

Government Documents Center Help Guides

Series F - Locating Federal Materials

Part 1 - Case Law

Case law includes judicial opinions on legal questions that arise when parties bring a case before that court. Decisions of administrative agencies are also reported in some instances.

The lowest level of federal courts are the district courts that try cases. The Circuit Courts are the initial level of appellate courts in most cases (sometimes district court review administrative agency decision), and the United States Supreme Court is the final state authority on questions of law. The Supreme Court grants certiorari or agrees to hear, only select cases. Primarily, the Supreme Court hears cases that raise constitutional issues or where there is a conflict among Circuit Courts. For a map of the federal circuits, go to <http://www.law.emory.edu/FEDCTS/>. For an explanation of the federal court system see <http://www.uscourts.gov>.

Sources of federal case law:

Source	Web address	Coverage
LexisNexis Academic	http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Includes federal cases of all levels, 1789+ ~ Permits searches only within selected level ~ Provides Shepard's® which tracks updates and citations to cases for Supreme Court cases
Supreme Court	http://www.supremecourtus.gov	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Provides opinions, 2000- ~ Includes Court docket, schedule of cases to be heard ~ Includes Supreme Court Rules and information for practicing before the Court ~ Includes extras such as historical information, Justice profiles, a copy of the Constitution.
CQ Supreme Court Collection	http://library2.cqpress.com/SCC/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Selected cases -1968; all beginning 1969 ~ Text of decisions and voting blocks ~ Analysis, background, related cases
FindLaw	http://www.findlaw.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ~ Provides links to the federal judiciary web page. ~ Links to the federal district and circuit court websites, many of which provide opinions and other materials. Though the coverage generally does not go as far back as the LexisNexis cite provides, they provide the advantage of daily updates and are often the first source of their own opinions.

Records and Briefs

Federal opinions, particularly Supreme Court opinions, can be easy to find on the Web. More difficult to locate are records and briefs filed before the courts that present counsel's arguments . Some resources for briefs are as follows:

Source	Web address	Coverage
Findlaw	http://supreme.lp.findlaw.com/supreme_court/resources.html	Includes briefs starting with the 1999/2000 term.
BriefServe	http://www.briefserve.com	2000-

Another good source of briefs are special interest groups and parties to the action in question. For example, the **University of Michigan** posts all briefs and other information related to its affirmative action cases, the **American Civil Liberties Union**, <http://www.aclu.org>, provides information, including briefs, for cases of interest to the organization such as privacy, death penalty cases, racial and women's rights, and the **Electronic Privacy Information Center**, <http://www.epic.org>, includes briefs and other information regarding cases related to electronic privacy, whether they are participants in the litigation or not.

Because federal courts examine constitutional issues, a version of the Constitution might be relevant to federal cases. The *Constitution of the United States Annotated* can be found at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/congress/senate/constitution/toc.html>. This includes the full text of the United States Constitution as well as cites to cases interpreting the Constitution and some brief summaries of those cases. It is provided by GPO Access, a service of the Government Printing Office.

Practice Questions

1. In *Eldred v. Ashcroft* (2002), the Supreme Court determined that an extension to the Copyright Act enacted by Congress was valid. Name one organization that filed an amicus brief of support for either side in this case.
2. What famous company was involved in the litigation decided at 334 U.S. 131?

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<http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/training/fedcase.pdf>