Using Westlaw’s Headnotes to Perform Targeted Searches

Since the subject matter and vocabulary of headnotes are more limited, when you search headnotes you will not capture conversational asides or dicta that may be present in the full text of the opinion.

To search headnotes, you must first browse to the type of cases you want to search. If we wanted to search for mandatory authority in the state of New Hampshire for a case on the fair use defense, first click on State Materials, then the state in question, then “All State and Federal Cases.” From there, click the “advanced” link underneath the orange SEARCH button.

Because we have limited our search to cases, we have the option to search a very specific set of fields such as “Judge,” “Docket Number,” or “Headnotes.”

The advanced search function requires you to use terms and connectors, or Boolean, searching techniques. If you have forgotten the connectors and expanders for this type of searching, a brief list of them can be found in the right-hand column. A diagram of the searchable fields is also available.

Scroll down to the headnote field and enter your terms and connectors search.

Your result set will only include cases whose headnotes match your query. Remember to try various types of research techniques to get a thorough grounding in your subject.

If you have additional questions, please consult with a reference librarian