



J. MICHAEL GOODSON LAW LIBRARY

DUKE UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW

Research Refresher: Free & Low-Cost Legal Research

I. Lowering Your Research Bills

- It is *always* cheaper to **retrieve a known citation** than to search on Lexis or Westlaw!
- Begin your research with a **print resource** (such as legal encyclopedia, ALR, hornbook, treatise). This will help you identify the leading cases, statutes, or key numbers—*then* retrieve and update the citations on Lexis or Westlaw.
- If print resources are unavailable (or unhelpful) for your topic, **test out your search terms** in free or low-cost legal research services. (See below for the sources available to Duke Law students.)
- Keep in mind that it is sometimes appropriate to use the higher-cost services. **Examples:** you are under an extremely tight deadline; you need the precision of key number/headnote searching for your very complex topic; your research involves legislation across multiple jurisdictions (50-state surveys); or the low-cost services are not up to date for your topic (especially with statutes).

II. Low-Cost Legal Research Services

- **Considerations**
 - **Content:** Most include a fairly large current and historical federal case law collection; some services also include state cases. Codes and session laws are available in most services; some also include practice material like forms and bar publications.
 - **Currency:** Case law is generally updated within 1-2 days on these services; legislation may take longer. Just like on Lexis/Westlaw, you must check the “currency” links to determine the last time the database was updated. (Legislation, in particular, can be slow to update.) Generally speaking, the citators offered on these low-cost services are not an adequate substitute for Shepard’s/KeyCite reports.
 - **Quirks:** generally, these services offer similar field/segment searching and commands as Lexis and Westlaw (for example, **/s** to place search terms in the same sentence). However, each service has its own unique fields and search commands. Take advantage of the “help” pages.
- **Loislaw** (<http://www.loislawschool.com>): Federal and state case law, codes, session laws; limited access to legal treatises and bar publications for selected states on student accounts. Search functions are similar to Lexis/Westlaw command/field searching; offers “GlobalCite” service to update research.
See reference librarian for a registration code, which continues for 6 months after graduation.
- **Casemaker** (<http://www.casemakerx.com> or via free NC Bar student membership): Legal research service provided to bar members in 28 states (including NC: <http://www.ncbar.org/join>). **CasemakerX**, for law students, incorporates social networking features. Register with your Duke e-mail to access state and federal case law, statutes, constitutions, and legal forms. State libraries include some city codes, bar journals, and law reviews.
- **Versuslaw** (<http://www.versuslaw.com>): Students can register for free access to the case law databases (“Standard Plan”); trial accounts must be reactivated each year (possibly with some difficulty).
- **FastCase** (<http://www.fastcase.com>): Free 24-hour trial available. Most non-case law material links to freely available government websites. Offers natural language search option. Free front end via **Public Library of Law** (<http://www.plol.org>).

III. Free Sources & Strategies

- **Considerations**
 - **What** kind of document are you looking for?
 - **Who** would be responsible for maintaining it in print?
 - **Where** might it be posted online?
 - **When** was it posted or last updated?

- **Mega-Sites**
 - **FindLaw** (<http://www.findlaw.com>)
 - **Justia** (<http://www.justia.com>)
 - **Legal Information Institute** (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/>)
 - **LexisONE** (<http://www.lexisone.com>)
 - **PreCYdent** (<http://www.precydent.com>)
 - **Public Library of Law** (<http://www.plol.org/>)
 - **Public.Resource.Org** (<http://public.resource.org/index.html>)
 - **AltLaw (beta)** (<http://www.altlaw.org/>): federal appellate case law only.

If You Need...	Consider This...	And Try...
Court decisions	Recent decisions are often posted on the court's own website, and/or legal research mega-sites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any of the Mega-Sites above • Court's own website (find link in <i>Federal-State Court Directory</i>: in Reference collection or http://library.duke.edu/metasearch/db/id/DUK02826)
Court documents (such as briefs)	Sometimes available through court's own website or mega-sites (especially appellate level). Amicus briefs of interest groups may be posted on own website.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supreme Court briefs posted on ABA site for current term; archive (1999-)available on FindLaw Sup. Ct. Resource Center (http://supreme.lp.findlaw.com/index.html) • PACER for federal court filings (low-cost) • Court Records & Briefs research guide: http://www.law.duke.edu/lib/researchguides/records_briefs
Statutes & legislative info	Usually posted on legislature website.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal: FDsys (http://fdsys.gpo.gov) for U.S. Code, bills, and public laws; THOMAS (http://thomas.loc.gov) for bill summary and status. Research guide at http://www.law.duke.edu/lib/researchguides/fedleg.html • States: links at http://www.ncsl.org/public/leglinks.cfm • Municipal: search for municipal code publisher
Regulations	Admin codes and registers on government website. Agency regulations on agency website.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal: FDsys (http://fdsys.gpo.gov) for Fed. Reg.; link to GPO Access for CFR. Research guide at http://www.law.duke.edu/lib/researchguides/fedadminlaw. • States: http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/statelaw.html
Forms and practice material	Required court forms often free on court site.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Court's own website • FindLaw, LexisONE, PLoL all good places to check.
Public Records for Companies	Corporation records maintained at state level.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check secretary of state where incorporation took place to search for business filings.
Public Records about People	Most records (births, deaths, marriages, real estate, voter registration, property taxes) maintained by county.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look on county government site for a search page. • Not sure of the county? Check map at http://quickfacts.census.gov/cgi-bin/qfd/lookup.