CASES AND CITATIONS

FINDING CASES AND INTERPRETING CITATIONS

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
LAW SCHOOL
JACOB BURNS LAW LIBRARY
# Finding Cases and Interpreting Citations

## Introduction

Locating Sources ............................................................................................................................................................ 1

## I. Interpreting Case Citations

A. Deciphering a Case Citation........................................................................................................................................ 1

B. Federal Court Decisions ........................................................................................................................................... 2

1. Supreme Court of the United States Decisions ........................................................................................................ 2

2. U.S. Courts of Appeals Decisions ............................................................................................................................ 2


4. Early Federal Cases ................................................................................................................................................ 2

C. State Court Decisions ............................................................................................................................................ 3

1. West’s Regional Reporters ......................................................................................................................................... 3

D. Abbreviations and Acronyms .................................................................................................................................. 3

1. Prince’s Dictionary of Legal Abbreviations ............................................................................................................. 3

2. Legal Citation in a Nutshell ..................................................................................................................................... 3

3. Black’s Law Dictionary ........................................................................................................................................... 3

4. The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation ....................................................................................................... 3

## II. Finding Cases

A. Digests ................................................................................................................................................................. 4

1. West’s Analysis of American Law: With Key Number Classifications ............................................................... 4

B. Digests in the Jacob Burns Law Library .................................................................................................................. 4

1. Federal Courts ........................................................................................................................................................ 4

2. State Courts ......................................................................................................................................................... 5

C. Cases Online ......................................................................................................................................................... 5

1. Lexis Advance ......................................................................................................................................................... 5

2. Westlaw ................................................................................................................................................................. 5

3. Bloomberg Law .................................................................................................................................................... 5

4. Fastcase Premium ............................................................................................................................................... 5

5. Online ................................................................................................................................................................. 6

D. Legal Encyclopedias ................................................................................................................................................ 6

1. National Encyclopedias .......................................................................................................................................... 6

2. State Encyclopedias ............................................................................................................................................... 6

E. American Law Reports (A.L.R.) ............................................................................................................................. 7

1. A.L.R. Finding Aids ................................................................................................................................................ 7

2. A.L.R. Series ......................................................................................................................................................... 7
F. Hornbooks & Treatises........................................................................................................................................... 8
G. Dockets................................................................................................................................................................. 8
  1. Bloomberg Law ................................................................................................................................................... 8
  2. Westlaw ............................................................................................................................................................ 8
  3. Lexis Advance.................................................................................................................................................... 8
  4. PACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records)......................................................................................... 8
Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to identify print and electronic resources for finding cases and interpreting case citations. It is intended primarily for users of the Jacob Burns Law Library, and indicates the location of materials within the Library or online.

Locating Sources

To determine if a source listed in this guide is available in Bloomberg Law, Lexis Advance, or Westlaw, enter the name of the source in the search box at the top of the page and then select the source from the drop-down list.

To obtain Bloomberg Law, Lexis Advance, or Westlaw credentials, email eservices@law.gwu.edu and include your GWid number.

For additional information, see the research guide Case Law Resources, where you can also access this guide in PDF.

I. Interpreting Case Citations

A. Deciphering a Case Citation

Here is an example of a case citation: Mattel, Inc. v. MCA Records, Inc., 296 F.3d 894 (9th Cir. 2002).

Mattel, Inc. v. MCA Records, Inc. = Names of the parties in the case.

In the trial court, the first name listed is the plaintiff, the party bringing the lawsuit. The name following the “v.” (“versus”) is the defendant. If the case is appealed, the name of the appellant, the party appealing, is commonly listed first and the name of the appellee is listed second. If the defendant in the trial court case files the appeal, the defendant’s name may be listed first in the appellate case. In this example, Mattel, Inc. brought the lawsuit and also appealed the trial court’s ruling.

296 = Volume number of the reporter containing the full text of the court’s opinion.

F.3d = Abbreviation for the reporter (in this example, Federal Reporter, Third Series) containing the court’s opinion.

894 = First page of the court’s opinion in the reporter.

9th Cir. = Court abbreviation.

