Anatomy of a Code

In this part of the tutorial, you will learn: the material contained in a code and how it is organized, how a statute actually appears when it is added to a code, differences between the official and unofficial versions of the U.S. Code, and how state codes are organized.

For example purposes, we are going to look at the U.S. Code, but keep in mind that state codes can be organized differently. The first volume of the U.S. Code includes the U.S. Constitution, as well as other foundational laws of the United States, called “organic laws.” State codes typically contain state constitutions as well. The titles of the code are where you will find the actual text of statutes. The titles cover extremely broad topical areas, such as agriculture, banks, and banking, or education. For example, Title 49 is entitled “Transportation” and contains the current statutes relating to railroads, highways, and pipelines. There are currently 54 titles (though Title 53 is reserved and not used as of this recording). Indexes, tables, and supplements will be discussed in subsequent sections of this tutorial.

In the U.S. Code, titles are broken down further into subtitles, chapters, and sections.

When you look at the structure of a codified statute, you will find that it usually has several parts: an opening statement of purpose; definitions (usually found at or near the beginning); the heart of the statute itself, describing actions that are authorized, required or prohibited by it; and annotations (which we will cover later).

To learn how to construct statutory citations, consult Georgetown’s Bluebook Guide and tutorial.

So far, we have only looked at the statutes themselves: the text passed by Congress. But some codes give us much more than that. These codes are annotated, meaning the publishers have added information to the plain text of the statutes. There are two annotated versions of the U.S. code: the U.S. Code Annotated and the U.S. Code Service.

Annotations include: An historical note with information about when the statute was originally passed and amended; cross-references to related regulations issued by executive branch agencies; notes of decisions summarizing court cases that have interpreted the statute; and references to secondary sources, such as encyclopedias or treatises, that discuss the statute.

As you have seen, the U.S. Code (and many state codes) are published in several different editions by different publishers. Each contains the same text of the statute itself, but they differ in the content of the annotations and other research aids they contain. Since code citations are always given by title and section number, you can use any edition of the code to find the text of the statute.

Finally, a few words about state codes. Some state codes use numbers to designate titles while others use names with specific abbreviations. If a state uses a name instead of a number, the abbreviation of the title must be included in the citation. For example, in California the family law title is referred to as Cal. Fam. Code, and the public utilities title is Cal. Pub. Util. Code. Table 1 in the Bluebook has the information you will need to construct statutory citations for any state.