

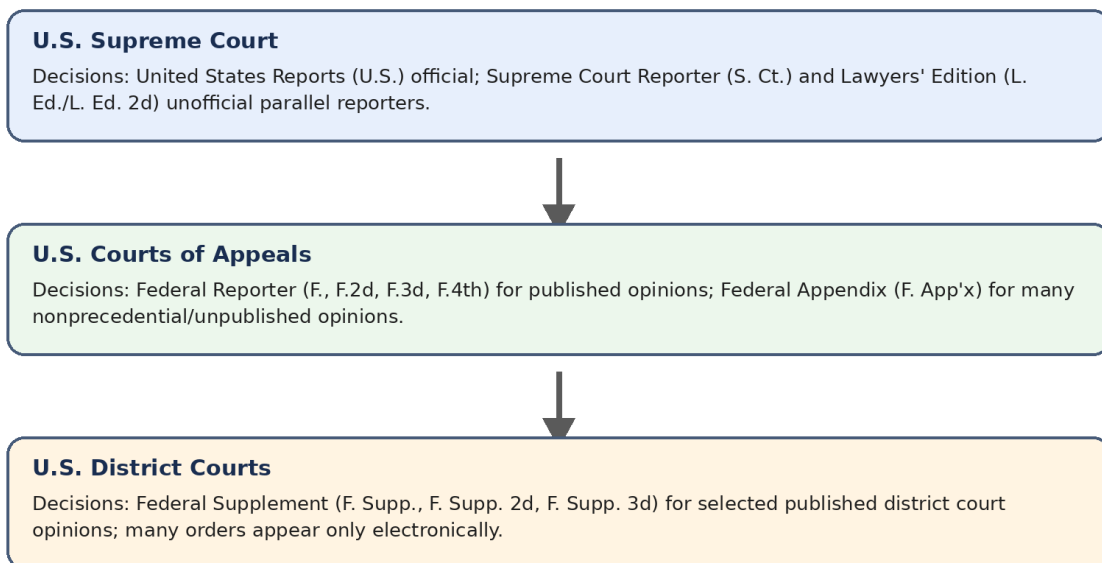
Federal Case Reporters

A Legal Professional's Guide to Reading, Citing, and Validating U.S. Federal Cases

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Prepared as a practical training manual for legal research, Bluebook citation, case briefing, precedent analysis, and case validation.

Federal Court Structure and Reporter Map



Reading clue: U.S. = Supreme Court; F.3d/F.4th + circuit parenthetical = Court of Appeals; F. Supp. + district parenthetical = District Court.

Figure 1. Federal court hierarchy and reporter map.

Educational note: This manual is for legal education and research training. It is not legal advice and does not substitute for jurisdiction-specific rules, local rules, or professional legal judgment.

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1. The Structure of Federal Court Case Reporters

Federal case reporting is the bridge between judicial decision-making and legal authority. A federal judge or panel decides a dispute, the court releases an opinion or order, and selected decisions are later distributed through official or commercial reporting systems. A professional reader must identify four things immediately: the court that issued the decision, the reporter in which it appears, the date and procedural posture, and the decision's precedential force.

A. U.S. Supreme Court

The Supreme Court is the highest court in the federal system. Its decisions on federal law bind every lower federal court and every state court. The official reporter is United States Reports, abbreviated U.S. Commercial parallel reporters include Supreme Court Reporter, abbreviated S. Ct., and United States Supreme Court Reports, Lawyers' Edition, abbreviated L. Ed. or L. Ed. 2d. Supreme Court opinions are first released as slip opinions, then edited and paginated for preliminary prints and bound volumes of United States Reports.

B. U.S. Courts of Appeals

The U.S. Courts of Appeals sit above the district courts and below the Supreme Court. They review final judgments and many interlocutory orders from district courts and agencies. Published precedential opinions appear principally in the Federal Reporter series: F., F.2d, F.3d, and F.4th. Many nonprecedential opinions appear in the Federal Appendix, abbreviated F. App'x, or only in electronic databases. A citation parenthetical such as (2d Cir. 2020) or (9th Cir. 2018) identifies the circuit.

