

# How to Effectively Do Legal Research

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Research is a vital part of just about any legal profession. Whether you're still in law school or working at your very own practice, legal research plays an essential role in helping you make informed decisions, craft compelling arguments, and enhance your working knowledge. However, there's no denying that research can be a daunting prospect for even the most seasoned professionals.

In years past, legal research meant navigating dusty old libraries and sifting through gargantuan law books. Now, however, the advent of technology and research-focused software has revolutionized the research process. More than ever before, it is critical to have a solid grasp of the best practices of results-driven research to make the most of every tool available.

Streamline your next case by following these tips for the most effective legal research.

## Identify a clear focus for your research

Just like delivering an argument in court, successful research requires careful planning and preparation ahead of time. When you start researching a new case, be sure to decide on a single goal or objective that you hope to achieve with your research. Doing so will enable you to ensure that your study yields beneficial results.

Don't get caught up in researching every little nuance and minor detail when you've just started researching. Instead, keep your main goal in mind and let it guide you as you begin analyzing and annotating cases, articles, and other materials. It may be helpful to write down a one-sentence mission statement for your research to help you keep your intentions in mind.

After you've clarified your objective, begin committing your case to heart. Memorize all the vital information in the case, determine its jurisdiction, and develop a firm understanding of the circumstances surrounding the memo. Understanding all this core information while maintaining a core focus can set you up for success later in the research process.

## Organize your research

Once you have thoroughly acquainted yourself with your case and ironed out your goals, take steps

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to ensure your research process is orderly and organized.

Logging your research is among the most critical things you can do to optimize your studies. By keeping track of the sources you find and your methodology for referencing them, it will be easy for you to find the sources you need when you start writing and explain your research strategy.

You have multiple options available for logging your work. While you can manually write down your thoughts on paper, you can also take advantage of a CRM or document management system to keep track of your work in one place, digitally. Regardless of the method you use, the best research logging practices typically include recording the date, keywords, process, and required follow-ups for each source you find.

## Use the right search terms

If you plan to use an online database or search engines in your research, draw on the details and goals you identified in your initial analysis to develop a handful of precise search terms and key phrases. For example, let's say you have questions about Texas copyright law. In that case, your search query might consist of a few keywords like "copyright infringement" and "Texas law." Using specific terms in your searches will make it easier to discover the most relevant results.

Additionally, you can narrow down your queries by using [Boolean search terms](#). For example, if your search includes the keywords "copyright infringement" and "Texas law," then search engines will return any results that feature **either** "copyright infringement" **or** "Texas law." However, if you only want sources that include both keywords, then use a Boolean like AND between them to tell the search engine to return results that contain the specified keywords. Using Booleans in this way can help you quickly find the sources you're looking for without having to wade through potentially unnecessary results.

## Draw from diverse sources

When you're conducting legal research, it's a good rule of thumb to try and draw from many different kinds of sources. Consider referencing a blend of primary sources, such as the original case and witness testimonies, as well as secondary sources like commentaries, dictionaries, and journals as you conduct your study. In the process, you'll assemble more comprehensive information supported by a varied assortment of authorities.

Even cases that lack the outcome you desire can provide helpful insights for your purposes. For example, a case that ended in a guilty verdict can still offer valuable examples and precedents to consider as you're building a defense closing argument.

Additionally, finding one relevant source can naturally lead you toward many others. Let's say you find one law review that's filled with helpful information. The chances are that this article will provide a treasure trove of references to other similarly valuable resources. Legal databases can make this process even more accessible, as many platforms have built-in functionality that can direct users to related articles, headnotes, and other sources.

It may be tempting to limit yourself to only the most recent sources for your research. However, that should not always be your tactic. Even decades-old cases can contain crucial details or set important precedents that affect your current project – provided that they haven't been overruled or the law hasn't changed in the meantime, of course.

## **Pace yourself where you can**

One unfortunate reality that every lawyer must face in their career is that legal research rarely leads to the correct answer on the first try. Research can be inherently time-consuming, and it can be easy to get sucked into an endless loop of churning through databases searching for the perfect statute, article, or case.

However, the best researchers know when to stop. As you research, remember to take a step back every so often to evaluate your progress. If you find yourself encountering the same sources time and again, or if you've made all the headway you can realistically accomplish given your project's timeframe, then it may be time to take a break or move onto writing.

## **Takeaway**

There's no denying that legal research can be an overwhelming process. However, taking steps like these to boost your efficiency and manage your time can empower you to overcome even the most challenging research-related tasks.

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