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Free & Low-Cost Legal Research Options - Presentation Outline

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/lee_ryan/9/

Free and Low-Cost Legal Research Options*

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Slides & Outline available on TWEN *and* at: http://works.bepress.com/lee_ryan/.

[Free & Low-Cost Legal Research Sites](http://legalresearch.usfca.edu/FreeLegalResearchSites) — guide at
<http://legalresearch.usfca.edu/FreeLegalResearchSites>

Trade-offs — Content & Coverage Caveats

If “you get what you pay for,” what do you give up when you choose free or low-cost legal research options?

Here is some of what you'll miss —

- **Explanations and analysis of the law.** Free and low-cost legal research tools lack secondary sources like Witkin, practice guides, encyclopedias, law review articles, etc.
- **Annotated statutes/codes.** Adding annotations (*e.g.*, “notes of decisions” and links to secondary sources) is very expensive, so free and low cost tools omit them.
- **Powerful cite-checking tools for verifying the status of cases or statutes** — for figuring out if the authority you cite is still “good law.” Some free and low-cost tools have cite-checking options, but these are helpful *only for expanding your research* by finding similar cases. They are no substitute for Shepard's and KeyCite.
- **Access to older case law** — especially older cases from state courts and the lower federal courts.

Free Statutes and Regulations — Sites and Tips

These are currently among the best free sources for codes and regulations. But keep an eye on sites like Ravel and Casetext, which are starting to add statutes.

United States Code (statutes)

U.S. Code — Cornell Legal Information Institute

(<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text>)

Features

- Browse by Title.
- Search by citation.
- Full-text search (via site-wide “Search” box).
- Usually current to within less than a year. Links to government sites for more current legislation.

* Based on “Find it Free and Fast on the Net: Strategies for Legal Research on the Web,” National Business Institute Seminar, June 5, 2012, Oakland, California.

Code of Federal Regulations (administrative regulations)

C.F.R. — Cornell Legal Information Institute

(<https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text>)

Features

- Browse by Title.
- Full-text search (via site-wide “Search” box).

For the official C.F.R., visit FDSys, the Gov’t Printing Office’s Federal Digital System at <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collectionCfr.action?collectionCode=CFR>.

California Codes (statutes)

California Code Search — California Legislative Information Site

(<http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes.xhtml>)

Features

- Browse by Code.
- Search by citation.
- Basic full-text search.

California Code of Regulations (administrative regulations)

Cal. Code of Regulations — Office of Administrative Law

(<http://ccr.oal.ca.gov/>)

Features

- “[Search for a Specific Regulatory Section](#)” (find by citation).
- [Search for Words](#) (Terms & Connectors keyword search, powered by Westlaw).
- Browse by Title (the default; browsing via a list of CCR Titles).
- [Search within a Title](#) (perform a keyword search within just one Title of the CCR.)
- See which regulations apply to specific agencies with the “[Find a Specific Regulatory Agency](#).”

Other States’ Statutes & Regulations

For access to other states’ statutes/codes and administrative regulations, visit —

Cornell Legal Information Institute — Get the Law / State Law / Listing by State

(<https://www.law.cornell.edu/states/listing>)

Select your state to see what statutes and regulations (and, often, other primary law) are available.

Basic statutes and regulations are also available via the **Public Library of Law** (see below) and the **free Fastcase app** (see below).

Free Case Law — Sites and Tips

A Word About Coverage

No free site has everything. Even if you take all the free sites together, they do not have all cases from all jurisdictions and all dates. Keep in mind:

- Some sites don't have federal district court cases at all.
- Most free sites lack *some* federal court cases. (Ravel has all published federal cases.)
- Most free sites with U.S. Supreme Court cases have all of them — but a few don't.
- Some sites lack older (often pre-1950) state court cases.
- Only two free sites have all (or almost all) California cases.

The Best Sites

Google Scholar — Case Law

(<http://scholar.google.com/>) — Select "Case Law" before searching!

Features

- Good relevance ranking.
- The OR connector, the * operator, and phrase searching allow for a sort of terms and connectors searching. (Google's default is, of course, natural language.)
- Allows searching across multiple courts; allows selecting specific courts.
- Updating is rapid; new cases are generally added fairly promptly.
- Some cases have "star pagination" for pinpoint cites.
- Has "cited by" and "how cited" features — for expanding your research.
- Occasionally has more than one version of the same case — because Google probably gets the cases from several overlapping sources.

What's available

Explicit coverage information is hard to find, but coverage appears to be:

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1791 to the present
- Federal court of appeals: approximately 1924 to the present
- Federal district courts: approximately 1924 to the present
- California state courts: 1934 to the present (with some earlier cases)
- Other states' high and appellate courts: 1950 to the present, *generally* (Coverage may vary.)

