applicable.

02 **Verify each money edge**

Require dated payer, payee, amount and source document.

03 **Test indirect links**

Read conditions, contracts and reported activities before mapping influence.

04 **Review editorial evidence independently**

Financial support alone does not establish an editor's instructions or decision.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A broad political or cultural affiliation is not a transaction. Do not infer shared control, coordinated messaging or criminal behavior from donor identity, community identity or an adjacent diagram.

Watch the evidence change the claim

NET-01: An access-program grant to Archive Circle. Fictional fund grant

ADV-01: A media purchase by a different payer. Political committee filing

REC-01: Payment to Works LLC, separate from both. Government reconciliation

CHAPTER 14 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The case contains three independently recorded financial events with different payers and recipients. The similarity of public messaging does not establish a transfer among the three entities.

1. Entity nodes

List all legal persons and their stable keys.

14.1

2. Transaction edge

Preserve the exact payer, payee, amount and date.

14.2

3. Unsupported join

Name the proposed link with no supporting original document.

14.3

4. Control test

What would directly show editorial instructions?

14.4

5. Public graph

Describe which arrows can be displayed as verified.

14.5

Related Field System templates: 06-07 Foundation grant trace; 06-08 PAC / vendor spend route; 05-10 Network false-positive review

Open a real source: IRS Form 990

CHAPTER 15 / HISTORICAL MEDIA

Which version of the news story came first?

Archived newspapers, syndicated stories and later reproductions can make one statement look like many independent reports.

An archive search finds four copies of an old harbor-history article, each repeating the same account of the former pier. NEWS-01 is a scan of the earliest issue; NEWS-02 is an apparent wire copy and NEWS-03 is an online reprint. None is a direct contemporary public ledger for the restoration grant.

The investigator can use each clipping to reconstruct public language and search terms, but should not count derivative versions as independent verification of a transaction. Article dates and issue dates should be checked against the scan, and OCR transcription errors against the printed page.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: SYNDICATION
>
> Reuse or distribution of an article by other publications. Repetition expands reach without necessarily adding independent reporting.

How to approach the question

01 **Find the earliest issue**
Search title, unique quotation, publisher and narrow dates.

02 **Open the page image**
Check masthead, edition, page and line breaks against OCR.

03 **Group derivative articles**
Compare exact language and citations to a common original.

04 **Test original records**
Use meeting minutes and the treasury ledger for the underlying transaction.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

NEWS-01 / Simulated clipping index

Publication	Issue date	Page	Evidence
Harbor News	**May 11**	**A4**	**Board quotation**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

ISSUE AND PAGE

These locators let someone reopen the actual scan.

OCR

Machine text can omit negation or alter numerals; inspect the page image.

ATTRIBUTION

The article quotes board minutes and is derivative for the spending claim.

> **COMMON TRAP**
>
> OCR search snippets can drop negatives, punctuation and column boundaries. Images of original pages are needed to resolve ambiguous quotations and amounts.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
NEWS-01	Fictional dated newspaper scan	Reports board approval, citing minutes.
NEWS-02	Simulated wire copy	Repeats the initial story.
EX-04	Treasury extract	Independent reporting of zero disbursed through May 21.

CHAPTER 15 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE NEWS-01 can demonstrate how the fictional approval was reported on May 11. NEWS-02 cannot serve as an independent confirmation if it reproduces the same underlying description.

1. Earliest issue

Record publication, date, edition and page.

15.1

2. Ocr check

Flag a phrase that needs inspection against the scan.

15.2

3. Source family

Which items repeat the same account?

15.3

4. Primary test

Which record answers the financial claim directly?

15.4

5. Citation

Prepare a page-level source locator.

15.5

Related Field System templates: 02-04 Independence challenge; 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 04-07 Publication vs occurrence clock

Open a real source: Chronicling America research

CHAPTER 16 / SOFTWARE AND REVISIONS

Who changed the public document?

A repository commit reveals a text change, but an author field and a timestamp do not automatically identify the human responsible or establish why the change was made.

The fictitious Harbor Board website posts a machine-readable project status file. A mirrored copy appears in a public code repository. CODE-01 records a commit changing "approved" to "funds released" in a local content file. A commenter claims the board chair personally changed the site.

The commit proves what changed in that repository snapshot. The author metadata is a contributor identity string that might differ from the authenticated account or the government publishing workflow. The investigator needs the original repository, commit hash, file path, deployment records and source-chain evidence before tying a change to an individual.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: COMMIT HASH
>
> A content-addressed identifier for a particular repository state or change. It helps reproduce an observed diff but does not authenticate a contributor's real-world identity.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

CODE-01 / Simulated repository diff

Repo	Commit	Path	Change
harbor/site	**a1b2-c3**	**status.json**	**approved > released**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

REPOSITORY

Determine whether the project is official, mirrored or a third-party fork.

COMMIT

Record the complete immutable hash from an actual host.

DEPLOYMENT

A commit does not prove that code was deployed to the live website.

