Secondary Sources: Legal Encyclopedias

Legal encyclopedias give an overview or introduction to an area of the law. In common with other secondary sources, they also provide citations to relevant primary law. Encyclopedias are available in print and online and fall into three main categories: **nationally focused**, which cover broad topical areas of the law, **state-specific**, which focus on the law in a single jurisdiction, and **subject specialized** which provide coverage of an area of law such as corporations, family law, or tax.

The two major national legal encyclopedias are: *American Jurisprudence 2d* (also known as AmJur) and *Corpus Juris Secundum*. Both of these are shelved in the Library’s reference department and are included on Westlaw. Lexis offers access to AmJur but not CJS. They are broad, general treatments of the full range of state and federal law. When you use an encyclopedia, you will get a much briefer and less detailed discussion of a topic than you would if you used a treatise or law review article.

When using a resource with such broad coverage, it is often wise to pre-emptively limit your searching. For instance, in AmJur just searching for Americans with Disabilities Act public accommodation golf nets over 2,000 hits, many of which probably only mention the ADA rather than being about the ADA. Whereas, if you start with the table of contents, you can find their analysis of the Americans with Disabilities Act and limit your search.

Note that sometimes not all entries are presented in alphabetical order. Be sure to scroll to the bottom to make sure there are no headings that are out of place. Now if we limit our search and look for public accommodation golf, we get a much more focused set of results.

Many, though not all, states have an encyclopedia focusing exclusively on the laws of that state. These encyclopedias have various names such as: California Jurisprudence, Maryland Law Encyclopedia, and Virginia Practice. State encyclopedias are shelved on the third and fourth floors of the Williams Library with the state’s primary materials. They tend to be a very useful tool to begin researching in a particular state, so they should be consulted early in the research process if the state in question has an encyclopedia.

State encyclopedias will describe a particular topic, usually give a brief history of the development of the law in that state, and provide a discussion of leading cases and/or relevant statutes. State encyclopedias are also generally available on Lexis and/or Westlaw.

If you want to use or browse the encyclopedias offered on Westlaw, first select the Secondary Sources link, then filter for “Jurisprudence and Encyclopedias.” You can filter further by topic or jurisdiction. If you don’t know anything about a resource, you can click the circled i to the right of the title to look at the scope note. Note that many less-populous states will not have a comprehensive encyclopedia.