If a reporter contains decisions from multiple courts or jurisdictions, information is required to identify which court issued the decision. In this example, because the Federal Reporter contains decisions of all of the U.S. Courts of Appeals, the Ninth Circuit is identified as the court issuing the opinion.

2002 = Year the case was decided.
B. Federal Court Decisions

Federal reporters publish federal decisions that are designated by the courts for publication, usually by court rule. Reporters are kept current by advance sheets, before new bound volumes are available. Federal reporters are located on Burns, Second Floor of the Library.

1. Supreme Court of the United States Decisions

U.S. United States Reports
Only the printed bound volumes of the *United States Reports* contain the final, official opinions of the Supreme Court.

S. Ct. Supreme Court Reporter

L. Ed., L. Ed. 2d United States Supreme Court Reports, Lawyers’ Edition, First & Second Series

2. U.S. Courts of Appeals Decisions

F. Federal Reporter

F.2d Federal Reporter, Second Series

F.3d Federal Reporter, Third Series

F. App’x Federal Appendix
Contains decisions that have not been designated for publication in the *Federal Reporter*. Local court rules should be consulted to determine if and how these cases may be cited.


F. Supp. Federal Supplement

F. Supp. 2d Federal Supplement, Second Series

F. Supp. 3d Federal Supplement, Third Series

F.R.D. Federal Rules Decisions
Contains decisions concerning the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and Criminal Procedure that have not been designated for publication in the *Federal Supplement*.

4. Early Federal Cases

F. Cas. Federal Cases
Covers U.S. Circuit and District court cases from 1789 to 1880.
C. State Court Decisions

Regional reporters publish state appellate level court decisions that are designated by the courts for publication, usually by court rule. Regional reporters, published by West, contain court opinions from designated state regions. The Atlantic Reporter, Third Series is kept current by advance sheets, before new bound volumes are available, and is located on the Second Floor of the Library. All other regional reporters are no longer maintained by the Library in print.

1. West’s Regional Reporters

   A., A.2d, A.3d  Atlantic Reporter, First, Second & Third Series
                    CT, DE, DC, ME, MD, NH, NJ, PA, RI, VT

   N.E., N.E.2d, N.E.3d  North Eastern Reporter, First, Second, & Third Series
                          IL, IN, MA, NY, OH

   N.W., N.W.2d  North Western Reporter, First & Second Series
                    IA, MI, MN, NE, ND, SD, WI

   P., P.2d, P.3d  Pacific Reporter, First, Second & Third Series
                    AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, KS, MT, NV, NM, OK, OR, UT, WA, WY

   S.E., S.E.2d  South Eastern Reporter, First & Second Series
                    GA, NC, SC, VA, WV

   So., So. 2d, So. 3d  Southern Reporter, First, Second & Third Series
                        AL, FL, LA, MS

   S.W., S.W.2d, S.W.3d  South Western Reporter, First, Second & Third Series
                           AR, KY, MO, TN, TX

D. Abbreviations and Acronyms

The following sources may help to determine the meanings of various abbreviations and acronyms:

1. Prince’s Dictionary of Legal Abbreviations
   
   Location: 1st Floor, Reserve and Ready Reference, KF246 .B46 2017

2. Legal Citation in a Nutshell
   
   Location: 1st Floor, Reserve, KF245.T47 2016

3. Black’s Law Dictionary
   
   Location: 1st Floor, Reserve and Ready Reference, KF156 .B53 2014
   
   Online:  Westlaw

4. The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation
   
   Location: 1st Floor, Reserve and Ready Reference, KF245 .B58
II. Finding Cases

A. Digests

One way to research and find cases is to use a digest. Digests are annotated indexes to reported cases, providing brief statements of court holdings or facts of the case, arranged by legal topic and subdivided by jurisdiction. They can be used to locate cases by legal topic or by case name. Digests are updated with pocket parts and supplementary pamphlets. Published by West, digests feature the “Key Number” system found in the West reporters. A West key number comprises a topic and a number that together refer to a specific subtopic within the broader legal topic. For example:

115 DAMAGES

146. Loss of or damage to property

Under the digest Topic Number 115, “Damages,” Key Number 146 (“k146”) represents the subtopic “loss of or damage to property.” To locate an appropriate topic or key number to conduct a subject search, use the “Descriptive Word Index” volume that accompanies each digest, or use a Key Number already found in a relevant case.