Follow this research route

01 **Find the authoritative repository**
Verify organizational control and any forks or mirrors.

02 **Open history for the exact path**
Use commit view and blame only as leads to a change.

03 **Record old and new bytes**
Save the full diff, parents, hash and repository URL.

04 **Compare the live page**
Check release or deploy logs and contemporary captures.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A Git author string is user-supplied metadata; a commit in a fork is not automatically a change to an official site. Do not infer authorship or intent from one field.

Watch the evidence change the claim

CODE-01: Changes wording in a repository content file. Simulated file history

ARCH-01: Preserves a previous page observation. Archive capture

REC-01: Separately shows an $18,000 settlement. Treasury reconciliation

CHAPTER 16 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE CODE-01 documents a change in a simulated repository version of a status file. It does not identify the real-world author or establish that the new text reached the live site.

1. Path receipt

Preserve owner, repo, path, branch and full hash.

16.1

2. Source authority

Is the repository official, copied or unknown?

16.2

3. Diff

Record the exact changed words and their context.

16.3

4. Deployment check

What proves the change appeared publicly?

16.4

5. Boundary

Write a sentence that does not guess the editor.

16.5

Related Field System templates: 03-04 Web capture record; 08-09 Document version reconciliation; 02-08 Source identity uncertainty

Open a real source: GitHub code search guide

CHAPTER 17 / WEB INFRASTRUCTURE

What does a shared web server establish?

A domain lookup, historical crawl and script fingerprint can locate forgotten pages. Shared hosting and matching code may have innocent explanations.

The fictional vendor operates a project information page. An archive index includes an older host, and an unrelated nonprofit site contains the same third-party analytics script. INFRA-01 lists the two hostnames and an old crawl timestamp. A social graphic labels this an "ownership network."

A shared script can reflect ordinary site templates or common vendors. A historical DNS record can show an observed technical configuration at a point in time. It cannot identify a beneficial owner. A useful research trail combines archived page content, authoritative organizational disclosures and stable legal identity.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: CRAWL OBSERVATION
> An indexed observation of a page or host collected by a crawler at a specific time. Absence or presence depends on crawling coverage.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

INFRA-01 / Simulated crawl row

Host	Date	Script	Owner
archive.test	**2025-05-01**	**A-123**	**Unverified**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

HOST

A URL host is distinct from the legal organization that operates it.

CRAWL DATE

Observation date may be later than the page's creation.

SCRIPT KEY

A widely used tag cannot establish common ownership.

Follow this research route

01 **Capture the current URL**

Save hostname, path, protocol and an accessed snapshot.

02 **Locate historical appearances**

Use Common Crawl, Wayback and text-search services for dated clues.

03 **Inspect third-party code**

Determine whether a shared identifier is unique or a common library.

04 **Require an organizational join**

Verify legal identity in public registries or firsthand statements.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Shared IP addresses, content-management themes and analytics libraries can serve many unrelated customers. A search hit is an entry point, not a corporate-ownership conclusion.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
INFRA-01	Simulated crawl extract	Two hosts share a common analytics script.
ID-01	Vendor registry	Identifies the legal contractor.
NET-01	Grant schedule	Names a separately registered recipient.

CHAPTER 17 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE INFRA-01 supports a limited observation about shared website code. Its data neither identifies the same proprietor nor proves financial coordination.

1. Crawl receipt

Record host, URL path, date and archive ID.

17.1

2. Technical link

Describe exactly what the two sites share.

17.2

3. Alternative

State a plausible shared-hosting explanation.

17.3

4. Identity

Which document would directly identify the operator?

17.4

5. Public wording

Write a bounded technical relationship.

17.5

Related Field System templates: 03-04 Web capture record; 05-10 Network false-positive review; 02-08 Source identity uncertainty

Open a real source: Common Crawl

CHAPTER 18 / PHOTO AND VIDEO EVIDENCE

Is that photograph from the inspection?

An image in a community post is said to show completion of the harbor work. Cropping, reposting and metadata loss complicate that claim.

A fictional image IMG-01 shows scaffolding beside a stone warehouse. The caption says it depicts the May 16 harbor inspection. The image file has no usable camera timestamp; an earlier crop IMG-02 appears in a local history gallery without an inspection label.

The visual may be of a similar building. Neither source yet proves its date, exact location or that any official attended. Inspect the unedited file, search for earlier publication and compare fixed architectural features with independently dated imagery. Record what remains unresolved.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: IMAGE PROVENANCE
> The traceable origin, transformations and handling of an image, including the earliest known publication and relevant file metadata.

How to approach the question

01 **Preserve the file**
Save original bytes where lawfully available, hash, source URL and retrieval time.

02 **Find earlier versions**
Compare reverse-image leads with archived publication history.

03 **Check location clues**
Assess buildings, horizon, signage and geolocation with dated maps.

