Administrative Law Websites:

In this part of the tutorial you should learn:

- What types of information are available on agency web sites,
- How to find those websites, and
- Some problems to look out for when using agency websites for research

Most federal agencies make a great deal of information available on their web sites. Often, an agency’s web site will be the best place to begin your research. Most, but not all, agency web sites include:

- Regulations and authority statutes
- Administrative decisions
- Press releases
- Recent reports and other documents produced by the agency

The actual information available varies widely by agency.

When you already know which agency regulates the area of law you are researching, figuring out its URL is usually easy. For example, the URL of the Federal Communications Commission web site is http://www.fcc.gov. (Official federal websites always end in .gov) If you don’t know which agency regulates your area of law, you could consult the Library’s topical research guides or the federal government’s portal to agency web sites, USA.gov. Now let’s consider the following fact pattern:

A partner at your law firm is annoyed. Her 10-year old son ordered a supposedly rare coin from an online merchant, but a local coin expert later informed him that the coin was a mass-produced imitation. Is there a federal agency that could intervene?

On the homepage of USA.gov, you can get to a list of Federal Agencies by name through the Government Agencies link at the top of the page. Under “Federal Government,” you’ll find an A-Z list of Agencies, but this can be a challenging search method if you don’t know exactly which agency you are looking for. You can also do a search across the entire site to quickly find an agency or
agencies responsible for a particular topic, Consumer Protection, for example.

When you search for the phrase, “Consumer Protection,” one of the first results that comes up is the consumer information page of the FTC. From that page, the FTC allows consumers to easily file complaints:
Just like the content of agency web sites will vary, navigation of every government site differs also. Most sites seem to place regulations and authority statutes behind links with labels that include words like “Laws,” “Legal,” “FOIA” (“Freedom of Information Act”), or “Library.” Administrative decisions may be found behind the same links, or behind links that include words like, “Enforcement,” “Interpretations,” or even “Litigation.” Keeping our fake coin example in mind, let’s try finding administrative law on the FTC web site.

It’s not entirely obvious where to look for administrative regulations when on the home page of the FTC. Here, under Enforcement, are the statutes and regulations (noted as rules) enforced or administered by the Commission. You will also find FTC cases and adjudicative proceedings in this category.

An agency’s web site can be an excellent place to retrieve a known document, such as a recent agency decision or a form, to get quick answers to straight-forward questions, or to get an overview before conducting deeper research of more complex questions. However, when using an agency web site, you should keep in mind the following:

- The agency web site might not be current;
- The regulations on the web site might not be codified; and
- The site might not provide full coverage

Some agencies are not as well funded as others and may not be able to update their sites frequently. Even well-funded agencies may choose not to update often. For example, the regulation database linked to on the FDA web site is no more current than the print CFR. So, make sure to check for currentness of any information upon which you are relying.