

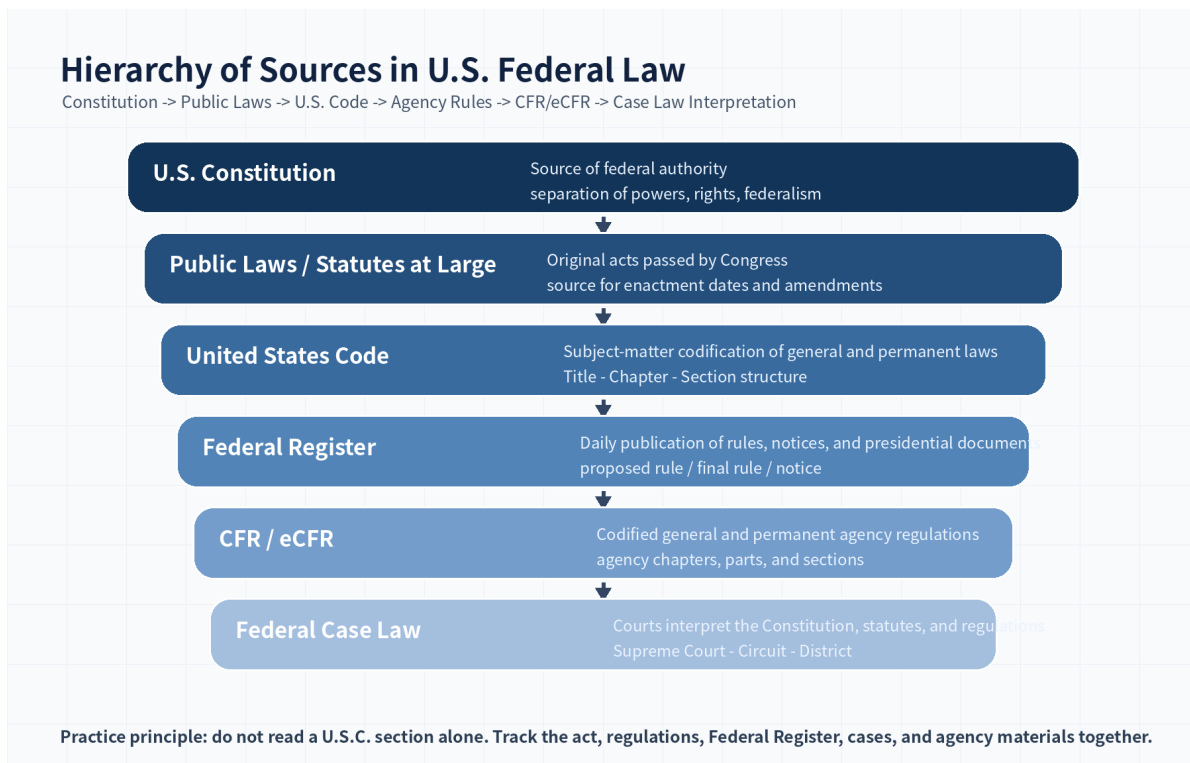
The Structure of United States Federal Law and the United States Code

An Integrated Guide to the Constitution, Public Laws, U.S.C., CFR, Federal Register, Case Law, and Agency Interpretation

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Disclaimer and currency notice: This paper is an educational, legal-research, policy-analysis, and journalism-oriented overview. It is not legal advice for any specific matter. Federal statutes, regulations, and case law may change. Before citation or reliance, verify all current text in official sources such as OLRC, GovInfo, eCFR, the Federal Register, and the Supreme Court.

Abstract

United States federal law cannot be reduced to a single code book. The Constitution establishes the scope of federal authority; Congress enacts public laws; general and permanent provisions are codified by subject in the United States Code; agencies promulgate rules under statutory delegation; rules are published in the Federal Register and codified in the Code of Federal Regulations; and courts interpret the entire system. After *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, agency interpretations no longer receive Chevron-style binding deference simply because a statute is ambiguous; courts must exercise independent judgment about the best reading of statutes while considering agency views for their persuasive value.^{[1][9]}

This paper provides a systematic guide for lawyers, journalists, policy analysts, investors, and business professionals who need to locate, read, and verify federal law. It explains the Title structure of the United States Code, major federal legal fields, the relationship between federal and state law, preemption, concurrent jurisdiction, federal question jurisdiction, statutory reading, interpretive methods, official research databases, practical research workflow, and a 30-day learning roadmap.

