Case Law – Anatomy of a Case

In this part of the tutorial, you will learn how to read a case citation, the basic parts of a case, and what case reporters are.

The sets of books where cases are published are called “reporters,” and each one has a designated abbreviation for use in citations. There are different types of reporters based on the cases published therein.

Federal, regional, and state reporters contain the opinions of particular courts regardless of the subject matter of the opinion.

In addition to these reporters, there are subject-oriented reporters, both online and in print, which report cases from various jurisdictions that deal with a certain area of law, such as environmental or patent law.

U.S. Supreme Court opinions are published in several reporters, the abbreviations of which are shown here from the Bluebook. While the opinion itself is the same in each publication, the unofficial publishers add editorial enhancements, such as headnotes, which we will discuss later.

**Ti.1 Federal Judicial and Legislative Materials (p. 233)**

For more information about the federal court system, including a list of the district courts and the territorial jurisdiction of the courts of appeals, access http://www.uscourts.gov.

*Supreme Court (U.S.):* Cite to U.S., if therein; otherwise, cite to S. Ct., L. Ed., or U.S.L.W., in that order of preference.

- **United States Reports**
  - 01 U.S. to date
  - Wallace: 1863–1874
  - Black: 1861–1862
  - Howard: 1843–1860
  - Peters: 1828–1842
  - Wheaton: 1816–1827
  - Cranch: 1801–1815
  - Dallas: 1790–1800
  - United States Supreme Court Reports
    - 1882–date
  - United States Supreme Court Reports, Lawyers’ Edition
    - 1790–date
  - United States Law Week
    - 1933–date
  - U.S.
  - e.g., 68 U.S. (1 Wall.)
  - e.g., 60 U.S. (1 Black)
  - e.g., 42 U.S. (1 How.)
  - e.g., 20 U.S. (1 Pet.)
  - e.g., 14 U.S. (1 Wheat.)
  - e.g., 5 U.S. (1 Cranch)
  - e.g., 1 U.S. (1 Dall.)
  - S. Ct.
  - L. Ed., L. Ed. 2d
  - U.S.L.W.


West’s National Reporter system publishes state appellate court opinions in compilations known as Regional Reporters. This map shows which states are included in each reporter. For example, cases from Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the other states in blue on this map are published in the Atlantic Reporter.

For many, but not all states, appellate court opinions are also published in individual state reporters in addition to the regional reporter. In Virginia, for example, supreme court opinions are published in the Virginia Reports as well as in the South Eastern Reporter.
Why is knowing about how cases are published in print important now that most attorneys use online resources? Because even when using the online resource, your citation form matches the print resource so that all parties are working with the same information, regardless of whether it comes from a physical book or electronic source.

Court opinions, regardless of jurisdiction, have many common elements. Each publisher (whether of printed volumes or online versions) presents these elements in a slightly different way and also provides different supplementary material. Let’s look at the basic elements of a court opinion in the Supreme Court Reporter.

The citation is the reference to the place or places where the case has been published. The caption includes the names of the parties in the case. Generally, the first party is the plaintiff and the second party is the defendant. Note that as cases are appealed, those parties may reverse positions. The docket number is the number assigned by the court to track a case through the litigation and keep track of documents related to a case. Note that a new docket number is assigned at every appellate level.
On Westlaw or Lexis, the same elements of the case appear. Here is the citation, the caption, and the docket number. The judge writing for the majority is also identified.

Let's look at some more elements of a court opinion in the Supreme Court Reporter. Dissenting judges are identified.
West publishes headnotes with key numbers to summarize and index the areas of law raised in the case. Other publishers, such as Lexis, may also include similar annotations.

Because headnotes are written by the publisher and not by the court, you should never rely solely on them, and you should only cite the actual text of the opinion.

Here are the same elements in Westlaw. The dissenting judges and the headnotes, which include the relevant West Key Numbers. Notice that there are 11 headnotes. Each discusses a different point of law in the case.

If you would like to learn how to decipher and build case citations, please see our Bluebook guide and tutorials.