Tips

- Use the post-search filters (on the left-hand side of the results page) to limit by court or date.
- Use the "Select courts" post-search filtering option to select multiple federal and/or state courts to search at the same time.
- Apply general power search tips for Google. (See next page.)

Guides and tutorials — Google generally

General Google Scholar search tips from Google:

<http://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/help.html>

Basic Google search tips:

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/134479?hl=en>

More Google search tips:

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/2466433>

California Official Reports — Public Access Web Site

(<http://www.lexisnexis.com/clients/CACourts/>)

Features

- Flexible searching. Options include:
 - By Terms (natural language)
 - Advanced (Terms & Connectors)
 - By Citation
 - By Party Name
 - By Judge
- Advanced (Terms & Connectors) search appears to have all the power of Lexis's Terms & Connectors search engine. For example, you may use:
 - Boolean operators: and, or, not
 - proximity connectors: w/n, pre/n, w/p, w/s
 - field searching: e.g., dissentby(chin)
 - truncators (e.g., neglign!) and wildcards (e.g., kn*w)
- Updated only four times per year. To find the most recent California cases, use the Fastcase free app (described below), or Google Scholar.
- Lacks "star pagination" for pinpoint cites.
- Cases include colored Shepard's signals — *but* there is no free access to the actual Shepard's reports. Also, the signals may be out of date because the database is updated only four times a year.
- Natural language search results are limited to the 100 "most relevant cases," — even though the search screen says "Retrieve the 25 most relevant cases based on your input."
- Advanced ("Terms & Connectors") search results are not necessarily limited to 25 "most relevant" cases! You will get as many cases as fit your search terms. (If you do get limited to 25 results, see "Tips," below, on how to override this.)

What's available

This is the only source of California case law that extends all the way back for both Supreme Court and Courts of Appeal cases. Only published cases are included. New opinions are added quarterly. Coverage is:

- California Supreme Court: 1850 to the present (all opinions)
- California Courts of Appeal: 1905 to the present (all opinions)
- Appellate Department of Superior Court: 1934 to the present (all opinions)

Tips

- If you hit a “25 most relevant cases” limit, follow these steps override:
 1. Select “Advanced” search.
 2. Run a really broad search — such as for the word “law.”
 3. At the next screen (“More than 3000 results!”), select “Edit Search.”
 4. Enter the Terms & Connectors search you actually want to run. You will get as many results as fit your search parameters.

Intriguing, Promising Newcomers

Ravel — “a new view on legal research”

(<https://www.ravellaw.com/>)

Ravel has basic free (“Open”) accounts (which don’t require registration).

There are also paid “Advanced,” “Elite,” and “Enterprise” accounts.

USF Law has “Advanced” account access with “Judge Analytics.”

Features

- Free search shows results as a list. (“Advanced” plans allow users to see results in “Visual Search,” which reveals numbers of citations to a case, and citations between cases. Larger circles indicate a more “important” case, based on number of later citations. Lines between cases show cases that cite one another. Width and color of lines show amount and “direction” of citations. Visual Search results can be sorted by court or relevance.)
- Both natural language and terms and connectors searching are possible. Terms and connectors uses the OR and AND connectors, as well as numerical and grammatical (same sentence and same paragraph) proximity connectors.
- Allows searching across multiple courts; allows selecting specific courts.
- Updating seems decent; new cases are generally added fairly promptly.
- Some cases have “star pagination” for pinpoint cites.

What’s available —

Free “Open” account coverage is currently as follows. (Ravel, in collaboration with the “Free the Law” project, plans to offer *all* published cases from all U.S. courts.)

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1754 to the present
- Federal court of appeals: 1891 (inception) to the present
- Federal district courts: at least 1789 to the present
- State courts: at least 1950 to the present. For 10 state — including California — all published cases are available

Advanced account coverage *adds*:

- Individual case analytics, judicial analytics, and cost recovery tools

Guides and tutorials —

Ravel FAQ and Help Center: <https://ravellaw.zendesk.com/hc/en-us>

Casetext, the law annotated

(<https://casetext.com/>)

Casetext promotes itself as deploying data science, machine learning, and natural language processing to make legal research more efficient and effective.

(For a fee, users can subscribe to CARA, an add-on to Casetext that uses AI and machine learning to “recommend a list of cases that are highly relevant to, but not yet cited in, your brief.”)