Keywords: United States Code, Federal Register, Code of Federal Regulations, Administrative Procedure Act, Preemption, Federal Question Jurisdiction, *Loper Bright*, Legal Research

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I. Introduction: Federal Law as an Operating System

A beginner often thinks of the United States Code as the federal law itself. That view is useful but incomplete. The U.S. Code is a subject-matter codification of general and permanent federal statutes. The original legal event is the enactment of a Public Law by Congress. The official chronological source for enacted federal statutes is the Statutes at Large. The U.S. Code reorganizes those enactments into a working structure that lawyers, courts, agencies, journalists, investors, and regulated businesses can use.

Federal legal research is therefore not a search for a single section. It is the reconstruction of a legal ecosystem. One must identify the constitutional authority, the enacted statute, the U.S. Code location, the implementing regulations, the Federal Register history, the controlling and persuasive cases, and the relevant agency guidance. This is particularly important in securities, banking, tax, immigration, labor, environmental, health, and national-security fields, where the regulatory layer often determines the practical legal obligation.

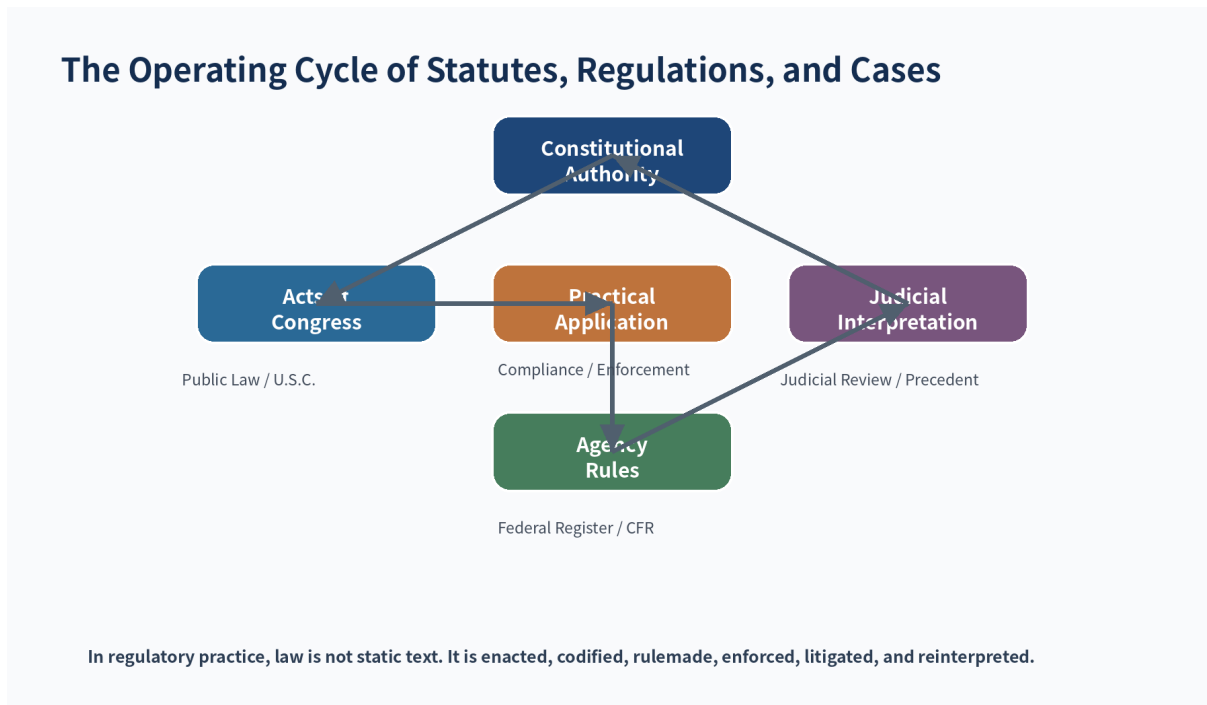


Figure 1. The operating cycle of statutes, regulations, and cases

Research caution: For practical research, distinguish convenience from official status. OLRC, GovInfo, Statutes at Large, official Federal Register editions, and court opinions are the safest citation sources. eCFR and FederalRegister.gov are highly useful search platforms, but final legal reliance should be checked against official legal editions and current effective dates.

II. The Hierarchy of Federal Legal Sources

1. The Constitution

The Constitution is the starting point for federal power. Article I defines legislative power, Article II executive power, and Article III federal judicial power. Article VI contains the Supremacy Clause, which declares the

Constitution, federal laws made in pursuance of it, and treaties to be the supreme law of the land, binding state judges notwithstanding contrary state law.^[6]

This does not mean the federal government controls every legal subject. Contract law, property law, family law, most tort law, and much criminal law remain primarily state-law domains. Federal law operates within constitutionally granted powers and within specific statutory delegations.

