

Digital Redaction That Cannot Be Reversed

This guide explains why simple covering fails as digital redaction, outlining how real redaction works through burn-in and sanitisation. It covers verification, hard formats, and common mistakes, helping practitioners ensure redactions are permanent and auditable.

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DIGITAL REDACTION · A GUIDE FOR UK LAWYERS Digital Redaction That Cannot Be Reversed Why Black Rectangles Fail, How Real Redaction Works, and How to Verify It
COMPUTER FORENSICS LAB

§ ABOUT THE AUTHOR PREPARED BY COMPUTER FORENSICS LAB E-DISCOVERY TEAM
FAILED-REDACTION EXAM IN AT I ON CPR PART 35 EXPERT REPORT S FULL
CHAIN-OF-CUSTODY DOCUMENTATION

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§ 01 · ORIENTATION Executive summary THE HEADLINE POINT:
REDACTION IS REMOVAL OF DATA, NOT CONCEALMENT OF PIXELS: BURN IN, SANITISE,
VERIFY, AND KEEP THE AUDIT RECORD THAT PROVES ALL THREE

§ 02 · FIRST PRINCIPLES The problem in plain English: covering is not removing

§ 03 · THE HIDING PLACES Where content hides: text layers, metadata, embeds and revisions

§ 04 · THE PIPELINE How real redaction works: burn-in, s an it is at i on and the pipeline

§ 05 · THE HARD FORMATS The hard formats: spreadsheets, natives, images and media

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§ 08 · THE WIDER MAP Source architecture: where else the evidence lives WHERE THE
THREAD DMS / UNREDACTED CONTENT INSTANCES VERSIONS ORIGINALS ALSO
LIVES (GUIDE 83) (GUIDE 75) (RING) DUPLICATES BACKUPS / COUNTERPART
(GUIDE 82) ARCHIVES COPIES

§ 09 · IN THE WILD Worked examples EXAMPLE 1 · THE RECTANGLE THAT LIFTED OFF
EXAMPLE 2 · THE THREAD REDACTED IN ONE PLACE AND QUOTED IN ANOTHER EXAMPLE 3 ·

THESPREADSHEETTHATCOMPUTEDITSONSECRETS 88

§ 4 completed: spreadsheets are computation, not pages, and their redaction is an engineering task

§ 10 · WHEREITGOESWRONG Common mistakes and technical limitations Common mistakes
Technical limitations

§ 11 · INTERROGATORIES & DRAFTING AIDS Questions to ask · Suggested wording Ask
your client Ask your opponent Ask your e Discovery / forensic provider SUGGESTED
WORDING · REDACTION PARAGRAPHFORTHEDISCLOSUREPROTOCOL

§ 12 · QUICK CONTROL Checklist and red flags · When to involve a digital forensic expert The
redaction checklist Red flags When to involve a digital forensic expert

§ 13 · COMMON QUESTIONS Frequently asked questions We drew black boxes in our PDF tool.
Is that not redaction? Do we really need to worry about metadata on redacted documents? Can
we redact a spreadsheet by deleting the sensitive cells? The other side's redaction has failed
and we can read the content. Can we use it? Is blurring or pixelating text an acceptable
redaction? How do we prove our redactions are sound if challenged?

§ 14 · REFERENCE Glossary Sources and authoritative references DISCLAIMER

§ HOW A SPECIALIST LABORATORY CAN ASSIST Working with Computer Forensics Lab
Speak to a forensic examiner, not a salesperson. INSTRUCTTHELAB
NEWENQUIRIESEMAIL - DISCOVERY

Questions and answers

We drew black boxes in our PDF tool. Is that not redaction?

Almost certainly not: general-purpose markup draws over content and leaves it in the file: Example 1's lift-off is the standard demonstration. Redaction is the removal function of redaction-grade tooling, confirmed by the §6 tests: if select-and-copy over the region yields text, it is not redacted.

Do we really need to worry about metadata on redacted documents?

Yes: titles, authors, comments, tracked changes and embedded objects routinely carry exactly what the page-level redaction removed: guide 87's families are the redactor's threat list. The scan it is at i on pass is one command in proper tooling; its absence is one metadata dump from being a guide 92 incident.

Can we redact a spreadsheet by deleting the sensitive cells?

Not safely alone: dependents recompute, caches retain, hidden sheets persist: Example 3's trio: so native spreadsheet redaction is a dependency-audited engineering task (values converted, caches purged, hidden content reviewed, the operation logged), or the affected sheets are imaged for cause under guide 88 §6. The page intuition is the error; the file is a computation.

The other side's redaction has failed and we can read the content. Can we use it?

Treat it as guide 92 §5 treats any privileged arrival: stop, quarantine, notify: CPR 31.20's logic and professional-conduct duties reach content obtained through a redaction's failure, and deliberate mining converts an opponent's error into your own conduct problem. Contested redactions are challenged through §7's machinery: the court can look behind the ink; you should not.

Is blurring or pixelating text an acceptable redaction?

No: obfuscation preserves information that reconstruction techniques increasingly recover, and the protocol wording of §11 excludes it by name: image-region redaction means solid replacement with sanitised output. The visual softness that makes blurring feel gentler is precisely the data it leaves behind.

How do we prove our redactions are sound if challenged?

From the records this guide has you keep: the tooling and pipeline description, the scan it is at i on coverage, the verification log with its per-document or sampled results, the preserved originals available under ring terms: the challenge met with files, per the series' standing principle. A sound redaction with no record argues; a recorded one exhibits. cflab. uk · e-discovery. uk ©2026 Computer Forensics Lab Ltd · cflab. uk · e-discovery. uk · info@cflab. uk · +44 (0)20 7164 6915 Page 15 of 17

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