C. U.S. District Courts

U.S. District Courts are federal trial courts. They find facts, manage discovery, conduct trials, issue injunctions, and decide motions. Selected district court opinions are published in the Federal Supplement series: F. Supp., F. Supp. 2d, and F. Supp. 3d. A parenthetical such as (S.D.N.Y. 2023), (D. Mass. 2019), or (N.D. Cal. 2021) identifies the district court. District court decisions are often influential but generally do not bind other judges, even within the same district.

D. Official vs. unofficial reporters

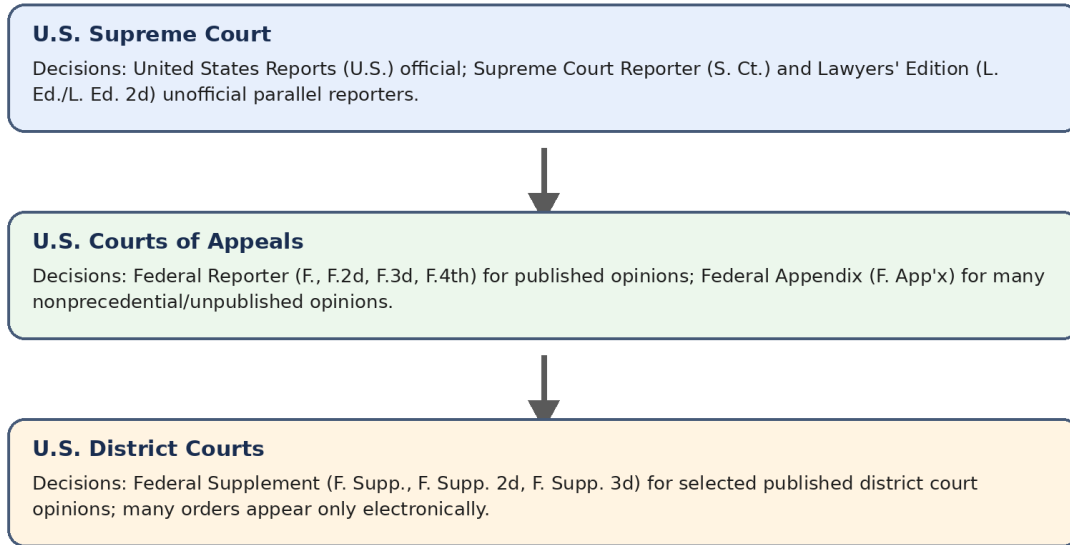
An official reporter is a government-approved publication of judicial opinions. United States Reports is the official reporter for Supreme Court decisions. An unofficial reporter is published by a private commercial publisher. S. Ct., L. Ed., Federal Reporter, Federal Appendix, and Federal Supplement are commercial reporters, but they are routinely used in professional legal practice. For most federal appellate and district court cases, the commercial reporter citation is the normal working citation because there is no comparable official reporter for those courts.

E. Slip opinions, advance sheets, and bound volumes

- Slip opinion: the initial version released by the court soon after decision. It may lack final pagination and may later receive editorial corrections.
- Advance sheet: a temporary pamphlet or installment of recent opinions before final bound-volume publication.
- Bound volume: the permanent volume of a reporter, with final pagination and indexing.

- Preliminary print: in Supreme Court practice, an official interim format that precedes the final bound United States Reports volume.

Federal Court Structure and Reporter Map



Reading clue: U.S. = Supreme Court; F.3d/F.4th + circuit parenthetical = Court of Appeals; F. Supp. + district parenthetical = District Court.

Figure 1 repeated. Court level usually determines both reporter and precedential force.

