Retrieving a statute by citation is very straightforward. On any platform, you merely enter the citation (the section symbol is not needed) and click search.

While we are looking at the statute, let’s review a few of the features that commercial platforms add. You can navigate to the prior or next sections of the code using these buttons. You can also use the table of contents to review the overall structure of the law and jump to different sections. Scrolling down will give you the history of the statute under “Credits” and links to the public law. Related cases are available under “Notes of Decisions” which has several links. Additional related materials can be found under “Citing References” and “Context & Analysis.”

When looking for statutes, you don’t always have the citation, so there are a variety of ways to search for them. Another way is by using the “popular name” of a law. Not all laws have popular names, but if you are looking for one that does, you can use the Popular Name Table. We are going to use it to find the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The easiest way to find the Popular Name Table for the U.S. Code on Westlaw is to start typing the name of the resource. Then select it from the suggestions. Scroll through the A’s until you get to the name of the law. When you click on it, you will see how the various sections of the Public Law were codified.

If you don’t have a popular name or citation, you can search for keywords based on your fact pattern or subject. This can be quite difficult if you do not have unique keywords to work with. A lot of statutory language is very similar and locating the specific statute you want can be very difficult, so although this may be the first technique you want to try when searching for statutes, examine what other information you might have about the statute to see if there is a better way to find it, such as a citation or popular name.

Imagine that you did not know the name or citation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

It’s helpful to preemptively narrow your search to just the type of material you want to look at. Since we want to search the U.S. Code, start by selecting “Statutes & Court Rules,” then select “U.S. Code Annotated.”

Now that we are searching only the U.S. Code, we will enter discriminate disability “public accommodation” (the quotation marks will tell Westlaw to search for that phrase, not just those terms).

Most of these results will be relevant. Remember that the “Definitions” section of most statutes comes at or near the beginning: that would make this a logical place to start.

If you need to use free resources, Congress.gov is the official website for U.S. federal legislative information. It also provides a link to the Office of the Law Revision Counsel’s online version of the U.S. Code. If we search for disability "public accommodation" we will find several sections of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Note that this site’s search engine is very finicky – if we add the term “discriminate,” we get no results. You may have to play with your search terms a bit to get a good
results set. Alternatively, you can use Google’s “site search” feature to search only this domain for the terms you like. This technique is useful for many government websites which have search engines that may not be as elastic or forgiving as you are used to.