



Introduction

Secondary sources will usually lead you to the relevant primary sources. Of the different types of primary materials, statutes, whether state or federal, are typically the first type of primary source you should consult, even before cases, as many court decisions now turn on the interpretation of statutes rather than application of common law principles.

Publication of Statutes

After a bill is enacted into law, it receives a “chapter” number based on the order in which it was passed and is published as a **session law**. Collections of session laws are arranged chronologically. While they have various names at the state level, the collection of federal session laws is known as the *United States Statutes at Large*. Session laws include all laws passed during the legislative session, including laws that have no general application like appropriation acts or private acts applying only to specific individuals or entities. Although session laws constitute the authoritative, binding versions of most enacted laws, researchers don’t typically turn to session laws except for historical purposes.

Enacted laws of general application are next typically published in a **statutory code**. Codes are useful for researching statutes, as they contain only current legislation and are arranged by subject. Citations to statutes should be to the official code for your jurisdiction when available, but these official codes are sometimes unannotated. For research purposes, you will typically want to consult an annotated code, as these versions contain references to cases citing or interpreting the statute, important editorial and historical notes, and cross-references to relevant secondary sources.

Here are the official and unofficial codes at the federal level and in two selected states:

Legislature	Official Codes	Unofficial Codes
U.S. Congress	<i>United States Code</i> (unannotated)	<i>United States Code Annotated</i> (U.S.C.A.) (West) <i>United States Code Service</i> (U.S.C.S.) (annotated) (Lexis)
Georgia General Assembly	<i>Official Code of Georgia Annotated</i> (Lexis)	<i>West’s Code of Georgia Annotated</i>
Virginia General Assembly	<i>Code of Virginia 1950</i> (annotated) (Lexis)	<i>West’s Code of Virginia Annotated</i>

Locating Relevant Statutes

The easiest way to find statutes is to read relevant secondary sources, which will almost always provide citations to the controlling statutes for your area of law, whether in the main body of the text or in footnotes.

When using statutory codes online, you can **search the full text** for relevant keywords. But this approach can be difficult, as legislatures sometimes use technical or atypical language when drafting statutes.

Using an **index** can mitigate these difficulties. Most statutory codes contain indexes, although they may be available only in print. If you have access to an index, look for your keyword in the alphabetical list of index terms. The entries for each term will not only show you relevant code sections but may also provide cross-references to other relevant terms. An index often gives you more precise results than a full-text search.

Finally, a code's **table of contents** can be an easy way to identify relevant code sections near a section you've already found. Westlaw and Lexis each link to a code's table of contents at the top of each code section page.

History of Statutes

When interpreting statutory text, it's important to understand when a statute was first **enacted** and if/when it was subsequently **amended**. Historical information about a statute can be found after the main text of any code section. Westlaw calls this information "Credits":

Credits

Laws 1958, p. 693, § 1; Laws 2014, Act 566, § 2-4, eff. July 1, 2014.

Lexis calls this information "History":

History

Ga. L. 1958, p. 693, § 1; Ga. L. 2014, p. 404, § 2-4/SB 382.

The entries in the Credits/History section refer to individual laws enacted by the legislature and include the date of each law's enactment and a citation to the session law. The first entry generally shows the initial enactment of the code section, although in some cases the actual enactment may predate the first entry, especially when the code section was previously arranged under a different title. Subsequent entries show amendments to the code section. Westlaw and Lexis also provide explanatory notes on how the amendments changed the statutory text.