04 **Limit event claims**
Require a time-consistent independent record for participants and activities.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

IMG-01 / Simulated media receipt

Filename	Upload	EXIF	Source
dock-crop.jpg	**May 25**	**Missing**	**Community post**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

UPLOAD DATE

The hosting timestamp documents publication, not exposure.

EXIF

Metadata can be absent, changed or stripped by the platform.

SCENE MATCH

Look for architectural features and independent views, not captions alone.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Metadata and reverse-image search results are evidence of their own origin and coverage. An image appearing earlier on the web may be copied from an even earlier offline source.

Watch the evidence change the claim

IMG-01: Scaffolding photo with May 25 upload claim. Simulated cropped image

IMG-02: Same scene without verified inspection timing. Older gallery version

EX-05: Meeting invitation, not proof it happened. Inspection invitation

CHAPTER 18 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The packet includes an image of a warehouse-like scene reused with differing captions. It does not establish a May 16 inspection or identify any participant.

1. Original file

Record URL, bytes or hash and acquisition date.

18.1

2. Earliest lead

Which source displays the earlier use?

18.2

3. Location

Identify one independent geolocation clue.

18.3

4. Date

What could establish the image capture date?

18.4

5. Public label

Write a caption that preserves uncertainty.

18.5

Related Field System templates: 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 04-07 Publication vs occurrence clock; 02-01 Atomic claim card

Open a real source: Library of Congress digital preservation

CHAPTER 19 / LEAKS AND DOCUMENT CORPORA

A leaked document names the project. Is it authentic?

Searchable document archives can reveal hidden context. The investigator must authenticate origin and avoid exposing unrelated personal data.

A fictional anonymous upload, LEAK-01, reproduces what looks like a spreadsheet of municipal project identifiers. Row DA-17 includes the phrase "photo package." A forum claims this proves suppression of inspection images. The scan has neither a complete header nor a traceable publisher.

A cropped spreadsheet can be a useful lead. It does not identify who wrote the entry, whether it reflects an official workflow, or whether a named file existed. Search for the original agency record, compare nearby rows and document versions, and treat private contact details in the file as protected.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: AUTHENTICATION
>
> The process of establishing a document's nature, origin and reliability for the particular claim being tested. A file's presence in a database is not automatic proof.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

LEAK-01 / Simulated spreadsheet crop

Row	Project	Description	Signer
208	**DA-17**	**Photo package**	**Absent**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

CROPPED HEADER

Missing columns can change what the row means.

PROJECT KEY

DA-17 aligns with a known training project but cannot prove authenticity.

AUTHORSHIP

Without provenance, the file must remain an unverified lead.

Follow this research route

01 Record the collection

Preserve archive name, submission history if available, file ID and access date.

02 Check the actual bytes

Inspect original format, hashes, metadata, neighboring pages and revisions.

03 Find independent confirmation

Compare to authenticated agency records and response logs.

04 Protect unrelated people

Exclude credentials, addresses and identifying details of vulnerable persons from examples and publication.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> Mirrors of one leaked dataset do not create independent corroboration. Never publish passwords, private health records or unrelated personal material to demonstrate a technique.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
LEAK-01	Simulated screenshot	A cropped reference to "photo package" with no issuer.
EX-06	Agency routing memo	Photographs were requested for review.
REQ-01	Records request	A narrow request to the relevant government office.

CHAPTER 19 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE EX-06 already establishes that inspection photographs were sought in the fictional workflow. LEAK-01 adds no authenticated proof about who created a package or whether files were removed.

1. Collection receipt

Record where and when the lead was found.

19.1

2. Authentication

List two origin checks still missing.

19.2

3. Mirror test

How will you identify duplicate copies?

19.3

4. Privacy

What material must remain unpublished?

19.4

5. Record request

Define the original source to obtain next.

19.5

Related Field System templates: 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 02-04 Independence challenge; 02-08 Source identity uncertainty

Open a real source: DocumentCloud

CHAPTER 20 / RECONCILE LARGE DATASETS

Why did a name-match spreadsheet create a false network?

Large investigative tables introduce duplication, mixed identifiers and incompatible reporting periods. A defensible join needs reproducible keys.

The fictional investigation imports 240 rows from a contract ledger, grant table and media report. A quick spreadsheet join on the word "Heritage" appears to connect the vendor, a nonprofit grant recipient and a political committee. REVIEW-01 records four ambiguous name matches.

A better matrix separates entity master records from events. Each event records an issuing system, origin-family key, amount and period; relationships are accepted only after entity resolution. Names with shared words become candidate matches for review. The false-positive log must show why a tempting link was rejected.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: JOIN KEY
> A field used to match records across datasets, such as an official registration number. A name string is usually weaker than a stable system-specific identifier.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

REVIEW-01 / Simulated matching table

Rows	Proposed join	Stable keys	Decision
240	**Heritage**	**Different IDs**	**Reject**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

RAW COUNT

240 is a row count, not 240 independent sources.

KEY COLLISION

Shared terms do not make entities identical.