2. Comparative Table by Reporter

Reporter	Abbrev.	Court	Status	Example	Practical meaning
United States Reports	U.S.	U.S. Supreme Court	Official	Brown v. Bd. of Educ., 347 U.S. 483 (1954)	Binding nationwide on federal law.
Supreme Court Reporter	S. Ct.	U.S. Supreme Court	Unofficial/commercial	347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686	Parallel citation to same Supreme Court decision.
Lawyers' Edition	L. Ed.; L. Ed. 2d	U.S. Supreme Court	Unofficial/commercial	74 S. Ct. 686, 98 L. Ed. 873	Parallel reporter with editorial enhancements.
Federal Reporter	F.; F.2d; F.3d; F.4th	U.S. Courts of Appeals; some older federal cases	Unofficial/commercial	United States v. Lopez, 2 F.3d 1342 (5th Cir. 1993)	Published circuit opinions are binding in that circuit.
Federal Appendix	F. App'x	U.S. Courts of Appeals	Unofficial/commercial	Smith v. Jones, 450 F. App'x 100 (2d Cir. 2011)	Generally nonprecedential; citation permitted under FRAP 32.1 for post-2007

					federal appellate dispositions.
Federal Supplement	F. Supp.; F. Supp. 2d; F. Supp. 3d	U.S. District Courts	Unofficial/commercial	Brown v. Bd. of Educ., 98 F. Supp. 797 (D. Kan. 1951)	Persuasive unless a specific doctrine or higher-court rule gives it controlling effect.
Electronic database citation	WL, LEXIS, U.S. Dist. LEXIS, U.S. App. LEXIS	All federal courts	Commercial/electronic	No. 20-cv-123, 2024 WL 123456 (S.D.N.Y. Jan. 2, 2024)	Used when no reporter citation is available; always check local citation rules.

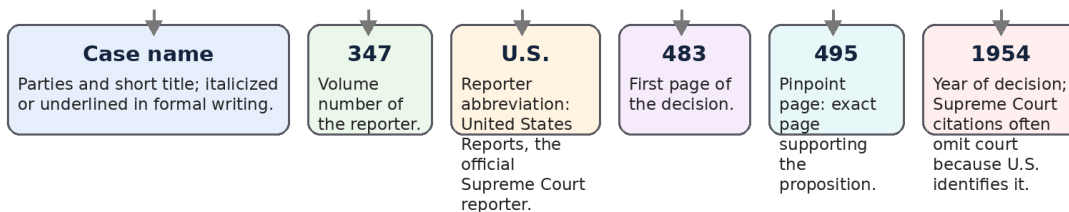
Professional reading shortcut: U.S. almost always signals a Supreme Court decision. F.3d or F.4th plus a circuit parenthetical signals a federal court of appeals. F. Supp. plus a district abbreviation signals a district court decision.

3. How to Interpret Citations

A case citation is a compressed professional address. It tells you where to find the case, what court issued it, when it was decided, and sometimes what later happened to it. The basic formula is: Case Name, Volume Reporter First Page, Pinpoint Page (Court Year), subsequent history.

Citation Anatomy: Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483, 495 (1954)



Subsequent history example
 Brown arose after lower-court proceedings. A full citation trail might include the district court decision, the Supreme Court reversal, and later remedial proceedings. Subsequent history tells what happened to that judgment on appeal: aff'd, rev'd, vacated, remanded, cert. denied, and related signals.
Professional habit: never quote a rule from a case until you check its subsequent history and later treatment.

Figure 2. Citation anatomy with pinpoint page and subsequent history.

A. Components of Brown v. Board of Education

Component	Example	Meaning
Case name	Brown v. Board of Education	Short name of the adversarial

		dispute; Bluebook style abbreviates many words in case names.
Volume number	347	The volume of the reporter.
Reporter abbreviation	U.S.	United States Reports; official Supreme Court reporter.
First page	483	The page on which the decision begins.
Pinpoint citation	495	The exact page supporting the proposition: 347 U.S. 483, 495.
Court	omitted for U.S.	For Supreme Court cases, the reporter identifies the court; for lower courts, include court in parenthetical.
Year	(1954)	Year the decision was issued.
Subsequent history	aff'd, rev'd, vacated, cert. denied	Later appellate action affecting the case, judgment, or citation trail.