2. Public Laws, Statutes at Large, and the United States Code

A bill that passes Congress and becomes law is assigned a Public Law number. The official chronological source for those acts is the Statutes at Large. General and permanent provisions are then classified to the United States Code. OLRG describes the U.S. Code as the consolidation and codification by subject matter of the general and permanent laws of the United States.^[1]

This distinction matters in practice. Effective dates, transition rules, sunset clauses, statutory notes, and amendment history may not be fully understood by reading the U.S. Code section alone. In non-positive law titles, the original acts remain particularly important if a conflict exists between the codified text and the Statutes at Large.

3. Federal Register, CFR, and eCFR

When Congress delegates rulemaking authority to an agency, the agency typically proceeds through notice-and-comment rulemaking, publishes proposed and final rules in the Federal Register, and codifies general and permanent regulations in the Code of Federal Regulations. The eCFR is the most accessible current online presentation of the CFR, but it states that it is not an official legal edition of the CFR.^[4]

FederalRegister.gov is also highly useful, but it explains that only official editions of the Federal Register provide legal notice to the public and judicial notice to the courts.^[5]

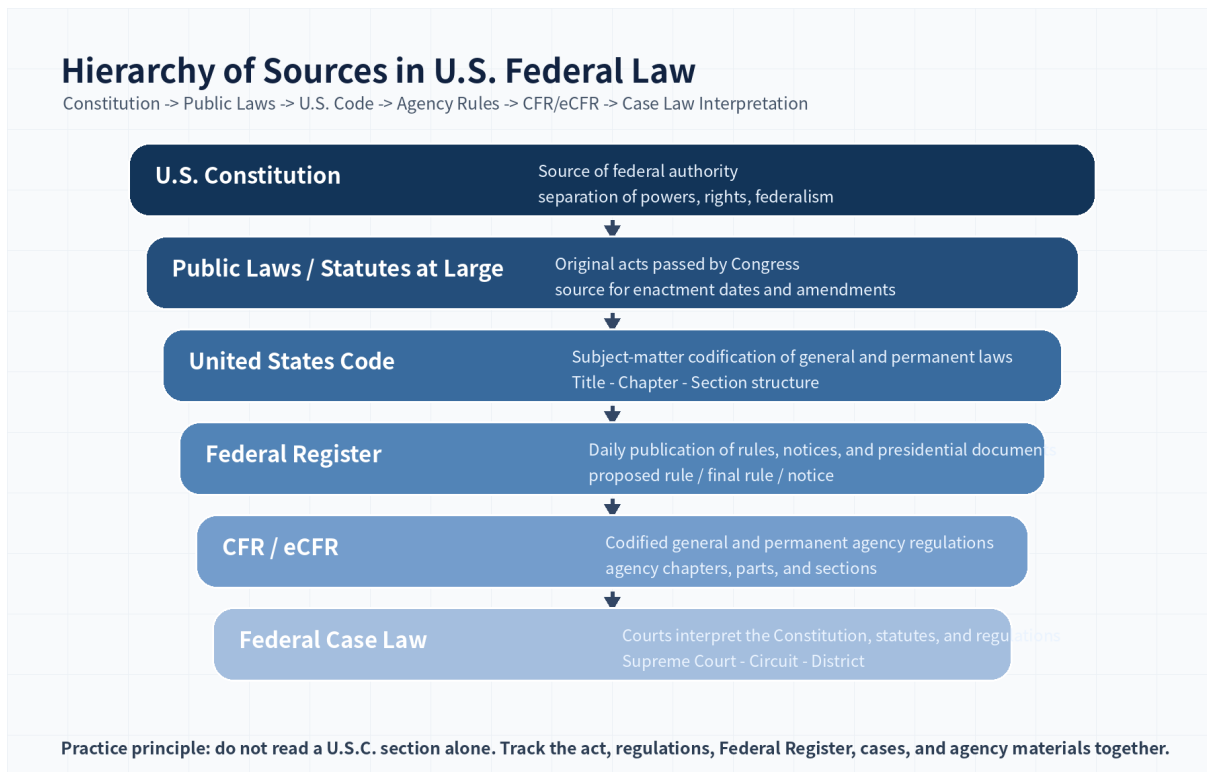


Figure 2. Hierarchy of sources in U.S. federal law

III. The Title Structure and Codification Logic of the U.S. Code

The U.S. Code is organized by Title. A Title may be divided into subtitles, chapters, subchapters, parts, subparts, and sections. Practical statutory citation normally takes the form of a Title number, the abbreviation U.S.C., a section symbol, and a section number, followed by subsections if needed. For example, 15 U.S.C. § 78j(b) refers to Title 15, section 78j, subsection (b).