REJECTION LOG

Preserve why a link failed; avoid rematching the same false positive.

Follow this research route

01 **Keep raw exports intact**

Hash or preserve exact original files with export filters and time.

02 **Normalize into event tables**

Separate legal entity, transaction, date and source families.

03 **Propose candidate joins**

Use IDs first; names only as a flagged fallback.

04 **Review and document decisions**

Record accepted, rejected and unresolved links with supporting evidence.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A large relationship graphic can conceal a weak join. Count unique source families, verified events and unresolved matches independently; never count a shared name as a transfer.

Watch the evidence change the claim

REVIEW-01: Four apparent name matches have conflicting keys. Fictional join audit

ID-01: Stable Works LLC identifier. Vendor registry

NET-01: Archive Circle is a distinct registered recipient. Nonprofit return

CHAPTER 20 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE A join on the token "Heritage" incorrectly collapses different organizations. When issuer-specific IDs and dated legal records are added, the proposed relation fails.

1. Raw data

Record all export sources and filters.

20.1

2. Schema

Specify the entity and event fields needed.

20.2

3. Bad join

Describe the rejected name-key relation.

20.3

4. Review decision

Show which original records settle it.

20.4

5. Quality check

Write a reproducible join acceptance rule.

20.5

Related Field System templates: 05-10 Network false-positive review; 06-01 Payment lifecycle ledger; 09-03 Weakest-link detector

Open a real source: ICIJ Offshore Leaks

CHAPTER 21 / PROTECT THE INQUIRY

What should never enter the public evidence pack?

An investigation can be reproducible while still protecting sources and unrelated individuals.

The fictional Harbor Board investigator receives a response containing a public contract, contact information for staff and an unnecessary personal attachment. The public evidence pack needs the contract and source receipt, but not unrelated addresses or private communications.

The investigator should document that excluded material exists, control who can access it and preserve the original only in a suitably restricted workspace if lawful and necessary. Public copies should be reviewed for true redaction rather than simply covered with black shapes. Privacy and source-protection choices should appear in the audit log.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: DATA MINIMIZATION
> Collecting, retaining and publishing only information reasonably necessary for a defined investigative purpose.

How to approach the question

01 Classify evidence
Separate publishable, restricted, privileged and unnecessary information.

02 Limit local access
Protect devices, backups, credentials and document shares appropriate to risk.

03 Redact technically
Remove underlying text, metadata and hidden layers in the public copy.

04 Record release decisions
Identify reviewer, date, justification and the safe public artifact.

The document you need to read

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

SAFE-01 / Simulated disclosure review

Document	Public fact	Private data	Action
Agreement	**Contract terms**	**Home address**	**Redact copy**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

PUBLIC FACT

Contract value and signature authority may be relevant.

PRIVATE DATA

A personal home address does not answer the payment question.

REDUCTION

Keep an auditable restricted original and validate the published redaction.

> **COMMON TRAP**
>
> A drawn black rectangle over a PDF is not necessarily a redaction. Hidden text, attachment streams and document metadata can remain recoverable.

Watch the evidence change the claim

Exhibit	Where it came from	What it shows
SAFE-01	Fictional release review	Private address excluded from public copy.
PROC-02	Executed contract	Pertinent procurement terms remain usable.
REC-01	Financial reconciliation	Relevant nonpersonal payment detail supports conclusion.

CHAPTER 21 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE The public packet can present procurement clauses and the $18,000 settlement without including staff members' unrelated personal addresses. The complete, legitimately held originals stay in a restricted archive with access and retention rules.

1. Relevance

Identify which fields support the published finding.

21.1

2. Private content

List information unnecessary to the story.

21.2

3. Access

State who needs access to the original.

21.3

4. Redaction test

Explain how the public copy will be validated.

21.4

5. Decision log

Write the publication decision and reason.

21.5

Related Field System templates: 03-01 Acquisition receipt; 11-01 Evidence-to-paragraph map; 02-08 Source identity uncertainty

Open a real source: CPJ safety resources

CHAPTER 22 / BUILD THE FINAL DOSSIER

Can another investigator reproduce the result?

The completed Harbor Board case has a verified transaction and several tempting false connections. The capstone asks readers to assemble a documented publication decision.

Return to the originating assertion that the Harbor Board "released $48,000" for restoration. The reconstructed fictional record now contains a conditional authorization, a later $18,000 payment issued and cleared, a named legal recipient, an unrelated grant, an advertising purchase and several unsupported links.

A reader must assemble a report that names which transaction occurred, when each record was valid and which tempting explanations failed. The final work product contains an exhibit index, source family list, claims tied to documents and a redaction check. It must remain understandable to a reader who never saw the course.

> IN PLAIN ENGLISH: REPRODUCIBILITY
> The ability of a separate researcher to follow documented source locations, transformations and reasoning to check a specific finding.