B. Examples by court

Citation	Court clue	Court identified	Initial authority clue
Miranda v. Arizona, 384 U.S. 436 (1966)	U.S. reporter; no lower-court parenthetical	U.S. Supreme Court	Binding on federal constitutional law nationwide.
United States v. Lopez, 2 F.3d 1342 (5th Cir. 1993), aff'd, 514 U.S. 549 (1995)	F.3d plus 5th Cir.	U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit	Binding in Fifth Circuit until altered by en banc court or Supreme Court; affirmed by Supreme Court.
Brown v. Bd. of Educ., 98 F. Supp. 797 (D. Kan. 1951), rev'd, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)	F. Supp. plus D. Kan.	U.S. District Court for the District of Kansas	Persuasive only, and reversed by Supreme Court.
Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009)	U.S. plus pinpoint page 678	U.S. Supreme Court	Binding pleading-standard authority.
Hart v. Massanari, 266 F.3d 1155 (9th Cir. 2001)	F.3d plus 9th Cir.	U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit	Precedential in the Ninth Circuit.
Twombly v. Bell Atl. Corp., 313 F. Supp. 2d 174 (S.D.N.Y. 2003)	F. Supp. 2d plus S.D.N.Y.	U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York	District court authority; later appellate history must be checked.

C. Parallel citations

A parallel citation gives two or more reporter references to the same decision. For example, an older Supreme Court citation may appear as 347 U.S. 483, 74 S. Ct. 686, 98 L. Ed. 873. The first reporter is the official United States Reports citation; the other two are commercial parallel citations. Modern Bluebook practice in many contexts favors the official U.S. citation for Supreme Court cases, with parallel citations used when required by court rule, local practice, or the intended audience.

4. How to Read the Text of a Case

A reported case contains more than one kind of text. Some text is the court's law; some is an editorial road map. A beginner often reads the syllabus or headnotes and mistakenly treats them as the holding. A professional uses them as navigation aids, then relies on the opinion, judgment, and mandate.

Inside a Reported Case: Binding Text vs Editorial Aids

Syllabus / Summary Usually prepared for reader convenience; in Supreme Court practice it is not part of the opinion.	Editorial / nonbinding
Headnotes & Key Numbers Publisher-created topical summaries and indexing tools.	Editorial / nonbinding
Majority Opinion Court's controlling legal reasoning when joined by a majority.	Binding holding + rationale
Plurality Opinion Most votes for result but no majority rationale; use Marks analysis cautiously.	Potentially controlling, limited
Concurring Opinion Agrees with judgment but adds or changes reasoning.	Persuasive unless necessary for controlling rule
Dissenting Opinion Disagrees with judgment.	Persuasive only; not law
Judgment & Mandate Formal result and appellate command to the lower court.	Binding disposition

Rule: the holding needed to decide the case binds; summaries, headnotes, and dicta do not.

Figure 3. Parts of a reported opinion and their legal force.

A. Binding and nonbinding parts

Part of case	Who creates it	Legal force	How to use it
Syllabus	Reporter of Decisions or court staff, depending on court	Usually nonbinding summary	Use as an overview; verify every proposition in the opinion.
Headnotes	Commercial publisher editors	Nonbinding editorial aid	Use for indexing and topic search, never as authority.
Majority opinion	Court/justice/judge for the majority	Binding as to holding and necessary reasoning	Extract issue, rule, reasoning, and holding.
Plurality opinion	Opinion with the most votes but not a majority rationale	May control only under special analysis	Find the narrowest common ground; check later cases.
Concurrence	Judge or justice agreeing with result	Persuasive unless necessary to controlling judgment	Use to understand doctrinal tension or narrow grounds.
Dissent	Judge or justice disagreeing	Persuasive only	Useful for policy critique, future arguments, or later overruling.
Judgment	Court	Binding result in the case	Identify affirmed, reversed, vacated, remanded, dismissed.
Mandate	Appellate court/clerk	Binding command to lower court	Controls what lower court must do next.