Features

- Searching is primarily natural language, but Casetext also supports the “w/N” proximity operator.
- Searches across all content. Post-search filters let you narrow your results by jurisdiction.
- Results can be sorted by relevance, date, and citation count.
- Registered users can write quick posts (“Insights”) related to cases. These “Insights” show up with cases in search results.
- Case display includes “summaries” of the case extracted from other cases that discuss the case you’re viewing
- Case display includes “key passages” extracted from the case.
- Case display includes links to and excerpts from cases that cite to the case you’re viewing.
- “Heat map” on the left-hand side of the screen displaying a case shows the most-cited portions of that case.
- Citing Cases feater — for expanding your research.
- “Star pagination” for pinpoint cites is usually available.
- Free registration.
- Updating may not be entirely current for the lower federal courts. Updating appears to be good for U.S. Supreme Court Cases.

What’s available

Current coverage is:

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1791 to the present
- Federal court of appeals: from 1925 to the present
- Federal district courts: from 1925 to the present
- State appellate court cases from 1925 to the present

Casetext has some state statutes (including California) and may add more. Casetext currently has the U.S. Code and the Code of Federal Regulations.

Guides and tutorials —

Casetext Search guide & content information:

<https://casetext.com/search-queries>

Other Good Free Sites

Public Library of Law

(<http://www.plo.org/> — Free registration required to view the full text of cases)

Features

- Uses the Fastcase search engine, which is fairly powerful.
- Choice of natural language and terms and connectors searching. Terms and connectors uses: OR and AND connectors; the W/n proximity connector.
- Has “star pagination” for pinpoint cites.
- Updating generally seems to be good.

What’s available

Coverage is broader for U.S. Supreme Court cases and for federal court of appeals cases than for state court cases. Coverage, generally, is:

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1754 to the present
- Federal courts of appeal: 1950 to the present
- Federal district courts: *none*
- State supreme and appellate courts, including California: 1997 to the present

Also includes basic state statutes/codes, administrative regulations, state and federal court rules, and constitutions.

Tips

- Use “Advanced Options” to select the desired court/state, and to limit by date.

Guides and tutorials —

- The “Resources for Getting Started” box on the home page has good tutorials and “How to” information.

Fastcase Free Case Law App (with basic statutes)

Fastcase iPhone/iPad/Android App

(iPad — <http://www.fastcase.com/ipad/>. iPhone — <http://www.fastcase.com/iphone/>
Android — <http://www.fastcase.com/android/>)

Features

- Natural language is default. Terms & Connectors also available.
- Includes a basic “Authority Check” function.
“Authority Check” shows how often a case in your results is cited by other cases *on Fastcase* and how often it is cited by other cases *within your search results*.
- Updating is rapid; new cases are added promptly.
- Cases have “star pagination” for pinpoint cites.
- Free to download *and* free to use. (Registration is required.)

What's available

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1790 to the present
- Federal courts of appeal: 1925 to the present
- Federal district courts: 1925 to the present
- California Supreme Court and Courts of Appeal: 1950 to the present
- Other state supreme and appellate courts: dates vary

Also includes basic state statutes/codes.

Low-Cost Legal Research Options

These are among the best low-cost legal research options.

Also, depending on the size and scope of your practice, you may be able to negotiate a relatively affordable, fixed-rate contract for Lexis or Westlaw (usually for a subset of materials for your state or practice area).

Fastcase – “premium edition”

(Fastcase is available at no cost to current USF students, faculty and staff. Link for other subscribers: <http://www.fastcase.com/>)

Pricing: <http://www.fastcase.com/subscription/>

- \$65 per month or \$695 per year — for an option that *excludes* Federal district courts and bankruptcy courts.
- \$95 per month or \$995 per year — for an option that *includes* the Federal district courts and bankruptcy courts.

24-hour free trials are available at <https://www.fastcase.com/subscription/>.

(Remember: the Fastcase **app** is free — but has fewer features and less non-case-law content than Fastcase “premium.”)

Features

- Natural language or “Keyword” (Terms & Connectors) searching.
Terms & Connectors operators are:
 - AND OR NOT w/n**
 - “ ” — exact phrase
 - * — expander
 - ? — single-character wild card
- Post-search filters, including “Search Within” to help you narrow search results.
- Interactive timeline result display — helps identify relevant cases by showing those that are cited most frequently (a) in all the cases in your search results and (b) in all the cases on Fastcase.
- “Forecite” feature suggests other possibly-relevant cases that do not have your search terms.
- Authority Check — to help expand your research by finding other cases that cite your case. “Bad Law Bot” uses *computer algorithms* (not human editing) to flag cases that are *potentially* “bad law.” (Fastcase has acknowledged that “We do not hold Authority Check out as a complete replacement for services such as Shepard’s or KeyCite – both of which we like very much.”)
- Cases have “star pagination” for pinpoint cites.
- Many options for sorting results (including relevance, date, frequency of citation in search results, and frequency of citation in entire database).
- Individual subscribers can deploy alerts to update search results.
- Individual subscribers can add documents to “Favorites.”

