

Introduction to Research Methods in Law

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Study guide – concise, organized, and ready for quick review

1. Why Legal Research Matters

Purpose	What it achieves
Understanding the law	Identifies statutes, cases, and regulations that govern a problem.
Problem-solving	Provides the factual and doctrinal basis for advice, litigation, or policy proposals.
Academic contribution	Generates new insights, critiques existing rules, and suggests reforms.
Professional credibility	Demonstrates rigor, reliability, and ethical standards to clients, courts, and peers.

2. Core Types of Legal Research

Type	Typical Output	Main Methods
Doctrinal (traditional) research	Case notes, legal memoranda, statutory commentary	• Textual analysis of statutes, case law, regulations • Comparative doctrinal tables
Empirical (social science) research	Survey reports, statistical analyses, field studies	• Quantitative (surveys, experiments, secondary data) • Qualitative (interviews, focus groups, ethnography)
Interdisciplinary research	Policy briefs, impact assessments	• Combines doctrinal with empirical or normative approaches (e.g., law & economics, law & sociology).
Critical / normative research	Theoretical essays, critical commentaries	• Philosophical argumentation, feminist/legal critical lenses, human rights analysis.

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3. The Research Process – Step by Step

1. Identify the research problem

- Formulate a clear, answerable question (e.g., “How does the GDPR affect cross-border data transfers?”).
- Distinguish *primary* (legal rules) from *secondary* (commentary) issues.

2. Conduct a preliminary literature scan

- Use legal databases (Westlaw, LexisNexis, HeinOnline, JSTOR).
- Check treatises, law review articles, government reports, and reputable blogs.

3. Develop a research plan

- Choose the appropriate methodology (doctrinal, empirical, mixed).
- Draft a timeline, resource list, and ethical approval requirements (if human subjects are involved).

4. Collect data / sources

- **Doctrinal:** statutes, case law, legislative history, regulations.
- **Empirical:** questionnaires, interview transcripts, court statistics, public policy datasets.

5. Analyze the material

- **Doctrinal analysis:** issue spotting, rule extraction, synthesis, and hierarchy of authority.
- **Empirical analysis:** coding, statistical testing (descriptive, inferential), thematic coding for qualitative data.

6. Draft the findings

- Structure: Introduction ? Methodology ? Results/Analysis ? Discussion ? Conclusion ? Bibliography.
- Cite consistently (Bluebook, OSCOLA, AGLC, or jurisdiction-specific style).

7. Review & revise

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- Peer-review, supervisor feedback, or professional editing.
- Verify accuracy of citations, data integrity, and compliance with ethical standards.

8. Disseminate

- Publish in journals, present at conferences, submit to policy bodies, or file as a legal brief.

4. Key Research Tools & Resources

Category	Examples	Typical Use
Legal databases	Westlaw, LexisNexis, Bloomberg Law, HeinOnline	Full-text case law, statutes, secondary sources