B. Case brief method

A case brief is not a summary of everything in the case. It is a disciplined extraction of legally operative information.

Brief element	Question to answer	Professional warning
Facts	What facts mattered to the legal issue?	Do not include background facts that did not affect the rule.
Procedural history	How did the case reach this court?	This often explains the standard of review and disposition.
Issue	What precise legal question did the court decide?	State it narrowly enough to be useful.
Holding	What answer did the court give to the issue?	The holding is not every sentence you like.
Rule of law	What legal principle controls future cases?	Extract the rule at the level of generality the court actually used.
Reasoning	Why did the court reach that answer?	Separate doctrine, policy, facts, and precedent.
Disposition	What happened to the judgment below?	Affirmed, reversed, vacated, remanded, dismissed, or modified.

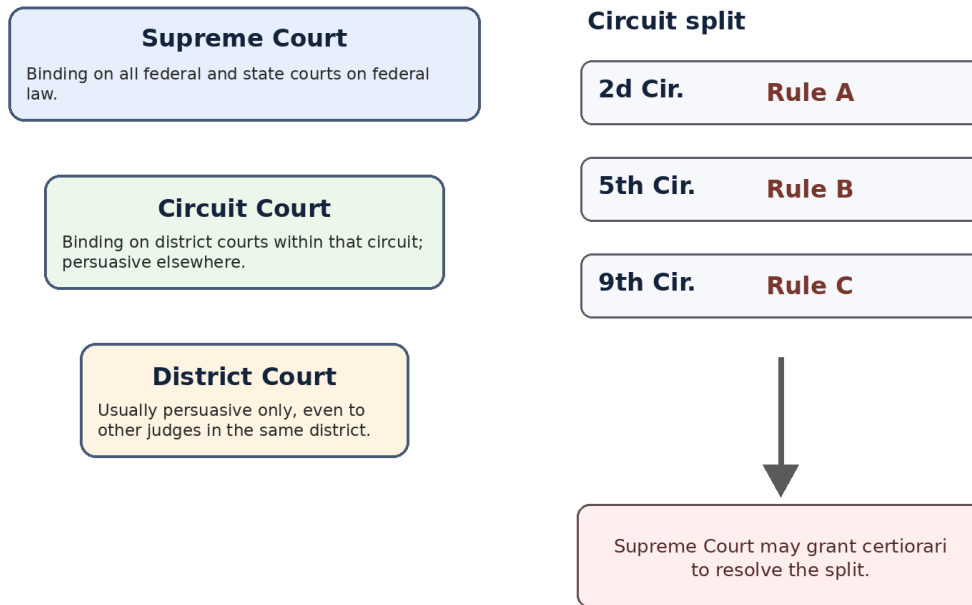
C. Step-by-step method for reading a single case

1. Read the caption, court, date, and procedural posture before reading the facts.
2. Look at the reporter citation and parenthetical to identify court level and jurisdiction.
3. Skim the syllabus or headnotes only to orient yourself; mark them as nonbinding.
4. Read the first and last paragraphs of the majority opinion to identify the issue and disposition.
5. Read the facts and procedural history with the issue in mind.
6. Extract the rule, then test whether the court treated it as holding, dicta, or background.
7. Map the reasoning: text, precedent, history, policy, administrability, federalism, separation of powers, or factual analogy.
8. Read concurrences and dissents to understand limits, alternative rationales, and future litigation paths.
9. Check subsequent history and citing treatment before relying on the case.
10. Write a one-page brief with facts, procedural history, issue, holding, rule, reasoning, and disposition.

