HOW TO: RESEARCH STATUTES IN PRINT

Purpose

The purpose of this guide is to give a very basic introduction to researching statutes in print.

Introduction

Statutes are what most lay people think of when they talk about “the law.” These are laws that are passed by legislative bodies, both state and federal.

After a law is passed, it is assigned a public law number and is printed in a pamphlet called a “slip law.” This is the first full-text publication of the law as it was passed. These slip laws are later collected and republished chronologically by legislative session and are called “session laws.” The federal series where the session laws are published is called the Statutes at Large. Because a single act can cover a broad array of legal issues, they are later broken down by topic and reorganized into the state or federal code.

Session laws are most useful for researchers who are interested in the exact text of the law as it was passed. Most researchers looking for the current law on a specific topic will most likely be looking at the codified law.

There are official and unofficial versions of the federal code and most state codes. The official code is the version that must be cited in court, and you should always check your research in the official version to ensure that there are no typos. The official federal code is the United States Code (U.S.C.), which is published by the federal government. This code contains only the text of the law along with limited comments on its history. Unofficial versions of the code, such as the United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.) or the United States Code Service (U.S.C.S.), are published by private companies and contain the text of the code along with helpful annotations other related statutes, case law, regulations and more.

Most states do not publish a print version of their code themselves, but instead designate one of the privately published versions to be their official version. The official version will have a comment in the front of the volume. For example, LexisNexis publishes the official version of the North Carolina General Statutes, as can be seen in the front of each volume which has a message from the Attorney General of North Carolina certifying that the version is official. Almost all of these official privately-published state codes are annotated.

Finding Statutory Law

1. Using a Citation

If you already have the citation to the statute, then the work is mostly done. A citation for a federal law typically follows the format of below:
28 U.S.C. § 1291

28 is the title number, U.S.C. is the abbreviation of the publication, and 1291 is the specific section within that title. If you are not familiar with the abbreviation for the publication you can ask a librarian or look it up in *Bieber’s Dictionary of Legal Abbreviations* (reference collection, KF246 .B46 2009).

There is more variety among state statute citations. For example the North Carolina General Statutes puts both numbers at the end:

N.C. Gen. Stat. § 145-31

The first number (145) is the chapter number and the second (31) is the section number. Each state has its own system, but generally the larger section comes first then the subsection (i.e. title then section, or chapter then section, or sometimes, title then chapter then section). To see a list of the citation style of each state, see Table 1 of *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation* 19th ed. (reserves, KF 245.B58 2010).

2. Using the Popular Names Table
Sometimes Congress gives a federal law a popular name known as a “short title,” such as “No Child Left Behind” or “The Patriot Act.” If you know the popular name of your statute, you can use the popular names table located at the end of the set with the indexes to find your law. The popular names are listed in alphabetical order and provide the act’s public law number, Statutes at Large citation, and citation to the United States Code.

3. Using the Index
If you do not have a citation and do not know the popular name for the specific law you are looking for, then use the index to look up keywords related to your search. The indexes are located at the end of the statutes.

**Updating Your Research**
Because the law is constantly changing, it is important to update your research. Most statute series have pocket parts, which are little paperback pamphlets that fit in the back of each volume. These pocket parts include laws or amendments that have been passed between the time the volume was printed and when that pocket part was printed. Sometimes the pocket part is too thick to fit in the back of the volume and is published as a free-standing paperback booklet called a supplement that’s shelved right next to the volume it belongs with. And lastly, some series have paperback booklets that include really recent changes for the whole series—changes that have occurred after the pocket parts have been printed. These supplements are housed that the end of the entire series, by the indexes. If you have a citation for a law but it doesn’t appear to exist, be sure to check the pocket part or pamphlets first—it may have been passed recently.
Because the printed versions are never entirely current, you must always update your research online using either Westlaw’s Keycite or Lexis’ Shepard’s to make sure you have the most current information.

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