



Knowledge Base Printer Friendly version

How do I read a case citation? What do all the numbers and letters mean? Are they important?

The case citation provides the following four critical pieces of information:

- 1. the name of the actual case;
2. the physical volumes where the case can be found;
3. the court that decided the case; and,
4. the year the case was decided.

Using the citation to the famous case of Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265; 98 S. Ct. 2733; 1978 U.S. LEXIS 5; 57 L.Ed. 2d 750; 17 Fair Empl. Prac. Cas. (BNA) 1000; 17 Empl. Prac. Dec. (CCH) P8402 (1978), let us decode the information provided. Regents of the University of California v. Bakke is the name of the case. It should always be underlined. 438 U.S. 265 is the cite of one of the six sources where the case can be found: in volume 438 of the United States Reports, beginning at page 265. Reporters are sets of volumes containing judicial opinions of a case(s).

98 S. Ct. 2733; 1978 U.S. LEXIS 5; 57 L.Ed. 2d 750; 17 Fair Empl. Prac. Cas. (BNA) 1000; and 17 Empl. Prac. Dec. (CCH) P8402 (1978), are five additional sources where this case can be found. These additional sources are called parallel citations. In the example, the parallel citations are volume 57 of the U.S. Supreme Court Reports, Lawyers Edition, Second Series at page 750; and volume 98 of Supreme Court Reporter at page 2733. A set of reporter volumes numbered consecutively is called a series. The abbreviation "2d" or "3d" stands for Second Series or Third Series. The year 1978 in the parentheses tells you the year the court decided the case.

In the last thirty years, we now have electronic storage and retrieval of court cases; therefore, in our example above, 1978 U.S. LEXIS 5 refers us to the specific electronic citation for the Bakke decision within LEXIS. In like manner, many commercial publishers, like Bureau of National Affairs (BNA) or Commerce Clearinghouse (CCH), publish subject oriented reporters on various topics like labor law cases, patent cases, or tax cases. In the above example, we see references to a collection of labor cases in a set titled Fair Employment Practices Cases by BNA and a collection of labor cases in a set titled Employment Practices Decisions by CCH.

Please note that both the official set or primary source published by the Government Printing Office (GPO) or a given states' printing office, i.e, Office of State Printer (OSP), and commercial sets or secondary sources always contain the same text of the actual court case. Frequently, commercial sets present annotations or comments in advance of the actual court case. Often these explanations assist our understanding of the meaning or the importance of the case.

When you are researching the federal level of courts or doing federal jurisdiction research you will normally encounter the following case reporters and abbreviations:

For the Supreme Court (Federal) Reporters

Table with 2 columns: Reporter Name and Abbreviation. Rows include U.S. Supreme Court Reports (L.Ed. or L.Ed.2d), Supreme Court Reporter (S. Ct.), U.S. Reports (U.S.), and United States Law Week (USLW).

Circuit Court of Appeals (Federal) Reporters

Table with 2 columns: Reporter Name and Abbreviation. Row includes Federal Reporter (F or F.2d or F.3d).

**District Courts (Federal) Reporters**

*Federal Supplement* F. Supp.

**If I do *not* know the abbreviation for a given court reporter, where should I look?**

*Black's Law Dictionary* or *A Uniform System of Citation* both contain extensive listings of legal abbreviations for various legal sources.

**Where should I look to find out how to cite a case in a bibliography?**

*A Uniform System of Citation*

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