

# ***Law Student Guide to Free Legal Research*** **Sarah Glassmeyer (2012)**

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# Research

Admit it. You didn't really pay that close attention in your legal research course. For a quick refresher, check out the [Research Primer](#) aka Everything You Wanted to Know About Legal Research but Were Scared to Ask aka How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Citators. Know all that already (or are otherwise ready to dive on in)? Great! Below are links to resources:

- [Primary Federal Law](#) – cases, codes, regulations
- [Secondary sources](#) – law reviews, forms, dictionaries, encyclopedias
- [Primary State Law](#) – cases, codes, regulations

You can also [print our guide to free legal research PDF](#).

## Primary Federal Law

There are many free sources of Federal law. For each type of federal law, we provide a description, the “best” source (bearing in mind that research is an individual process and you may find that you prefer one source over another) as well as other options for accessing it and, finally, how to make sure your law is up to date. Jump to:

- [U.S. Code](#)
- [Regulations](#)
- [Case law](#)

### Type of law: [U.S. Code](#)

**What is it:** The U.S. Code is all of the laws that have been passed by the US Congress that are currently in force. They are organized topically in sections called “titles.”

**Top Pick:** The best and easiest to navigate version of the US Code can be found at the Legal Information Institute. [Their copy](#) allows for browsing or searching (by title and in whole). There is also a [Popular Name Table](#) if you're not sure of an exact citation. (PROTIP: Wikipedia or even just googling the popular name is also good for determining the correct cite.) LII also provides an RSS feed for each title to keep up with updates.

#### **Other options:**

- [Justia](#)
- [United States Government Printing Office](#)

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**Updating:** If you use the LII version of the US Code, there is a box on the right hand side of the screen that links to updates for that section. Otherwise, you can check the [U.S. Code Classification Tables](#) from the U.S. House of Representatives to check if your law has been updated.

## Type of law: [Regulations](#)

**What is it:** Regulations are proposed by executive agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or Federal Drug Administration (FDA). A more complete list of agencies can be found [here](#). These agencies' proposed rules and regulation appear in the Federal Register, which is a daily publication of the federal government. After they are enacted, they are placed in the Code of Federal Regulations. Like the US Code, this is organized topically by "titles."

**Top Pick:** The [Government Printing Office Code of Federal Regulations](#) allows for quick browsing or searching from its initial page. (PROTIP: When possible, it will be less confusing to browse and drill down to get to the part that you want or search individual titles only.) The CFR is updated annually – one fourth of the volumes are done every quarter. When [browsing](#), the GPO version allows you to easily see when each volume of the CFR was last updated. That information is important when it comes time to update your law.

### **Other Options:**

- [Legal Information Institute](#)
- [Justia](#)

**Updating:** Updating CFR sections, frankly, sucks. First you need to ascertain when the CFR section you're looking at was published. The [revision dates](#) chart on GPO is very handy for this. Then you need to check the [List of Sections Affected](#) (LSA) for every month in between that date and the present. Finally, you need to check the [Current List of CFR Parts Affected](#) to catch anything that may have changed between the last LSA and now. Alternatively, you could just go to the government's [e-CFR](#) which is current as of the date written in red on the top of the screen.

## Type of law: [Case Law](#)

**What is it:** Case law is the law that appears primarily in appellate cases. There can be many issues decided in a single case and it's sometimes hard to determine the difference between the law created by the case and judicial dicta.

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**Top Pick:** Justia has an easy to navigate [U.S. Supreme](#) and [Appellate Court](#) search pages on its website. You can also browse by year or circuit.

**Other Options:**

- [Google Scholar Advanced Search](#) – at the bottom of the page, under “Legal Opinions and Journals” you can limit by jurisdiction
- [Legal Information Institute](#)
- [Public Library of Law](#)

**Updating:** There is only one truly free citator available at the present time. When using Google Scholar, you can see the cases that cite your case as well as snippets showing how it was cited. Unfortunately, it does not provide quick visual clues to see how your case has been treated by latter case law.

## Secondary Sources

Secondary resources are a great way to get a quick explanation of a topic, especially if you aren’t very familiar with it. Given the fact that these materials are written by experts, free quality versions are hard to come by. However, some are available. Jump to:

- [Dictionaries](#)
- [Encyclopedias](#)
- [Law Journal Articles](#)

**Resource:** [Dictionaries](#)- The law is filled with complex terminology and unique definitions for common terms. Specialized law dictionaries help sort them out.

*Sources:*

- [Justia](#)
- [Legal Information Institute Wex](#)
- [Law.com](#)

Source: [Encyclopedias](#) – Legal encyclopedias will provide a good overview of a topic and explain unfamiliar concepts in “plain English.”

- [Legal Information Institute Wex](#)
- [Zimmerman’s Legal Research Guide](#)
- [NOLO Press Legal Encyclopedia](#)

Source: [Law Journal Articles](#) – Law journals articles are great for getting broad overviews of a subject or in-depth looks at narrow topics. Getting to the content of the journals can

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sometimes be problematic, however more and more law journals are being placed online on the Free Web every day.

- [Google Scholar](#)
- [ABA Full Text Law Journal Search](#)
- [SSRN Legal Scholarship Network](#)

## State Law

The amount and quality of state law available for free on the Internet varies by jurisdiction. The following are pages or sites that will provide links to the state resources.

- [Justia](#)
- [Legal Information Institute](#)

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