What's available — cases

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1790 to the present
- Federal courts of appeal: 1925 to the present
- Federal district courts: 1932 to the present
- California Supreme Court and Courts of Appeal: 1950 to the present
- Other state supreme and appellate courts: at least 1950 to the present (and, for many states, earlier cases as well)

What's available — other content, which includes (for us at USF):

- U.S. Code
- Selected state statutes/codes and constitutions
- Selected state administrative regulations
- Court rules: federal and state
- Selected state attorney general opinions

Casemaker

(<http://www.casemakerlegal.com/>)

Access for USF law students?

USF law students have free access to Casemaker for Law Schools (<http://www.casemakerx.com/>). Register with your usfca.edu email address at: <http://www.casemakerx.com/signup.aspx>.

Products: <http://www.casemakerlegal.com/Products.aspx>

Pricing: <http://www.casemakerlegal.com/BuyNow.aspx>

- \$60 per month or \$600 per year — for Casemaker alone
- \$95 per month or \$950 per year — for Casemaker Pro, which adds CaseCheck+ (for cite-checking), Case Maker Digest (daily summaries of new cases), and Cite Check Brief Analyzer.

Features

- Universal search bar — to search across content.
- Search by keyword, citation, section, party, docket number.
- Terms & Connectors and natural language search options. Terms & Connectors operators are: AND OR NOT w/n
- Folders for saving your work and "Notes" feature for annotating documents.
- Basic citation checking via "CaseCheck" (for expanding your research). Includes a timeline for subsequent citations.
- "Star pagination" for pinpoint cites to cases.
- How-to information at: <http://www.casemakerlegal.com/LearningCenter.aspx>.
- Apps for iOS/Apple and Android devices.

What's available — case law and other content

- U.S. Supreme Court: 1790 to the present
- Federal courts of appeal: 1880 to the present
- Federal district courts: 1925 to the present
- California Supreme Court: 1850 to the present
- California Courts of Appeal: 1905 to the present
- Other state supreme and appellate courts: dates vary

Depending on the state, Casemaker may also have: state statutes; state administrative regulations; state administrative agency opinions; state attorney general opinions; ethics opinions; jury instructions; and selected court rules.

VersusLaw

(<http://www.versuslaw.com/>)

Access for USF law students?

USF law students have free access to the "Premium Plan" content. Register at:
<http://www.versuslaw.com/lawschool/lawschoolinfo.aspx>.

Features

- Uses Terms & Connectors searching. Terms & Connectors operators are: AND OR NOT w/n
- V.Cite for basic citation checking (for expanding your research) — in Premium and Professional plans.
- No star pagination for pinpoint cites. (Uses paragraph numbers instead.)
- Decent collection of Native American tribal court decisions.

What's available (coverage) and Pricing —

Standard Plan — \$18.95 per month (\$227.40 per year).

Federal cases (including district court cases), state appellate case law, and Tribal courts.

Premium Plan — \$29.95 per month (\$359.40 per year).

V.Cite citator, enhanced search options, links to state statute and regulatory materials.

Professional Plan — \$44.95 per month (\$539.40 per year).

Premium Plan content, plus additional federal specialty practice courts, and current versions of the U.S. Code and Code of Federal Regulations.

AccessLaw — for California law
(<http://www.accesslaw.com/>)

AccessLaw is owned by CEB (California Continuing Education of the Bar).

Pricing

- \$46 per month, \$135 quarterly or \$499 per year. Free trials are available.

Features

- Offers Terms & Connectors searching (“Search Using Keywords” or “Advanced Text Search”) and Natural Language searching, — for both case law searching and code searching.
- Search options for finding cases by citation, party name, or docket number.
- Updating is decent. New decisions are generally added promptly.
- “Case Alert” and “CaseFinder” — citators for basic citation checking (for expanding your research).
- “Code Annotator” — for finding cases that cite specific code sections.
- Helpful online user’s guide.