When using digests, it is important to conduct research in the set that is most likely to produce relevant results. In looking for cases from a particular state, it is often more efficient to use a state digest (if available) than one that indexes cases for the entire U.S. When looking for cases from the Supreme Court of the United States, it is often more efficient to use a digest that focuses on decisions of that court (e.g., United States Supreme Court Digest), than one that indexes cases from all federal courts (e.g., Federal Practice Digest).

1. West’s Analysis of American Law: With Key Number Classifications

Complete outline of all West digest topics, key numbers, and subtopics.
Location: 1st Floor, Ready Reference, KF435.W48
Online: Westlaw

B. Digests in the Jacob Burns Law Library

The following digests are held by the Jacob Burns Law Library. Digests for local jurisdictions are located in the Stockton Reading Room (the large room with the double glass doors on the Second Floor, across from the elevator). The federal digests and West’s Atlantic Digest 2d are on Second Floor, Burns.

1. Federal Courts

a. All Federal Courts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digest</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal Digest (red)</td>
<td>1754 - 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Federal Practice Digest (green)</td>
<td>1939 - 1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West’s Federal Practice Digest, 2d (blue)</td>
<td>1961 - Nov. 1975</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
West’s Federal Practice Digest, 3d (red) 1975 – 1983*
West’s Federal Practice Digest, 4th (blue) 1984 – 2002*
West’s Federal Practice Digest, 5th (red) 2003 – present

*For comprehensive coverage of cases from December 1975 through 1983, both West’s Federal Practices Digests, 3rd and 4th should be consulted.

b. Supreme Court of the United States

United States Supreme Court Digest 1790 - present

2. State Courts

The Library maintains current subscriptions to state digests for local jurisdictions, in addition to West’s Atlantic Digest, 2d, which also covers cases from the District of Columbia and Maryland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Digest</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>West’s District of Columbia Digest</td>
<td>DC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West’s Maryland Digest 2d</td>
<td>MD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West’s Virginia and West Virginia Digest</td>
<td>VA, WV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West’s Atlantic Digest 2d</td>
<td>CT, DE, DC, ME, MD, NH, NJ, PA, RI, VT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C. Cases Online

1. Lexis Advance

Search for cases by either using the main search box or selecting “Cases” under “Content Type.”

2. Westlaw

There are a number of ways to find cases in Westlaw, including using the main search box. Cases can also be located by selecting “Cases” under “All Content” or using the West Key Number System under the “Tools” tab.

3. Bloomberg Law

The main search box in the navigation bar can be used to search for cases. Another option is to use the “Browse” pop-out side menu to select “Litigation Intelligence Center,” to search for court opinions.

4. Fastcase Premium

Search for cases by either using the “Quick Caselaw Search” box on the main page or clicking on “Advanced Caselaw Search” under “Start a New Search.”

Use Shepard’s on Lexis Advance, KeyCite on Westlaw, or BCite on Bloomberg Law to determine if a particular decision has been overruled either totally or partially, if it has been distinguished, or if it has been followed by other courts, as well as to find cases and other sources that cite it.
5. Online

Increasingly, judicial opinions are being made available on federal and state court websites. Search capabilities and formats vary by jurisdiction.

a. Federal Courts

- Supreme Court of the United States
- U.S. Courts: The Federal Judiciary
- FindLaw: Cases and Codes
- Google Scholar

b. State Courts

- National Center for State Courts
- FindLaw: Cases and Codes
- Google Scholar
- Legal Information Institute

D. Legal Encyclopedias

Legal encyclopedias can be used to obtain helpful background information on various legal topics. They also provide citations to the leading cases on a topic. All of the encyclopedias listed below are arranged by topic with detailed indexes. Many also provide tables of cases or statutes and regulations. Encyclopedias published by West often include references to Key Numbers, which can be used throughout West’s National Reporter System to locate case law.

