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Research Guide

How to Use California Case Citations

Last Updated: July 20, 2007

Last Reviewed: July 20, 2007

Scope:

This research guide shows how to decipher the coded format of typical California case citations so that you can locate case material in the library. This Guide is limited solely to finding cases. Published court decisions can serve as precedent to guide judges in deciding later cases that involve similar issues, so you'll want to be able to find cases to strengthen your legal position. For help in determining whether a case is still "good law", see our guides on Shepardizing and related.

What is a citation?

A citation, in legal lingo, is a standardized reference to a published court decision that tells you where to find it. A typical case citation includes first the volume number, then the abbreviated title of the source, then the page number on which the case begins, and the year the decision was rendered. A citation is the "address" that tells you where the case is located. Many cases are published in more than one place, and they are listed sequentially as parallel cites.

For example:

Li v. Yellow Cab Co. (1975) 13 Cal.3d 804, 119 Cal.Rptr. 858, 532 P.2d 1126.

What does this mean? Let's take it apart. Basically: the official version of this 1975 California Supreme Court case is found in Volume 13 of the California Reports, 3rd series at page 804. Unofficial versions appear in Volume 119 of the California Reporter and Volume 532 of the Pacific Reporter, 2nd series.

Citation elements:

- **Case title.** Names of the parties.(i.e. who is suing or prosecuting whom).
- **Reporter.** Abbreviated name of the set of books in which the case appears
- **Series Number.** A publisher will periodically begin a new series of a reporter (e.g. 2nd series, or, 2d). These are totally new cases, not a revised edition of earlier cases. A reporter not stating a series number is always the first series.
- **Volume and page number.** A volume number *precedes* the reporter abbreviation, while the page number where a case begins *follows* the series number.
- **Date.** In California, the date of the decision in parentheses is placed immediately after the case title.
- **Parallel Citations.** Most California cases are published in more than one reporter. Parallel citations enable one to locate a case when the official reporter is unavailable.

Which reporters cover which cases?

California Supreme Court

California Reports = Cal. (1850 - present)
Pacific Reporter = P. (1883 - present)
California Reporter = Cal. Rptr. (1959 - present)

California Court of Appeal

California Appellate Reports = Cal. App. (1904 - present)
Pacific Reporter = P. (1904-present)
California Reporter = Cal. Rptr. (1959-present)

Superior Court

cases are not published - so no citation.

Superior Court Appellate Division

California Supplement = Cal. App. Supp. (1930 - present)
Pacific Reporter = P. (1930 - present)
California Reporter = Cal. Rptr. (1959 - present)

Additional Resources:

The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation, 18th edition, Harvard Law Review, et al.
KF 245 .U5 2005

Prince's Dictionary of Legal Citations, Seventh Edition, Mary Miles Prince.
KF 246 .B45 2006

Bieber's Dictionary of Legal Abbreviations, Prince's Fifth Edition, Mary Miles Prince.
KF 246 .B5 2001

ALWD Citation Manual - A Professional System of Citation, Darby Dickerson.
KF 245 .A45 2000

Legal Research - How to Find and Understand the Law, 13th Edition, Nolo Press
KF 240 .L417 2005

How to Find the Law, 9th Edition, Hornbook Series. 1989
KF 240 .H6