What’s available —

- California Supreme Court cases: 1934 to the present
- California Courts of Appeal cases: 1934 to the present (also includes several thousand selected pre-1934 cases from Cal. App. 1st Series)
- U.S. Supreme Court cases from 1792 forward
- Ninth Circuit slip opinions from 2001 to the present
- Current California Codes — browse-able or searchable
- Daily Opinion Service — new California, 9th Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court cases
- California legislation from 1996 to the present
- Judicial Council forms

Searching – General Dos and Don'ts

Do

- Start with fairly simple, straightforward searches.
- Run more than one search.
- Run your searches in more than one free case law site, to cross-check the results.
- Skim the relevant cases in your results to look for terms/words the courts use to discuss and analyze your client's issue.
This is especially important if you're researching an unfamiliar area of the law and don't yet have a grasp on the terminology typically used by judges and lawyers in that area of law.
As you identify useful terms, use them in new searches to expand your research.
- Seek a decent case to use as a springboard for further research.
Further research will often involve visiting a local law library, and can include: Shepardizing or KeyCiting your case; finding where your case is discussed in relevant practice guides and treatises (using tables of cases); finding cases like your case using the West Key Number Digests.
- Remember your local public law library — as a place to find good practice guides and treatises, annotated codes, non-free online legal research products, cite-checking tools like Shepard's and KeyCite, etc. See below for how to find the public law library nearest you.
- Visit the Zief Law Library if you're in the Bay Area. You'll find good practice guides and treatises, annotated codes, non-free online legal research products (including a practitioner-oriented WestlawNext subscription with Digests and KeyCite), etc.

Don't

- Expect to get all your research done just by searching with case-law databases.
Good research includes — and usually *begins* with — using secondary sources (like the Witkin publications, legal encyclopedias like Cal. Jur. 3d., practice guides, etc.), and using and annotated codes.
- Expect to get every potentially relevant case.
This is not generally possible even with the fee-based subscription databases like Lexis or Westlaw.
- Expect to find detailed documentation or help screens on the *free* sites. Most of the free sites have some basic how-to information, but many them — especially sites relying heavily on natural-language searching — don't go into detail about how their search engines work.
(Most of the *low-cost* sites do have good, extensive help features.)

Legal Research Portals

What is a legal research portal?

A legal research portal is a site that collects and organizes links to helpful sites. The links are generally organized by jurisdiction or topic.

Are portals still useful?

Portals were once very popular, but are now in decline, likely due to the increasing power and overwhelming popularity of search engines.

Portals that used to have good collections of links on legal topics (like securities law, or family law) seem not to be adding new links or weeding out bad ones.

Portals *are* still good for finding primary law — especially for states other than your own.

What good portals are still out there?

Cornell's LII (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/>).

This may be the best portal out there. Features include —

- “Get the Law” (https://www.law.cornell.edu/lii/get_the_law), which includes:
Links to state laws (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/states/listing>).
- Legal Encyclopedia & Dictionary (“Wex”) (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex>) —
 - Articles on legal topics: https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/wex_articles
(e.g., Immigration, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/immigration> — an overview with links to resources)
 - Definitions of terms
- Some case law (Federal court of appeals cases from the mid-1990s to the present; some but not all U.S. Supreme Court cases; some state court cases).

Washlaw — Legal Research on the Web (<http://www.washlaw.edu/>)

Good for links to federal and state primary law sites. (Topical “Subject Index” (<http://www.washlaw.edu/subject/index.html>) has lots of broken links.)

Search engines as alternatives to portals

Search engines are of course very useful for finding sources of primary law.

For example, Google searches like the following can help you target sources of state statutes and cases, and other legal research materials.

nevada statutes

nevada case law

nevada "legal research"

illinois "legal research" site:.edu

health law research site:.edu

[These 2 searches target university sites — to find helpful guides created by law school research librarians.]

Your Public Law Library — Not Technically Free, but Free to You!

County/public law libraries — especially those in the larger counties — subscribe to various fee-based legal research databases that you can use for free if you visit the library in person.

Depending on the county, you may be able to use: some portion Westlaw or Lexis or both; Shepard's or KeyCite or both; CEB's OnLaw; some portion of HeinOnline; other fee-based legal research databases, such as Fastcase.

California Public Law Libraries —

<http://www.publiclawlibrary.org/>

Find the public law library nearest you —

<http://www.publiclawlibrary.org/law-libraries/>

Guides & Links

“Free and Low-Cost Legal Research Sites”

(<http://legalresearch.usfca.edu/FreeLegalResearchSites>) —

University of San Francisco, Dorraine Zief Law Library

Covers free sites for federal law, California law, and San Francisco local law.
Also includes major low-cost legal research sites.

“Free & Low Cost Legal Research” (<http://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/freelowcost>) —
Georgetown Law Library

A mix of free and low-cost options. The guide lists free options separately from low-cost options to minimize confusion.

Presentation Outline and Slides

[This outline](#) (with live links) and the [accompanying slides](#) (also with live links) are available for downloading on TWEN and on my bepress Selected Works site:
http://works.bepress.com/lee_ryan/.