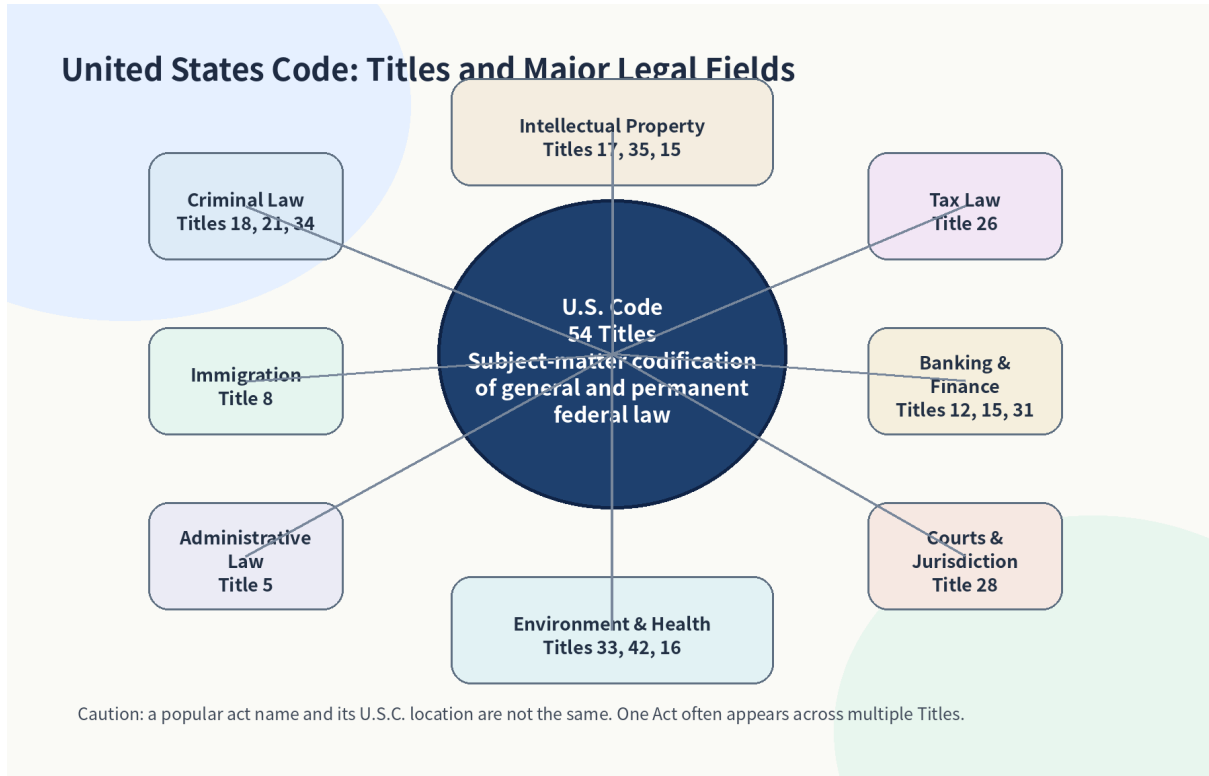


Figure 3. United States Code titles and major legal fields

1. Overview of U.S. Code Titles

Title	Official Name	Core Content
1	General Provisions	General interpretive rules and definitions
2	The Congress	Congressional organization, elections, and operations
3	The President	President, Electoral College, and succession topics
4	Flag and Seal, Seat of Government, and the States	Flag, seal, seat of government, and state-related provisions
5	Government Organization and Employees	Administrative organization, federal employees, APA, FOIA
6	Domestic Security	Homeland security and DHS-related law
7	Agriculture	Agriculture, food, and farm support
8	Aliens and Nationality	Immigration, nationality, visas, removal
9	Arbitration	Federal arbitration law
10	Armed Forces	Military forces and defense organization
11	Bankruptcy	Bankruptcy law
12	Banks and Banking	Banks, financial institutions, Federal Reserve, deposit insurance
13	Census	Census
14	Coast Guard	Coast Guard
15	Commerce and Trade	Commerce, securities, antitrust, consumer protection, trademarks
16	Conservation	Conservation, wildlife, natural resources

