West Key Number Digests

There are a variety of case-finding tools available for finding relevant cases. Before the development of computer-assisted legal research services, the most well-developed and widely used case finder was the West digest, a publication that reprints the headnote summaries of each point of law in a case, arranged by subject.

The digests are organized by West topics and key numbers from the West Key Number System and are still the most comprehensive and popular print research tool available. Digests function like an index; instead of simple one-line entries, however, they consist of paragraphs describing the legal principles decided by the court.

West digests include those organized by jurisdiction, such as West’s California Digest 2d or West’s Atlantic Digest 2d, or by topic, such as West’s Bankruptcy Digest or West’s Federal Practice Digest.

This quick reference guide will show you how to update your research in a West digest to make sure you find the most current case law.

Using the Westlaw Research Pyramid

Your 1L studies will focus on case law.

On Westlaw, you can retrieve relevant cases with a keyword search or with West topic and key numbers found in a key number digest.
Updating Steps

Using the West digests in conjunction with Westlaw, complete the following steps to find all case law up to the most recent case.

1. Check the digest topic and key number in the bound digest volume.
2. Check the same topic and key number in the digest pocket part.
3. Check the same topic and key number in the most recent supplementary pamphlet (interim pamphlets are published between annual pocket parts).
4. Check the closing table in the front of the last update to the digest—either the pocket part or the interim pamphlet, whichever is more recent. The closing table will give you the volume number of the last bound reporter volume covered by the digest.
5. Turn to the “Key Number Digest” section in the back of the next bound reporter volume following the last one listed in the closing table. Check the same topic and key number. Repeat this step for any other bound reporter volumes that follow the last one listed in the closing table.
6. Turn to the “Key Number Digest” section in the front of the first advance sheet issued after the last bound reporter volume. Check the same topic and key number as in step 1. Repeat this step with the remaining advance sheets through the most recent advance sheet.
7. Sign on to Westlaw and access the appropriate case law database. Run a key number search using the same topic and key number with an added-date restriction (ad), using the date of the most recent advance sheet for the appropriate reporter.

For example, to search for cases with headnotes classified under topic 115, Damages, and key number 101, Expenses, access a case law database—e.g., All Federal and State Cases (ALLCASES)—and run a search such as the following:

\[115k101 \& \text{ad(aft 2/1/2008)}\]