

A Guide to the Proper Redaction of Documents

Introduction

Frequently, counsel must file redacted documents with the Court pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5.2, Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 49.1 or in accordance with a court order.

When sensitive information has been improperly redacted, the document can be manipulated to reveal the sensitive data (metadata).

This guide is intended to educate counsel about the problems that can arise when improper redaction methods are used.

Effective Ways to Eliminate Metadata

The most reliable way to omit metadata from electronic documents is to redact the content from the original document. For example, counsel could redact a Social Security Number to the last 4 digits, example: XXX-XX-0001.

The most reliable way to redact sensitive information from a PDF is to use PDF Redaction software.

The court does not endorse or provide expert information about proper redaction techniques, however, commercially-available software may be used to effectively redact, and not just hide, sensitive information in different document formats. Information about proper redaction techniques is available on the Internet and from documentation from commercial vendors.

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Warning about Common Redaction Methods

1. Changing the font color: Information is not redacted by changing the font color to white because the data can easily be exposed by highlighting the area by dragging and dropping with the computer mouse.
 2. Redacting a paper document: Do not use plain white paper to cover sensitive data when scanning a document. The scanner may still pick up images that show through the covering paper.
 3. Word processing programs: Word processing programs may retain metadata that was previously contained in the file, even data that was deleted or changed, and even if the file was re-saved. While this is a useful tool for tracking revisions, if this information is not purged from the document, anyone can view this information, even after it has been converted to PDF.
 4. Adobe Acrobat (the full version) has some graphic and "commenting" tools, which can blackout, cover over or remove sections of text. The data these tools use to "hide" information can be easily removed to reveal the text underneath.
 5. Using ink, semi-translucent tape or paper to cover sensitive information in a document before scanning it may not be completely effective. These methods may still reveal enough information for someone to infer the content of the redaction, especially if that same information is repeated a number of times throughout a document.
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