17	Copyrights	Copyright law
18	Crimes and Criminal Procedure	Federal crimes and criminal procedure
19	Customs Duties	Customs duties
20	Education	Education
21	Food and Drugs	Food, drugs, controlled substances
22	Foreign Relations and Intercourse	Foreign relations, aid, international affairs
23	Highways	Highways
24	Hospitals and Asylums	Hospitals and institutional provisions
25	Indians	Native American and tribal law
26	Internal Revenue Code	Federal tax law
27	Intoxicating Liquors	Alcoholic beverages
28	Judiciary and Judicial Procedure	Federal courts, jurisdiction, procedure
29	Labor	Labor, wages, unions, ERISA
30	Mineral Lands and Mining	Mineral lands and mining
31	Money and Finance	Federal finance, accounting, and parts of AML law
32	National Guard	National Guard
33	Navigation and Navigable Waters	Navigation, waters, water pollution
34	Crime Control and Law Enforcement	Crime control and law-enforcement programs
35	Patents	Patent law
36	Patriotic and National Observances, Ceremonies, and Organizations	National observances and organizations
37	Pay and Allowances of the Uniformed Services	Uniformed services pay
38	Veterans' Benefits	Veterans benefits
39	Postal Service	Postal Service
40	Public Buildings, Property, and Works	Federal buildings and public property
41	Public Contracts	Federal procurement contracts
42	The Public Health and Welfare	Public health, welfare, civil rights, environmental provisions
43	Public Lands	Public lands
44	Public Printing and Documents	Government publications, records, documents
45	Railroads	Railroads
46	Shipping	Shipping
47	Telecommunications	Telecommunications, broadcasting, FCC
48	Territories and Insular Possessions	Territories and insular areas
49	Transportation	Transportation, aviation, rail, safety
50	War and National Defense	War, intelligence, emergency powers
51	National and Commercial Space Programs	Space programs, NASA, commercial space
52	Voting and Elections	Voting, elections, campaign matters
53	Reserved	Reserved title
54	National Park Service and Related Programs	National Park Service and related programs

2. Positive Law and Non-Positive Law Titles

Not every Title has the same codification status. A positive law title has itself been enacted by Congress as legal evidence of the law. A non-positive law title is an editorial classification of enacted statutes. OLC explains this distinction and identifies which Titles have been enacted into positive law. In non-positive law contexts, researchers should be prepared to verify the original Public Law and Statutes at Large text.^[2]

IV. Core Federal Statutes by Practice Area

Field	Core U.S.C. / Statutes	Main Regulators	Research Focus
Criminal law	Title 18; Title 21; Title 34	DOJ, FBI, DEA, ATF	Elements, mens rea, federal jurisdiction, sentencing, forfeiture
Civil procedure and jurisdiction	Title 28; Federal Rules	Federal courts, Judicial Conference	Federal question, diversity, removal, venue, appeal
Tax	Title 26 Internal Revenue Code	Treasury, IRS, 26 CFR	Treasury regulations, rulings, notices, procedure, penalties
Immigration	Title 8; Immigration and	DHS, USCIS, ICE, CBP, EOIR, 8 CFR	Status, admissibility, removal,

	Nationality Act		petitions, agency policy manual
Securities	Title 15; Securities Act; Exchange Act; Advisers Act; Investment Company Act	SEC, CFTC, 17 CFR	Registration, disclosure, antifraud, enforcement, exemptions
Labor and employment	Title 29	DOL, NLRB, PBGC, OSHA, 29 CFR	FLSA, NLRA, ERISA, OSHA, benefits and workplace duties
Environment	Titles 33, 42, 16	EPA, Interior, 40 CFR	Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, CERCLA, ESA, permits
Administrative law	Title 5 APA, FOIA, Privacy Act	All federal agencies	Rulemaking, adjudication, judicial review, records access
Intellectual property	Titles 17, 35, 15, 18	USPTO, Copyright Office, ITC	Copyright, patents, trademarks, trade secrets
Bankruptcy	Title 11; Title 28	Bankruptcy courts, U.S. Trustee	Chapters 7, 11, 13, automatic stay, discharge
Antitrust	Title 15	DOJ Antitrust Division, FTC	Sherman Act, Clayton Act, FTC Act, merger review
Banking and finance	Titles 12, 15, 31	Fed, OCC, FDIC, CFPB, FinCEN, SEC	Prudential regulation, consumer finance, securities, AML

The table shows why federal legal research must be field-sensitive. In banking and securities law, statutory text and agency rules often operate together. In tax, Title 26 must be read with Treasury regulations and IRS guidance. In immigration, the statute, regulations, policy manual, agency memoranda, and administrative decisions often interact. In environmental law, permits, standards, and enforcement practices are often set at the regulatory level.