5. How to Determine Precedential Authority

Precedential authority depends on court hierarchy, jurisdiction, publication status, and the exact legal proposition for which the case is cited. A case can be binding for one proposition in one court and merely persuasive elsewhere. A case can also remain good law for one issue while being overruled or abrogated on another.

Precedential Authority Map



Vertical precedent asks: which higher court controls this lower court? Horizontal precedent asks: does this court follow its own pr

Figure 4. Vertical precedent, horizontal precedent, and circuit splits.

A. Core concepts

Concept	Meaning	Practical use
Binding precedent	Authority a court must follow when materially applicable.	Supreme Court binds all courts on federal law; circuit precedent binds district courts in that circuit.
Persuasive authority	Authority a court may consider but need not follow.	Other circuits, district courts, state courts, treatises, law review articles.
Vertical precedent	Lower courts obey higher courts in the same hierarchy.	District court follows its circuit and the Supreme Court.
Horizontal precedent	A court follows its own prior decisions.	Circuit panels generally follow earlier circuit decisions unless overruled en banc or by the Supreme Court.
Stare decisis	The principle that courts ordinarily adhere to precedent.	Stronger for statutory interpretation, more flexible in constitutional cases.
Circuit precedent	Published circuit decisions controlling within that circuit.	A district court in Texas follows Fifth Circuit precedent, not Ninth Circuit precedent.
District court limits	District court opinions rarely bind other courts.	They may persuade, especially on local practice or detailed factual records.
Published opinion	Designated precedential by the issuing court.	Usually citable as binding in that circuit if from a court of appeals.
Unpublished opinion	Often designated nonprecedential.	Citation may be permitted, but precedential effect depends on court rules.

En banc decision	Decision by all active judges or a large authorized subset of a circuit.	Can overrule prior panel precedent within that circuit.
Circuit split	Different circuits adopt conflicting rules.	Increases certiorari interest and affects forum-specific outcomes.
Certiorari	Discretionary Supreme Court review.	Denial of certiorari is not approval of the lower court decision.

B. Published and unpublished federal appellate opinions

Published federal appellate opinions generally carry precedential weight in their circuits. Unpublished or nonprecedential opinions may still be cited under Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 32.1 if issued on or after January 1, 2007, but FRAP 32.1 governs citation permission, not the precedential force assigned by a circuit. Always check the issuing circuit's local rules and the notation at the top of the opinion.

C. Practical authority test

1. Which court issued the decision?
2. Which court are you writing for?
3. Is the issue federal law, state law, procedural law, or local practice?
4. Is the opinion published, unpublished, precedential, or nonprecedential?
5. Has a higher court, en banc court, or later statute changed the rule?
6. Is the cited language holding, necessary reasoning, dicta, syllabus, or headnote?

6. How to Use Shepardizing and KeyCite

Finding a case is only the beginning. Before citing it, a professional validates it through a citator: Shepard's on Lexis, KeyCite on Westlaw, or comparable tools such as Bloomberg Law's BCite. Citators track subsequent history and later citing references. They help answer the question: is this case still good law for the precise proposition I want to use?