What the original record actually contains

READING THE RECORD / LABELED FICTIONAL EXHIBIT

CAP-01 / Simulated publication register

Claim	Supporting IDs	Period	Decision
$18k cleared	**REC-01 + 02**	**June 3**	**Publish**

Practice reconstruction from the fictional Harbor Board file. This is not an authentic government extract or an independently authenticated document.

CLAIM

A single sentence must identify actor, amount, act and cutoff.

SUPPORT

Link every material fact to a record and exact field.

REVIEW

Include known limits and rejected alternative joins.

Follow this research route

01 **Index the originals**

Identify each exhibit, original custodian, preserved form and hash when appropriate.

02 **Test every published clause**

Mark primary support, derivative sources, uncertain identities and time limits.

03 **Conduct an adversarial review**

Write the strongest competing interpretation and the record that would change the finding.

04 **Release and correct responsibly**

Provide a stable version identifier, source notes, privacy review and correction path.

> COMMON TRAP
>
> A polished diagram or a long list of citations can hide an unsupported edge. The final publication must preserve the actual claim boundaries and separately identify unresolved research questions.

Watch the evidence change the claim

EX-02: Authorized up to $48,000 with conditions. Board decision

REC-01 / REC-02: $18,000 cleared May 27, with June 3 cutoff. Settlement and later extract

NET-01 / ADV-01: No proven payment edge to the contractor. Separate finance records

CHAPTER 22 / GUIDED PRACTICE

Your case notes

Use the annotated exhibit in this chapter. Record precise identifiers and dates, and explain any unresolved difference. A worked example appears directly below; your answers should use the same degree of specificity.

WORKED EXAMPLE In this fictional dossier, the board approved up to $48,000, and the financial records show an $18,000 payment to Dock Heritage Works LLC cleared May 27. A June 3 extract recorded $18,000 disbursed to date.

1. Source register

List the five essential exhibits with exact locators.

22.1

2. Atomic claims

Separate approval, issue, clearing and recipient.

22.2

3. Rejected links

Document at least two unsupported joins and why they fail.

22.3

4. Public paragraph

Write a paragraph with amount, date and cutoff.

22.4

5. Audit handoff

Identify version, reviewer, restrictions and correction process.

22.5

Related Field System templates: 11-01 Evidence-to-paragraph map; 02-10 Claim language precision; 09-03 Weakest-link detector

Open a real source: Follow the Files Source Trails

INSTRUCTOR AND READER REFERENCE

Worked answers for all 22 chapters

Compare the reasoning after you have completed the corresponding practice sheet. The examples are bounded to the fictional records and do not establish facts about real organizations.

Chapter 01: Did the board actually pay $48,000?

The testable question. Did the board disburse any of the authorized $48,000 for DA-17 through May 21, 2025?

Best direct evidence. EX-04, treasury extract line 208, project DA-17; disbursed-to-date is $0 for that reporting period.

Alternative explanation. Funds were authorized and reserved while inspection and contracting conditions remained open.

Appropriate next record. A later disbursement journal, payment warrant or reconciliation tied to DA-17 and the authorized vendor.

Watch for this error: Two articles repeating the minutes count as one underlying source for the vote. They are not independent proof of payment.

Use the real source: Use a municipal agenda and expenditure portal in your jurisdiction. Save the actual motion number and fiscal ledger entry. On the companion website, open the Source Trails and choose the public spending route.

Source Trails

Chapter 02: A later ledger changes the story

The version change. EX-04 recorded $0 through May 21. SUP-03 recorded $18,000 through May 24.

Source dependence. SUP-03 and SUP-04 were produced by the treasury workflow; neither is an independent settlement statement.

Reconciliation request. Ask for TX-219-A settlement or reversal entries and DA-17 payment journal items from May 22 onward.

Publication decision. Report the dated $18,000 issue and do not describe the full $48,000 authorization as paid.

Watch for this error: Subtracting the issued amount from the authorization gives $30,000 not shown as disbursed, not a debt, a missing transfer or an amount someone stole.

Use the real source: Find a public financial portal with dated exports. Open the same report for two distinct reporting periods, preserve both files and compute a SHA-256 checksum for each saved copy.

Source Trails

Chapter 03: Which Dock Heritage organization?

Confirmed match. ID-01 and ID-02 point to Works LLC using simulated key SIM-REG-411.

False positive. Works North uses SIM-REG-742; that distinct registration defeats a casual name match.

Unresolved question. An independently identifiable bank-clearing or recipient entry is still needed.

Real search method. Begin with the relevant state corporate registry. SEC EDGAR, IRS and FEC only cover their respective filing populations.

Watch for this error: A shared street address, familiar surname or similar logo may generate a research lead. None is by itself proof of common beneficial ownership.

Use the real source: Find a real public company filing through SEC EDGAR and locate its CIK and accession number. Compare it with the name on the filing, and do not use a missing SEC result as proof an ordinary LLC does not exist.

SEC CIK Lookup

IRS exempt organizations

Chapter 04: The page that changed after publication

What changed. The wording moves from conditional authorization to "funded and underway."