V. Federal Law and State Law: Supremacy, Preemption, Concurrent Jurisdiction

1. Supremacy and Preemption

The Supremacy Clause makes valid federal law supreme over conflicting state law. Preemption analysis asks whether federal law displaces state law. The main categories are express preemption, field preemption, and conflict preemption. Express preemption occurs when Congress explicitly states that state law is displaced. Field preemption occurs when federal regulation is so pervasive that Congress appears to have occupied the field. Conflict preemption occurs when it is impossible to comply with both federal and state law, or when state law stands as an obstacle to federal objectives.^[7]

Type	Meaning	Research Method
Express preemption	Congress expressly displaces state law	Look for phrases such as "No State may..." or express savings clauses
Field preemption	Federal regulation occupies an entire field	Immigration and nuclear-safety examples often raise this issue
Conflict preemption	State law conflicts with federal law or objectives	Impossibility and obstacle theories are common

2. Concurrent Jurisdiction and Federal Question Jurisdiction

Article III extends federal judicial power to cases arising under the Constitution, federal laws, and treaties. Congress implements that authority in statutes. The central federal question statute is 28 U.S.C. § 1331, which gives federal district courts original jurisdiction over civil actions arising under the Constitution, laws, or treaties of the United States.^[8]

However, a federal issue does not automatically mean exclusive federal jurisdiction. Many federal claims may be heard in state courts unless Congress makes jurisdiction exclusive or the structure of the statute requires a federal forum. Bankruptcy, patent, some securities, certain federal-officer, admiralty, and claims against the federal government may involve special jurisdictional statutes. A careful researcher must read both Title 28 and the jurisdictional provisions of the substantive statute.

VI. How to Read and Interpret Federal Statutes

1. Anatomy of a Federal Statutory Citation

A citation such as 15 U.S.C. § 78j(b) contains several signals: 15 is the Title number; U.S.C. identifies the United States Code; § 78j is the section; and (b) is the subsection. Below that level, a statute may contain paragraphs (1), subparagraphs (A), clauses (i), subclauses (I), and items. The precise level matters because exceptions, definitions, and penalties may apply only to specific units of text.

Level	Example	Meaning
Title	15	Subject-matter title of the U.S. Code
Section	§ 78j	Main statutory section
Subsection	(b)	First internal subdivision
Paragraph	(1)	Numbered subdivision
Subparagraph	(A)	Lettered subdivision
Clause	(i)	Romanette subdivision
Subclause	(I)	Capital Roman subdivision

2. Reading Sequence

Step	Question	Why It Matters
1	Definitions	Words such as person, security, agency, knowingly, United States may be defined specially
2	Scope	Who is covered, what conduct is covered, where and when it applies
3	Operative verbs	shall, may, may not, must, is authorized to
4	Exceptions	except, unless, notwithstanding, provided that, safe harbor
5	Enforcement	penalties, private right of action, agency authority, remedies
6	Timing	effective date, amendments, sunset clauses, transition provisions
7	Linked materials	regulations, Federal Register history, cases, agency guidance

3. Interpretive Methods

Method	Core Question
Plain meaning	What does the ordinary statutory text mean?
Whole act rule	How does the provision fit with the rest of the statute?
Context	How do definitions, neighboring provisions, and exceptions affect meaning?
Canons of construction	Do canons such as <i>expressio unius</i> , <i>eiusdem generis</i> , or <i>noscitur a sociis</i> apply?
Legislative history	Do committee reports, bill history, or enacted findings help?

Purpose	What problem was Congress addressing?
Constitutional avoidance	Is a plausible interpretation available that avoids serious constitutional doubts?
Rule of lenity	In criminal law, should ambiguity be resolved in favor of the defendant?
Agency interpretation	Is the agency reading persuasive after Loper Bright?

VII. After Chevron: Loper Bright and Administrative Interpretation

In *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, the Supreme Court overruled Chevron deference. The Court held that the Administrative Procedure Act requires courts to exercise independent judgment in deciding whether an agency acted within its statutory authority; courts may not defer to an agency interpretation simply because a statute is ambiguous.^[9]

The decision does not make agency views irrelevant. Courts may still consider agency expertise, consistency, and contemporaneous reasoning, but the legal weight is persuasive rather than controlling. The practical effect is that statutory text, delegation clauses, and case law have become even more central in challenges to agency action.

