How to Find Cases in the Law Library

Case Law Reports: Introduction

Written opinions by the judge or judges are called cases and are published in case law reporters. Most cases are appellate opinions. Trial court judges rarely write opinions, usually only when there is an unusual fact or legal issue that has not occurred before -- a case of first impression. In the federal appellate courts, many cases are heard by three-judge panels. The three-judge panel opinion can be appealed to a hearing by the full Circuit Court.

Cases are published in reporters. If you know the citation, you can go straight to the reporter to find the case. If you know the subject matter, you can use a digest, which organizes case summaries by subject. You may also find cases mentioned in other secondary resources such as legal periodicals, treatises, and hornbooks. You can find cases online, either on government websites or by using the Westlaw Public Access Terminal in the Circulation Area.

Cases can and should be updated to see if they are still good law or have been modified. Shepard's publishes subsequent histories for all cases. The process of updating a case is called “shepardizing.” Westlaw has a similar updating service online called Key Cite, and it is available on the Westlaw Public Access Terminal in Circulation.

Case Law Citations

Case citations following the format of The Bluebook, Rule 10, give you the name of the case, the name of the case reporter, its volume number, the page where the case begins, the year of the case, and sometimes the jurisdiction. Following are examples of federal case citations from The Bluebook:

- **U.S. Court of Appeals Case:** United States v. MacDonald, 531 F.2d 196 (4th Cir. 1976)

Examples of state reporters and regional reporters:


Case Law Digests

Digests contain brief summaries of cases, organized by subject, in alphabetical order by topic, and further refined by key number. Use the Descriptive Word Index to find topics and key numbers. Just about every legal issue has a topic and key number. Once you have the topic and key number, you can find all the cases about that legal issue. Digests are updated in print by inserts in the pocket of each volume’s back cover and sometimes by interim pamphlets.

The American Digest System includes all published state and federal cases; it is also called The General Digest. It is located in the first two rows of the compact shelving (movable shelving) along the back wall of the Reading Room. Look for your topic, then scan through the list of state decisions (alphabetical) and federal decisions (listed by court type) to find a case. This set of books is divided into
separate series called Decennial Digests (first published in ten year runs, but now in as few as five or six years).

Specialized digests are also useful. In the Mason Library, they include the Federal Practice Digest 4th, following the U.S. reporters on the lower level, the regional reporter digests, such as the Atlantic Digest, and some other specialized digests of cases.

**Case Law Reporters**

Case law reporters contain the full text of a court’s written opinion, in chronological order. They are printed by either the government or by a private company such as LexisNexis or Thomson West.

Reporters are updated frequently in soft-bound pamphlets called advance sheets at the end of the series. Eventually a hard bound volume will be published and the advance sheets will be discarded.

Case reporters include opinions from the state and federal courts, and from specialized courts and administrative agencies.

Federal court reporters include the United States Reports (the official government reporter), the United States Supreme Court Reports and Supreme Court Reporter (Supreme Court cases), the Federal Reporter (U.S. Circuit Court cases), the Federal Supplement (U.S. District Court cases), the Bankruptcy Reporter, the Veterans Appeals Reporter, the Military Justice Reporter, the Federal Claims Reporter, the United States Court of International Trade Reports, the United States Tax Court Reports, etc.

Federal reporters are located in the lower level of the Reading Room, following the U.S. materials.

State court reporters include state reporters such as the New York Supplement, and regional reporters such as the Atlantic Reporter, which includes cases from D.C., Maryland, Delaware, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont. Regional reporters are located in the lower level of the Reading Room, following the federal reporters. They the Atlantic Reporter, North Eastern Reporter, North Western Reporter, Pacific Reporter, South Eastern Reporter, South Western Reporter, and Southern Reporter.

**Periodicals**

The footnotes of law review articles are rich in footnote citations to case law and statutory law. To find case citations, use one of the indexes, Current Law Index or Index to Legal Periodicals and Books (both located in the Reference Room), to find articles on cases or on the subject matter of cases.

**Treatises and Hornbooks**

Both treatises (usually multi-volume and detailed treatment of legal topics) and hornbooks (one volume overviews of legal topics) are rich in footnote sources to case law and statutory law. Use the online public access catalog to find treatises and hornbooks.

**Westlaw Public Access Terminal**

Use online databases, including the government websites, to search for cases by using either a case citation or a combination of terms and synonyms for keyword searching. The Westlaw terminal is in the Circulation Area.