What remains unknown. Why the wording changed and whether attachments existed in the missing capture.

Next checks. Retrieve the original attached file URL separately and consult the clerk or project custodian.

Public formulation. Attribute the two descriptions and dates, rather than describing the change as concealment.

Watch for this error: A missing archived image can result from crawler limitations or site scripts. Do not label its absence as deletion without independent evidence.

Use the real source: Open an ordinary public webpage in the Wayback Machine, copy the full dated capture URL and test whether an attached PDF was independently saved. Record each retrieval result.

Internet Archive Wayback help

Chapter 05: Ask for the document that can settle it

Custodian. The financial records office responsible for payment clearing or reconciliation.

Useful scope. Entries for DA-17 and TX-219-A, including settlement, reversals and receipts, May 22-June 3.

Response logging. Preserve the request, agency response, search explanation and disposition, without converting the response into a motive.

Public position. The issue is documented by treasury records; independent bank settlement has not been established by the reviewed packet.

Watch for this error: A delayed answer or a properly supported records exemption is a disclosure event, not itself proof of payment misconduct.

Use the real source: Use the National Archives guide to practise specifying a record precisely. Confirm the agency jurisdiction first: federal FOIA does not govern state or local offices.

National Archives FOIA guide

FOIA jurisdiction limits

Chapter 06: A nonprofit filing raises a different question

Correct amount. TAX-01 says the Alliance reported a $6,000 grant to Harbor Education Fund for 2024.

Time mismatch. DA-17 issue concerns a different named vendor and 2025 transaction; the filing is not transaction evidence for it.

Follow-up. Seek the recipient organization filing or an original grant ledger for that precise grant.

Limit. Avoid treating a tax-exempt organization search result as an inventory of all private companies.

Watch for this error: A Form 990 total, Schedule I grant and vendor disbursement are different measures. Comparing the numbers without checking their reporting basis can create an imaginary transfer.

Use the real source: In IRS Tax Exempt Organization Search, open an actual filed Form 990 for a public charity. Record the EIN, tax year, Schedule I entries if present and explanatory notes.

IRS About Form 990

IRS Exempt Search

Chapter 07: A political ad borrows the same headline

Independent actors. Harbor Progress Committee is a simulated political spender; the Harbor Board is the government decision maker.

Media expenditure. ADV-01 records an ad payment, not a public treasury transfer to the archive vendor.

Ad verification. ADV-02 repeats $48,000 without proving full disbursement.

FEC method. In a real federal case, open a filed committee report, record committee ID, line item, amendment and filing period.

Watch for this error: An entity receiving a political-media payment has not thereby become controlled by the committee. A publicity relationship requires direct evidence before attribution.

Use the real source: Search an actual federal committee by its official ID on the FEC site. Open the filing behind an itemized disbursement and preserve the filing coverage period and amendments.

FEC report retrieval

FEC committee data

Chapter 08: The record that finally answers the question

Approval. EX-02 establishes up to $48,000 authorized, contingent on conditions.

Issue and clearing. SUP-04 shows TX-219-A issued; REC-01 later records clearing on May 27 to Works LLC.

Remaining balance. REC-02 shows $18,000 disbursed-to-date through June 3, not a permanent finding about future payments.

Editorial decision. Retain the source versions and date corrections; do not expand the recipient list beyond directly matched records.

Watch for this error: A verified $18,000 settlement cannot be stretched into proof that a $48,000 project was fully funded, that a different organization benefited, or that a later unreviewed payment never occurred.

Use the real source: Use the website Source Trails and the original offline Field System to enter every claim and its primary records. If you publish, provide stable locators and a visible correction method.

Source Trails

Chapter 09: A lawsuit is listed. What was decided?

Index. DOCK-01, 26-CV-117, entry 18 is the locator, not the full judicial text.

Holding. An extension is procedural. No adjudicated fraud finding is in the packet.

Identity. Cross-check legal name, jurisdiction, registry number and period, not a single surname.

Publication. Describe the docket and what was actually ordered without importing accusations.

Watch for this error: A complaint alleges; a docket indexes; an order decides the issue it actually addresses. Court filing existence does not prove the truth of a party's claim.

Use the real source: For a federal case, use PACER or the court's docket system, capture the case number, filing date, entry number, caption, docket record and actual order. Some records require fees or restricted access.

PACER find a case

CourtListener search

Chapter 10: A familiar investor name appears in a filing

Issuer. SEC-01 refers to a separate fictional reporting company.

Joining. The affiliate name does not join to the vendor's legal ID.

Better evidence. Obtain dated ownership or subsidiary disclosures tied to the exact legal entity.

Conclusion. The current file does not show the purported ownership relationship.

Watch for this error: Ticker, trading name, surname, shared mailing address and similarly named affiliate are different identifiers. No one of them substitutes for a dated ownership record.