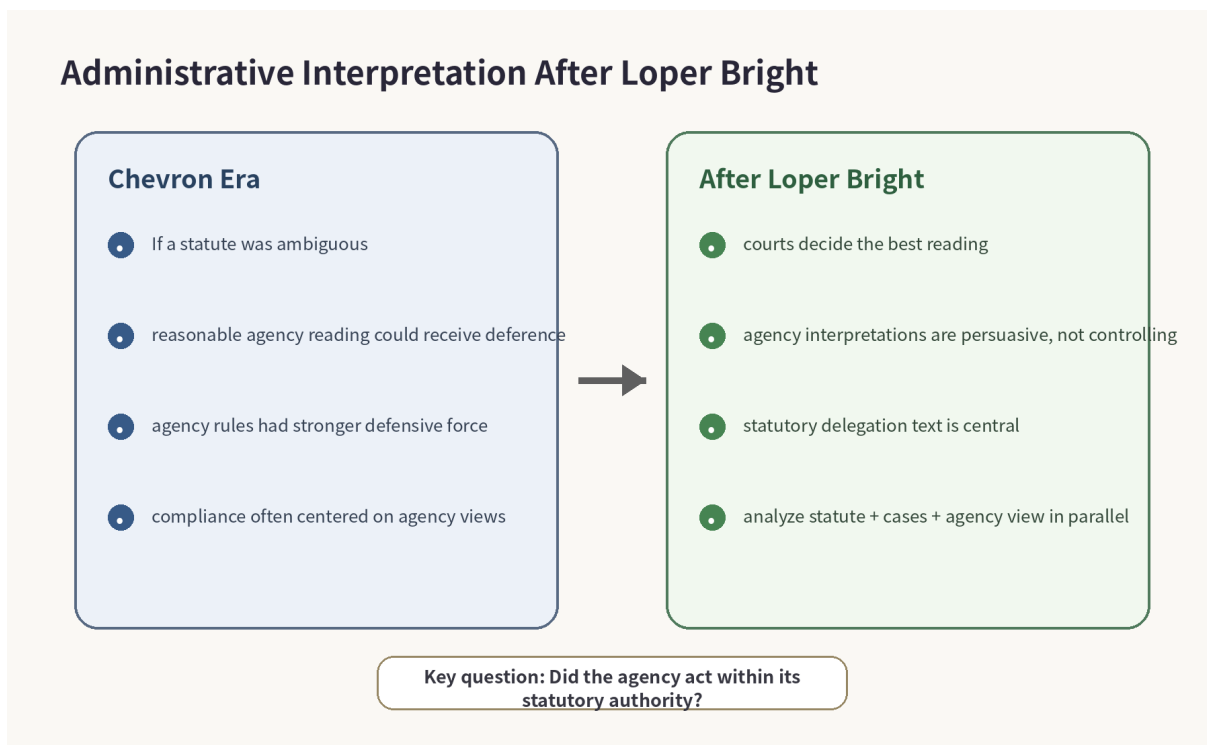


Figure 4. Administrative interpretation after Loper Bright

Chevron Era	After Loper Bright
Ambiguity could trigger deference to a reasonable agency reading	Courts decide the best reading of the statute
Agency interpretations had stronger defensive force	Agency interpretations are considered for persuasive value
Compliance often centered on agency views	Compliance must integrate statute, case law, rules, and agency views
Broad delegations were often operationally powerful	The text and scope of delegation are central litigation issues

VIII. How to Use Official Federal Legal Databases

Tool	Primary Use	Practice Tip
OLRC U.S. Code	Current U.S.C. text, notes, amendments	Check release point, positive-law status, notes, and classification
GovInfo	Official PDFs of U.S.C., Public Laws, Statutes at Large, CFR, Federal Register	Use for final official citation and historical editions
Congress.gov	Bills, public laws, committee reports, legislative history	Trace bill history, sponsors, amendments, and reports
FederalRegister.gov	Proposed rules, final rules, notices, public inspection	Check effective dates, comment deadlines, and agency explanations
eCFR	Current online CFR text	Useful for current regulatory text, but verify official legal edition as needed
Cornell LII	Fast search and educational navigation	Convenient but not the final official source
SupremeCourt.gov	Supreme Court opinions and orders	Use for current slip opinions and official Court material
Agency websites	Guidance, manuals, FAQs, enforcement releases	Assess legal force and persuasive value separately

A reliable federal-law memo should include citations to the current statutory section, relevant regulations, recent Federal Register materials if the regulatory text is changing, controlling or persuasive case law, and agency materials if they affect enforcement risk. For a journalist or policy analyst, the same structure prevents confusing a proposed rule with a final rule, a bill with enacted law, or a guidance document with binding regulation.