1. National Encyclopedias

**Corpus Juris Secundum (C.J.S.)**
Location: Reference, 1st Floor, KF154 .C67
Online: Westlaw

**American Jurisprudence 2d (AM. JUR. 2D)**
Online: Westlaw
Lexis Advance

2. State Encyclopedias

**District of Columbia Code Encyclopedia** (Discontinued in 1980)
Location: Stockton, 2nd Floor

**West's Maryland Law Encyclopedia**
Location: 2nd Floor, Stockton
Online: Westlaw

**Michie's Jurisprudence of Virginia and West Virginia**
Location: 2nd Floor, Stockton
Online: Lexis Advance
E. American Law Reports (A.L.R.)

Note: The Library no longer maintains A.L.R.s or A.L.R. finding aids in print.

American Law Reports (A.L.R.) contain articles, called annotations, which analyze specific legal issues in areas of the law that are emerging or unsettled. A case is used as the basis of the annotation. Each article includes a survey of court decisions from various jurisdictions and citations to legal encyclopedias, law review articles, and treatises.

1. A.L.R. Finding Aids

Annotations can be located by using one of the finding aids listed below or by keyword searching in Lexis Advance/Westlaw.

a. A.L.R. Index
   Covers the A.L.R. (First Series), 2d, 3d, 4th, 5th, 6th, Federal and Federal 2d.

   Online: Westlaw
   Covers the entire A.L.R. system currently available in print.

b. A.L.R. Quick Index
   Covers A.L.R.3d series to date.

c. A.L.R. Federal Quick Index
   Covers the federal series only.

d. A.L.R. Digest
   West’s A.L.R. Digest includes the case headnotes from reported cases for annotations, which are organized according to West Key Number topics.

   Online: Westlaw

2. A.L.R. Series

There are currently eleven A.L.R. series. The A.L.R. (First Series) and A.L.R.2d series are dated and should be used for historical research only. The A.L.R.3d through A.L.R.7th series are kept up to date in print using pocket parts. A.L.R. Fed., A.L.R. Fed. 2d, and A.L.R. Fed. 3d contain only annotations of federal cases. A.L.R. International analyzes both U.S. and foreign cases from English and non-English speaking countries that cover issues of international law.

Online: Westlaw

Online: Lexis Advance
F. Hornbooks & Treatises

Hornbooks and treatises can be useful for finding cases. Hornbooks generally provide brief overviews of subject areas with citations to or discussions of leading cases on the topic. Treatises, which are often multi-volume, provide more in-depth discussion and analysis of legal issues, as well as provide citations to relevant cases. They often are updated by pocket parts or looseleaf pages. Treatises and hornbooks usually include tables of cases, which list court decisions discussed in the text. (e.g., The Law of Federal Income Taxation)

All treatises in the Library can be located using JACOB, the Library’s catalog. Some treatises are also available online, including those in Westlaw and Lexis Advance. For assistance in locating treatises on a particular topic, for a particular jurisdiction, or for help finding cases or interpreting case citations, visit or contact the Reference Desk at (202) 994-6647 or ask@law.gwu.libanswers.com.

G. Dockets

Court dockets contain documents relating to a particular case. When a case is filed, it is assigned a docket number (e.g., 2:04-CV-09049-SGL). The docket number generally includes the year that the case was filed, a designation as to the type of case (e.g., civil, criminal), and a case number. A docket report, maintained for each case, is a chronological list of all documents (briefs, orders, and pleadings, etc.) filed with the court. The name of the judge, the attorneys, and a list of the parties can also be found in the docket report. Not all dockets are available online. However, some databases do provide varying levels of coverage.

1. Bloomberg Law
   Online: Dockets

2. Westlaw
   Online: Federal Dockets or State Dockets

3. Lexis Advance
   Online: Dockets

4. PACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records)
   Official federal docket database which charges per a page viewed. Dockets from PACER are searchable through Bloomberg Law’s docket search page. Contact the Reference Desk for questions about accessing PACER.
   Online: Federal Dockets

Revised by Mary Kate Hunter, May 2018