Use the real source: Use SEC EDGAR full-text search for names and phrases, then open the filed document and its exhibits. Preserve the accession, filing type and period. Full-text search covers electronically submitted filings from 2001 onward.

SEC Search Filings

SEC full-text search FAQ

Chapter 11: Which contract did the government sign?

Contract. HB-DA17 is the simulated signed agreement.

Draft. PROC-03 lacks completed approval evidence.

Transfer. Use invoice ID, vendor registry and treasury transaction, not the award value.

Wording. A contract ceiling and a disbursed amount must be described separately.

Watch for this error: Procurement portals mix proposed, authorized and performed amounts. The highest total shown on a portal may be a ceiling rather than actual expenditure.

Use the real source: Find the relevant government procurement database for the jurisdiction, then open the signed agreement and amendments. Federal USAspending data and SAM can generate leads, but inspect originating award documents and modifications.

USAspending data

SAM.gov contract data

Chapter 12: Is the address a location or a mailing line?

Parcel. PAR-01 specifies parcel 017-004 and City of Harbor as 2025 owner.

Vendor. PROC-02 names the contractor performing work on the property.

Registered agent. ID-01 lists a contact for legal notice, not proof of land ownership.

Next proof. A verified deed or land-record instrument with parties and recorded date could change the result.

Watch for this error: Map pins often collapse parcel, mailing and service addresses. Treat them as separate entities before drawing geographic or financial connections.

Use the real source: Search the county assessor and recorder by actual parcel number, then inspect filed conveyance instruments and reporting year. Jurisdictions differ in public data availability and address formats.

USGS National Map

Federal data catalog

Chapter 13: Did that vehicle carry the people named online?

Identity. The simulated tail ID must be checked against the registry for the same date.

Movement. MOV-01 supplies a position, not a verified traveler.

Meeting. EX-05 is an invitation, not attendance.

Result. No person-level transport relationship can be stated from these exhibits.

Watch for this error: Transport maps encourage false person-level inference. An aircraft or ship is an observed object; its passenger list and purpose must be established separately.

Use the real source: Consult the official FAA aircraft inquiry, transportation registries or published port information where lawful. Tracking aggregators have coverage gaps; preserve the underlying record and original time zone.

FAA aircraft inquiry

US Bureau of Transportation Statistics

Chapter 14: Can a grant be traced through a network?

Three streams. NET-01 grant, ADV-01 advertising and REC-01 settlement are separate transactions.

Control. Neither a grant nor a media purchase alone proves editorial direction.

Join. The packet lacks an authenticated link between the nonprofit and the committee.

Chart. Draw only sourced edges as relationships; use a separate hypothesis register for the rest.

Watch for this error: A broad political or cultural affiliation is not a transaction. Do not infer shared control, coordinated messaging or criminal behavior from donor identity, community identity or an adjacent diagram.

Use the real source: Use IRS Form 990, FEC filings and state registries to verify organizational identity, reporting period and actual amounts. Treat umbrella brands and fiscal-sponsor programs as evidence questions, not a presumption of centralized direction.

IRS Form 990

FEC data

Chapter 15: Which version of the news story came first?

Chronology. NEWS-01 precedes a later wire version, as shown by the fictional issue date.

Dependence. Repeated copy is not independent financial proof.

Best original. The treasury source is separate from the newspaper family.

Citation. Preserve issue/date/page and the repository image link where available.

Watch for this error: OCR search snippets can drop negatives, punctuation and column boundaries. Images of original pages are needed to resolve ambiguous quotations and amounts.

Use the real source: Use Library of Congress Chronicling America for historical newspaper issues and catalog context. Its digitized newspaper collection extends through 1963; verify individual title coverage and scan details.

Chronicling America research

Library of Congress newspapers

Chapter 16: Who changed the public document?

Hash. Use the complete immutable commit ID; the abbreviated fictional hash is only a teaching locator.

Fork test. Confirm owner and source before attributing a change.

Delivery. A page capture or deploy record can show that text was published.

Conclusion. The repository change by itself cannot name the person responsible.

Watch for this error: A Git author string is user-supplied metadata; a commit in a fork is not automatically a change to an official site. Do not infer authorship or intent from one field.

Use the real source: Use GitHub code search, commit history, blame and release history; where needed check GitLab, Codeberg or Software Heritage mirrors. Capture repository, path and hash, and do not treat a mirrored copy as another witness.

GitHub code search guide

Software Heritage

Chapter 17: What does a shared web server establish?

Observation. The same script appears on two simulated hosts.

Alternative. Common third-party templates and analytics are plausible explanations.

Legal join. No source in the packet identifies common ownership.

Conclusion. Describe the script overlap as a technical observation only.

Watch for this error: Shared IP addresses, content-management themes and analytics libraries can serve many unrelated customers. A search hit is an entry point, not a corporate-ownership conclusion.

Use the real source: Use public Common Crawl indexes and historical captures to locate URLs, then validate each result against archived content. PublicWWW-style fingerprints are useful for leads; interpret common scripts conservatively.