IX. Practical Federal Law Research Protocol



Figure 5. Practical protocol for finding federal law

Step	Action	Output
1	Define the problem	Identify the field: tax, banking, securities,

		immigration, labor, environment, criminal, etc.
2	Search by keyword and popular name	Use both subject terms and act names such as Dodd-Frank, Clean Water Act, or INA
3	Verify the current U.S.C. section	Use OLRC for current text, statutory notes, amendments, and classification
4	Trace the Public Law	Use Congress.gov and GovInfo for public law text and Statutes at Large
5	Find regulations	Use eCFR/CFR to locate implementing agency rules
6	Check Federal Register	Look for recent amendments, proposed rules, final rules, and effective dates
7	Add cases	Start with Supreme Court, then circuit precedent, then district court decisions
8	Review agency materials	Guidance, manuals, no-action letters, enforcement releases, FAQs
9	Confirm jurisdiction and remedies	Check federal question, exclusive jurisdiction, private rights, exhaustion, penalties
10	Reconfirm currency	Before use, recheck official databases and effective dates

X. A 30-Day Roadmap for Learning the Federal Statutory System

Day	Focus	Task
Day 1	Map the sources	Distinguish Constitution, Public Law, Statutes at Large, U.S.C., CFR, Federal Register
Day 2	Constitutional structure	Review Articles I, II, III, Supremacy Clause, Commerce Clause, Due Process
Day 3	U.S. Code structure	Build familiarity with Titles rather than memorizing every title
Day 4	Positive vs non-positive law	Read OLRC explanations and understand the role of Statutes at Large
Day 5	Statutory anatomy	Practice section, subsection, paragraph, clause structures
Day 6	Citation format	Practice citations such as 5 U.S.C. § 706 and 28 U.S.C. § 1331
Day 7	Research tools	Use OLRC, GovInfo, Congress.gov, eCFR, Federal Register directly
Day 8	Administrative law	Study APA rulemaking, adjudication, and judicial review
Day 9	Loper Bright	Understand why Chevron deference was overruled and what changed
Day 10	Federal jurisdiction	Study Title 28, federal question, diversity, removal, venue
Day 11	Criminal law	Review Title 18 structure and federal criminal jurisdiction
Day 12	Criminal procedure	Indictment, plea, sentencing, forfeiture, federal rules
Day 13	Civil procedure	FRCP, pleadings, discovery, summary judgment
Day 14	Tax	Title 26, Treasury regulations, IRS guidance
Day 15	Immigration	Title 8, INA, 8 CFR, USCIS policy
Day 16	Securities	Securities Act, Exchange Act, SEC rules
Day 17	Banking	Title 12, Fed, OCC, FDIC, CFPB
Day 18	AML and sanctions	Title 31, BSA, FinCEN, OFAC, Title 50
Day 19	Labor	FLSA, NLRA, ERISA, OSHA
Day 20	Environment	CAA, CWA, CERCLA, ESA, EPA regulations
Day 21	Intellectual property	Titles 17, 35, 15; trade secrets
Day 22	Bankruptcy	Title 11, Chapters 7, 11, 13
Day 23	Antitrust	Sherman Act, Clayton Act, FTC Act
Day 24	Telecom and technology	Title 47, FCC, privacy-related statutes
Day 25	Transportation	Title 49, FAA, DOT, NHTSA

Day 26	National security	Title 50, emergency powers, intelligence, sanctions
Day 27	Federal-state relations	Preemption, concurrent jurisdiction, state enforcement roles
Day 28	Case law research	Supreme Court, circuit split, district opinions
Day 29	Practice exercise	Trace one issue from statute to regulation to Federal Register to cases
Day 30	Build a personal map	Create a field-specific table of titles, agencies, CFR parts, and leading cases

XI. Conclusion

The United States federal legal system is not a linear code. It is a layered system of constitutional authority, congressional enactments, codified statutes, administrative regulations, public notices, judicial interpretation, and agency practice. The United States Code is the essential map, but it is not the entire territory. Competent research requires moving from the U.S.C. to the Public Law, the Statutes at Large, the CFR/eCFR, the Federal Register, the courts, and the relevant agency materials.

For lawyers, the task is doctrinal accuracy and litigation risk. For journalists, it is the difference between a bill, a law, a rule, and a proposal. For policy analysts, it is institutional mapping. For investors and businesses, it is compliance, enforcement exposure, and regulatory change. Across all uses, the operational rule is the same: verify the current law in official databases before reliance.

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