Shepardizing / KeyCite Workflow

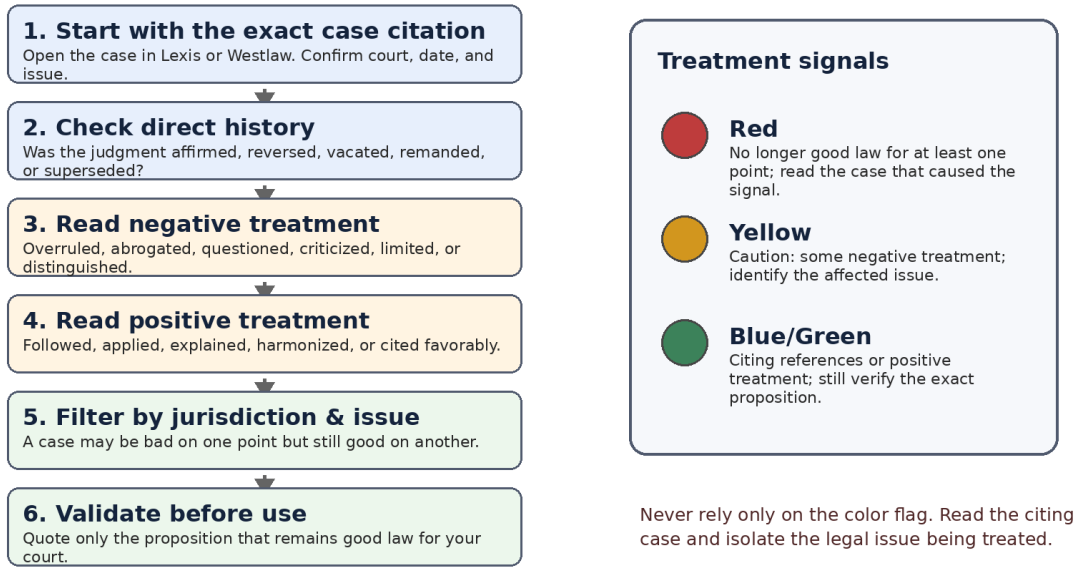


Figure 5. A professional citator workflow.

A. Treatment terms

Term	Meaning	Effect on use
Negative treatment	Later authority weakens, rejects, limits, reverses, vacates, or questions the case.	Requires close review before citation.
Positive treatment	Later authority follows, applies, explains, or relies on the case.	Can strengthen use, but verify the issue.
Overruling	A later court with authority rejects the legal rule of the earlier case.	Earlier rule is no longer controlling on that point.
Reversal	Higher court changes the judgment in the same case.	Directly affects the case's procedural authority and often its reasoning.
Vacatur	Judgment is set aside.	Vacated opinions usually lose precedential effect; check jurisdiction-specific rules.
Abrogation	Later statute, rule, or higher-court decision undermines the case's legal basis.	Case may be obsolete on the affected issue.
Distinguishing	Later court says facts or legal context differ.	Not necessarily bad law; limits application.
Questioning / criticizing	Later court expresses doubt or criticism.	Warning signal; not necessarily fatal.
Superseded by statute/rule	Legislature or rulemaking authority changed governing law.	Pre-change case may be historical or limited.

B. Six professional checks

1. Open the case and read the court, date, posture, and holding.
2. Check direct appellate history: affirmed, reversed, vacated, remanded, certiorari denied, or appeal dismissed.

3. Open the citator's negative-treatment tab and read the actual citing cases, not just the signal.
4. Filter by jurisdiction first: Supreme Court, controlling circuit, then persuasive circuits and districts.
5. Filter by legal issue: a case may be overruled on sovereign immunity but still useful on pleading or remedy.
6. Update the final citation immediately before filing, publishing, or sending the analysis.

C. Warning about citator signals

A red, yellow, blue, or green signal is not a legal conclusion. It is a research alert. The researcher must read the later case and determine whether the specific proposition remains valid. A case can receive negative treatment because one point was rejected while another point remains authoritative. Conversely, a case can have positive treatment but still be unhelpful if it addresses a different issue or court.

7. Practice Exercises with Explanations

Exercise 1: Identify the court from the citation

No.	Citation	Answer	Explanation
1	Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)	U.S. Supreme Court	The U.S. reporter identifies United States Reports; Supreme Court parenthetical is normally unnecessary.
2	Hart v. Massanari, 266 F.3d 1155 (9th Cir. 2001)	Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals	F.3d is Federal Reporter; (9th Cir. 2001) identifies the court and year.
3	Brown v. Bd. of Educ., 98 F. Supp. 797 (D. Kan. 1951)	District of Kansas	F. Supp. is Federal Supplement; D. Kan. is a federal district court abbreviation.
4	Smith v. Jones, 450 F. App'x 100 (2d Cir. 2011)	Second Circuit Court of Appeals	F. App'x indicates Federal Appendix, usually nonprecedential; 2d Cir. identifies the circuit.
5	No. 22-cv-1000, 2024 WL 123456 (S.D.N.Y. Jan. 5, 2024)	Southern District of New York	WL is an electronic citation; S.D.N.Y. identifies the district court.

