

Introduction to Legal Research

Introduction to Legal Research

Designed as a quick-reference guide for law students, paralegals, and anyone beginning to navigate legal sources.

1. What Is Legal Research?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The systematic process of identifying and retrieving legal information—statutes, cases, regulations, secondary materials—to answer a specific legal question or support a legal argument.
Purpose	• Resolve client issues • Prepare pleadings, memoranda, and briefs • Advise on compliance • Support academic writing
Core Skills	• Issue spotting • Source selection • Critical analysis • Proper citation

2. The Legal Research Process (Step-by-Step)

1. Identify the Legal Issue

- Read the fact pattern carefully.
- Break it down into discrete questions (e.g., “Is the contract enforceable?”).
- Use the IRAC framework (Issue, Rule, Application, Conclusion) to structure the issue.

2. Determine the Jurisdiction & Time Frame

- **Jurisdiction:** Federal, state, local, or foreign law.
- **Temporal scope:** Is the law current, or do you need historical versions?

3. Select Primary Sources

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- **Statutes & Codes** – legislative enactments.
- **Case Law** – judicial opinions.
- **Regulations** – agency rules interpreting statutes.
- **Constitutions** – federal and state.

4. Locate Secondary Sources (for background, analysis, and citation support)

- Treatises, law review articles, legal encyclopedias (e.g., *American Jurisprudence*), practice guides, and restatements.

5. Choose Research Tools

- **Print** (law libraries, digests).
- **Online databases** – Westlaw, LexisNexis, Bloomberg Law, Google Scholar, CourtListener, PACER, state court portals.
- **Free resources** – Cornell's Legal Information Institute (LII), Justia, GovInfo, public? policy sites.

6. Conduct the Search

- Start broad, then narrow using keywords, Boolean operators, and citation filters.
- Use **key numbers** (West) or **headnotes** (Lexis) to locate relevant case law.
- Verify that the material is **still good law** (no subsequent overruling, amendment, or expiration).

7. Analyze & Synthesize

- Read primary authority fully; note holdings, reasoning, and dicta.
- Compare conflicting cases; determine controlling precedent.
- Integrate secondary commentary to fill gaps or explain complex doctrines.

8. Cite Properly

- Follow the citation style required (most U.S. jurisdictions use **The Bluebook**, while others may use **ALWD** or local rules).
- Include parallel citations when required (e.g., reporter and regional reporter).

9. Update the Research

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- Run a **Shepard's/KeyCite** check or equivalent to confirm that the authority remains valid up to the present date.

10. Draft the Output

- Organize findings into a memorandum, brief, or opinion.
 - Use headings, subheadings, and bullet points for readability.
 - Attach a **Table of Authorities** if required.
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3. Primary Sources – Quick Reference

Source	Where to Find	Typical Use
Statutes/Codes	State legislature websites, *United	