Reading Legal Citations

What is a citation?

A citation is a reference to legal authorities and precedents such as statutes, cases, regulations and law review articles. Citations are used in arguments to courts, legal textbooks, law review articles and the like to establish or fortify the propositions argued.

Citations to legal materials follow a standard format which makes it possible for anyone using a law library to find cited cases, statutes, regulations, and law review articles.

Most legal citations consist of three basic parts:
1) the name of the case, statute, or article
2) a statement of where the item can be found in a multi-volume set of legal materials written as:
   volume number    name of publication (or set)    page number
3) a date

A complete case citation looks like this:


Legal citations may also contain additional information, such as an author’s name or the court that issues a decision, which helps the reader determine how authoritative or credible an item is.

Recently several jurisdictions have adopted format- and vendor-neutral citation forms, and other jurisdictions are likely to follow.

Below are examples of citations to cases, statutes, regulations and law review articles with explanations of the various parts. At the end of this guide is a listing of some common legal abbreviations used in citations.

CASES

United States Supreme Court

Lower Federal Court
“Universal” or “Vendor-Neutral” Case Citation as adopted by the Wisconsin State Bar
Jones v. Smith, 1996 Wis 47 ¶ 15

name of case year of decision
court case number paragraph number
Jones v. Smith, 1996 Wis 47 ¶ 15

STATUTES
Session Law

popular name public law# or chapter#

vol. title page year of book enacted
Code

popular name title# or chapter#

REGULATIONS
As Promulgated

vol. title of book

As Codified

LAW REVIEW ARTICLES


author & title of article   vol.#   journal name   page#   year of publication

SOME COMMON LEGAL ABBREVIATIONS

A., A.2d
A.L.R.
Am. Jur. 2d
C.F.R.
C.J.S.
C.M.R.
F., F.2d, F.3d
F. Appx.
F. Cas.
F.R.D.
F. Supp., F. Supp. 2d
L. Ed., L. Ed. 2d
M.G.L.A.
Mass.
Mass. Acts
Mass. L. Rev.
N.E., N.E.2d
N.W., N.W.2d
N.Y.S., N.Y.S.2d
P., P.2d, P.3d
S. Ct.
S.E., S.E.2d
S.W., S.W.2d, S.W.3d
So., So. 2d
Stat.
U.S.
U.S.C.
U.S.C.A.
U.S.C.S.

Atlantic Reporter
American Law Reports
American Jurisprudence (encyclopedia)
Code of Federal Regulations
Corpus Juris Secundum (encyclopedia)
Code of Massachusetts Regulations
Federal Reporter
Federal Appendix
Federal Cases
Federal Rules Decisions
Federal Supplement
Federal Register
Lawyers’ Edition Supreme Court Reports
Massachusetts General Laws Annotated
Massachusetts Reports
Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts
Massachusetts Appeals Court Reports
Massachusetts Appellate Decisions
Massachusetts Appellate Division Reports
Massachusetts Law Review
Massachusetts Register
North Eastern Reporter
North Western Reporter
New York Supplement
Pacific Reporter
Supreme Court Reporter
South Eastern Reporter
South Western Reporter
Southern Reporter
Statutes at Large
United States Reports
United States Code
United States Code Annotated
United States Code Service

Note: 2d indicates second series, 3d indicates third series. The series number is an essential part of the title.

For further information and abbreviations see: A Uniform System of Citation and Bieber’s Dictionary of Legal Abbreviations.

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