Exercise 2: Parse the citation

Citation: Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009).

- Case name: Ashcroft v. Iqbal.
- Volume: 556.
- Reporter: U.S., the official Supreme Court reporter.
- First page: 662.
- Pinpoint page: 678.
- Court: U.S. Supreme Court, inferred from U.S.

- Year: 2009.
- Professional next step: Shepardize/KeyCite because it is heavily cited and sometimes limited or distinguished in pleading-standard disputes.

Exercise 3: Authority ranking

You are writing in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York on a federal constitutional issue. Rank the authority: (a) U.S. Supreme Court decision, (b) Second Circuit published opinion, (c) Ninth Circuit published opinion, (d) Southern District of New York opinion, (e) law review article.

Answer: (a) Supreme Court controls; (b) Second Circuit controls unless inconsistent with Supreme Court law; (c) Ninth Circuit is persuasive; (d) S.D.N.Y. opinion is persuasive, even in the same district; (e) law review article is secondary persuasive authority only.

Exercise 4: Good-law problem

A district court opinion says X. The court of appeals later reversed the judgment on the same issue. Can you cite the district court opinion for X?

Answer: Usually no, not as good authority for X. The reversal is direct negative history. You may cite it only for limited historical or procedural background, and you should disclose the reversal if relevant. Always cite the higher court's rule instead.

Exercise 5: Headnote trap

A West headnote states a broad rule. The opinion itself states the rule more narrowly. Which version controls?

Answer: The opinion controls. Headnotes are editorial aids, not the court's law. The holding must be extracted from the court's reasoning and disposition, not from the publisher's summary.

8. Beginner's Checklist

Task	Question	Done?
Identify court	Does the reporter and parenthetical tell me Supreme Court, circuit court, or district court?	
Identify reporter	Is it U.S., S. Ct., L. Ed., F.3d/F.4th, F. App'x, F. Supp., WL, or LEXIS?	
Find legal force	Is the decision binding, persuasive, unpublished, vacated, reversed, or merely historical?	
Separate text types	Am I relying on the opinion, not the syllabus or headnotes?	
Extract holding	Have I stated the issue and holding at the correct level of generality?	
Check jurisdiction	Am I writing in a court that must follow this decision?	
Check history	Has the judgment been affirmed, reversed, vacated, or remanded?	
Check treatment	Have I Shepardized or KeyCited the exact proposition?	

Use pinpoint citation	Have I cited the exact page where the proposition appears?	
Check local rules	Do local rules require or restrict citation form, unpublished opinions, or copies of cases?	
Update before filing	Did I re-check the citator before final submission?	

The professional mental model is simple: court first, reporter second, citation anatomy third, controlling rule fourth, good-law check last. Never rely on a case until you know both what it held and whether that holding still controls the court you are addressing.

Selected Sources

The following public sources were consulted for court structure, reporting practice, citation conventions, unpublished opinions, syllabus/headnote status, and citator workflow. For actual filings, always consult The Bluebook, the local rules of the relevant court, and the most current commercial citator results.

- Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, Court Role and Structure; About U.S. Courts of Appeals.
- Supreme Court of the United States, U.S. Reports; Opinions of the Court; Table Definitions.
- Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School, Wex: reports; National Reporter System; Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 32.1; Basic Legal Citation.
- American Bar Association, How to Read a U.S. Supreme Court Opinion.
- LexisNexis, Shepard's Citations Service and Shepard's Signal Indicators materials.
- Thomson Reuters, Westlaw KeyCite guidance and citator materials.