

Free Legal Research 101

For non-lawyers, conducting legal research can seem like an overwhelming challenge. But it doesn't have to be, if you know where to look.

First, define the specific information you need and determine the jurisdiction. Once you know which court or government agency handles your area of concern, you're ready to start researching.

But before you begin, you need to learn about citations and abbreviations. Law books are cited in this sequence: volume number, book and page. For instance, 380 U.S. 97 indicates volume 380 of United States Reports, page 97. Statutes are cited by the statute title and section number. For example, 42 U.S.C. § 7622 for title 42 United States Code, section 7622.

Most public libraries, especially the larger ones, have resources for legal research. Law school libraries also are open to the public, providing depository libraries of federal materials. Many federal publications now are available online at www.access.gpo.gov, as the Internet is increasingly being used for legal research.

Simply "Googling" a specific topic is not the most efficient way to go, especially considering the soaring number of "spamdexing" sites you'll have to sift through in your search results. Instead, visit sites specifically designed for legal research including RealDealDocs, www.realdealdocs.com; FindLaw, www.findlaw.com; LexisOne, www.lexisone.com; The Legal Information Institute, www.law.cornell.edu; Washburn University School of Law, www.washlaw.edu; The American Bar Association, www.abalawinfo.com; and HierosGamos, www.hg.org.

While doing a web search via Google can be a hit or miss approach, using it to search for news stories related to your topic often yields very helpful information. Just run a search on Google's main page and then click on the "News" link. Or you can start your search directly from Google's News site at www.news.google.com.

To get an overview of a topic, legal encyclopedias are a good place to start: Corpus Juris Secundum (C.J.S.) and American Jurisprudence 2d (Am. Jur. 2d). Many states also publish encyclopedias of state laws.

Also useful are articles published in bar association journals or law schools reviews. You can look up a specific topic in printed or computer indexes including Index to Legal Periodicals or Legal Resource Index. In some cases, you may find free articles online at such sites as the University Law Review Project at www.lawreview.org or the Jurist's Law Review page at www.jurist.law.pitt.edu/lawrev.htm.

Codes contain legal rules known as statutes, regulations or ordinances, which are mandatory. You can access codes through an index that refers you to a numbered section. To keep them current for research, they are updated by supplements or pocket parts or are in looseleaf form.

Many public libraries and all law libraries have a copy of local state code, as well as city or county ordinance codes. Most state and some local law can be found online using directories such as Piper Resources' State and Local Government on the Net at www.statelocalgov.net/index.cfm. Or you can use the URL address www.state.xx.us, and fill in your state's postal abbreviation where the "xx" is shown.

For questions with federal jurisdiction, look to these resources: United States Code (U.S.C.), United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.), or United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.). The U.S.C. is available on the Web at uscode.house.gov/, but other sites containing the U.S.C. (such as www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/ and others mentioned herein) provide simpler ways to locate a statute.

Of course, those with the financial means can always hire an independent paralegal to conduct legal research for them. These freelancers can also assist you with any forms preparation you may need. More information is available on the National Federation of Paralegal Associations site at www.paralegals.org.

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