Common Crawl

Internet Archive

Chapter 18: Is that photograph from the inspection?

Repost. IMG-02 appears without the later inspection caption.

No date proof. Upload and EXIF status do not show an exposure date.

Check. Seek an original file, contemporaneous photographer record and matching site features.

Publication. Caption the scene without identifying it as the May 16 inspection.

Watch for this error: Metadata and reverse-image search results are evidence of their own origin and coverage. An image appearing earlier on the web may be copied from an even earlier offline source.

Use the real source: Use reverse-image search and archival copies for provenance leads; compare to original media when available. Consult digital-image preservation guidance and avoid publishing private individuals' identifying details unnecessarily.

Library of Congress digital preservation

Google Fact Check Explorer

Chapter 19: A leaked document names the project. Is it authentic?

Origin. No issuer or full row context is established for LEAK-01.

Duplication. Copies with matching bytes or provenance are one source family.

Corroboration. EX-06 is authentic within the fictional case but supports only that photographs were requested.

Protection. Minimize personal information and obtain the relevant agency record lawfully.

Watch for this error: Mirrors of one leaked dataset do not create independent corroboration. Never publish passwords, private health records or unrelated personal material to demonstrate a technique.

Use the real source: Search DocumentCloud or lawful, public-interest document repositories, including historical leak indexes only when legal and privacy review permits. A discoverable document must still be independently authenticated.

DocumentCloud

OCCRP Aleph

Chapter 20: Why did a name-match spreadsheet create a false network?

Problem. Common words caused false positive name joining.

Stable IDs. ID-01 and NET-01 identify different legal parties.

Review log. Reject the cross-organization link and retain the rejected candidate for audit.

Repeatability. Preserve original files, identifiers, dates and decisions.

Watch for this error: A large relationship graphic can conceal a weak join. Count unique source families, verified events and unresolved matches independently; never count a shared name as a transfer.

Use the real source: Use ICIJ Offshore Leaks and OCCRP Aleph as search and comparison resources with explicit coverage limits. Neither index establishes wrongdoing or a financial relationship from one name match.

ICIJ Offshore Leaks

OCCRP Aleph

Chapter 21: What should never enter the public evidence pack?

Include. Source citation and public contract provisions needed for the claim.

Omit. Unrelated contact and personal details.

Security. Restrict access based on actual research need.

Proof. Inspect the redacted bytes, embedded layers and metadata before publication.

Watch for this error: A drawn black rectangle over a PDF is not necessarily a redaction. Hidden text, attachment streams and document metadata can remain recoverable.

Use the real source: Refer to the Committee to Protect Journalists safety resources and source-protection practice when defining a risk-specific workflow. No workbook can replace case-specific legal or safety advice.

CPJ safety resources

EFF surveillance self-defense

Chapter 22: Can another investigator reproduce the result?

Authorization. EX-02 establishes the ceiling, not an immediate payment.

Settlement. REC-01 establishes $18,000 cleared to the matched Works LLC party on May 27.

Cutoff. REC-02 sets the June 3 reporting horizon for $18,000 disbursed-to-date.

Independent review. All proposed new relationships still require their own primary evidence.

Watch for this error: A polished diagram or a long list of citations can hide an unsupported edge. The final publication must preserve the actual claim boundaries and separately identify unresolved research questions.

Use the real source: Complete the final review using the original Field System source register and claim-evidence matrices. Open the Follow the Files Source Trails for one independent practice record, then document which controls would apply before publication.

Follow the Files Source Trails

Follow the Files workbook

REFERENCE PAGES

How to keep your investigation usable

The minimum source receipt

For any document that enters the case file, record the issuing institution, original record title, its identifier, exact URL or repository locator, relevant page or row, publication and retrieval dates, the preservation method, and a sentence describing what the document establishes. Record the uncertainty separately.

When the source disappears

Retain the original locator and the capture date. Search official revisions and established web archives. Preserve the difference between the original publication date and the archive's capture date. If the gap cannot be resolved, report it as a gap.

When two names look alike

Identify a stable key from the original issuing system before joining records. Depending on the source, that may be a company registration, an EIN, a CIK, a parcel number or a docket number. A shared name, address, public affiliation or photograph remains a lead until independently matched.

When you are ready to publish

Require a citation for every material clause. Retain rejected interpretations in the private review log, check privacy and redactions, and establish a way to correct the published piece. Preserve the published version and any later correction separately.

Source systems and further reading

Public starting points include the Centre for Investigative Journalism's handbooks, SEC EDGAR, IRS Tax Exempt Organization Search, FEC reports, public court records, local government records, library and newspaper archives, the Internet Archive and other lawful research collections. Their coverage and data quality vary; a search result requires inspection of the original.

Centre for Investigative Journalism - tcij.org/handbooks

Follow the Files Research Directory

Follow the Files Source Trails

Private editorial proof: this publication has not replaced the public workbook. Check all external source coverage and accessibility before release.