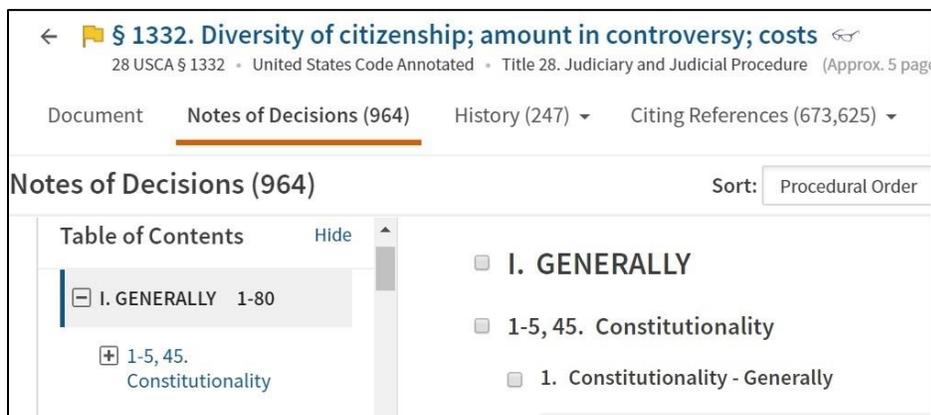
Statutory history is important because you generally apply the version of the law in effect when your fact pattern occurred. Also, you need to know if the cases and secondary sources you review are interpreting an earlier version of the statute. Westlaw’s “Compare Versions” feature lets you visualize exactly how amendments changed the text.

Interpreting Statutory Text

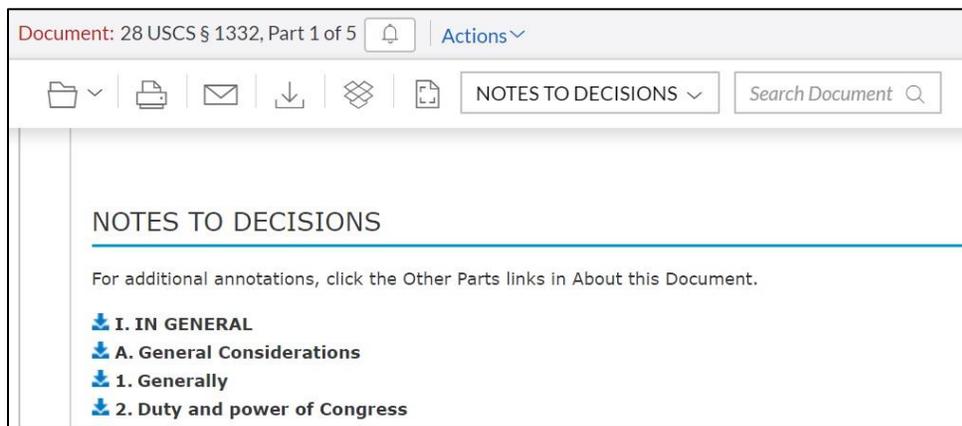
Read the controlling statutory text carefully, keeping in mind that statutes are frequently read together with other relevant statutes, given additional meaning by courts, explicated by legislative history, and expanded by applicable regulations. Note any questions that remain after reading the statutory text and consider how these other sources may provide potential answers.

Use the table of contents to easily find other relevant code sections nearby, including sections that define terms used in the code. Frequently these **definitions sections** will appear at the start of a title, chapter, or subchapter in the code. If a term is left undefined, courts may construe its meaning.

Westlaw and Lexis both provide citations to significant judicial decisions that have interpreted a code section. On Westlaw these are called **Notes of Decisions**:



Lexis calls them **Case Notes** or **Notes to Decisions**:



These **case annotations** are arranged by topic and provide brief summaries of the courts' interpretations. When a code section has many annotations, Westlaw or Lexis may split them into multiple web pages that you must examine individually.

If there are few or no case annotations available, you may want to consult KeyCite (Westlaw) or Shepard's (Lexis), tools that not only list all the judicial decisions that cite to a statute but also tell you whether the statute is still in force (e.g., whether it's been found invalid or whether it's been recently amended by new legislation that hasn't yet been incorporated into the code).

You may need to consult **administrative regulations** that interpret or expand upon the statute. In statutory code sections, Westlaw and Lexis may provide cross-references to the relevant regulations.

A Note on Court Rules

Court rules are similar to statutes but typically govern procedural issues exclusively. At the federal level there are four sets of rules that apply to federal courts nationwide: the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure, Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure, and Federal Rules of Evidence. Additional sets of rules apply to specific courts only (e.g., the Federal Rules of Bankruptcy Procedure or local court rules). Each state has its own sets of rules that apply to the various courts of that state. Generally, court rules can be researched in a similar manner as statutes.

Next Steps

After identifying and thoroughly researching the relevant statutory text, you can next turn more fully to researching [regulations](#), [case law](#), or [legislative history](#).