Reading Legal Citations



Reading a Case Citation

Cases are published in reporters. A case citation is generally made up of the following parts:

- the names of the parties involved in the lawsuit
- the volume number of the reporter containing the full text of the case
- the abbreviated name of that case reporter
- the page number on which the case begins the year the case was decided; and sometimes
- the name of the court deciding the case.

Below is an example of a case citation:

Hebb v. Severson, 201 P.2d 156 (Wash. 1948).

In this example, Hebb and Severson are the parties in the case. The case can be found in volume 201 of the Pacific Reporter, Second Series beginning on page 156. The case was decided by the Washington State Supreme Court in 1948.



Reading a Statutory Citation

Unlike case law which is made by judges in specific court cases, statutory law is made by the federal and state legislative branches of the government. Statutory law is published in codes. The United States Code contains statutes that have been passed by Congress. In addition, every state publishes its own statutory code. Citation format for statutes varies widely across the state and federal systems, however, there are similarities.

A federal statutory citation generally contains the following elements:

- the title or chapter number of the code
- the abbreviated name of the code
- the section or part number of the title or chapter; and
- the year of the code

Below is an example of a United States Code citation:

42 U.S.C. § 1983 (2006).

In this citation 42 is the Title of the Code where this statute can be found. U.S.C. is the abbreviation for the United States Code. § is the section symbol. 1983 is the section of title 42 of the code where the statute can be found. 2006 is the year of the code.