Sharpening Your Skills

WestlawNext®
Using West’s National Reporter System

The written opinions of federal courts and state appellate courts are published in West’s National Reporter System®, which contains not only the courts’ decisions but also enhancements added by our editors. This quick reference guide explains these enhancements and how they can help you identify relevant cases.

What Is the National Reporter System?

West’s National Reporter System is a set of reporters (Figure 1) that divides the 50 states and the District of Columbia into seven national regions: Atlantic, North Eastern, North Western, Pacific, South Eastern, South Western, and Southern.

The National Reporter System covers the opinions of state courts of last resort and intermediate appellate courts (in states that have such courts). Federal reporters published by Thomson Reuters are also part of the National Reporter System.

Our editorial enhancements make it easy for you to use the reporters to identify relevant cases from any jurisdiction.

Editorial Enhancements

Synopsis

Our attorney-editors write a synopsis, or brief description, of each case published by Thomson Reuters. Most synopses contain the following information:

• the facts of the case
• the name and holding of the lower court judge
• the holding of the court
• the name of the judge writing the opinion

Headnotes

Court decisions typically contain at least one legal issue. Our attorney-editors identify the legal issues in cases and discuss each issue in a headnote. Each headnote is usually one sentence and appears between the synopsis and the opinion. A headnote begins with a number in boldface type followed by a topic name and key number.

Headnotes are numbered so that you can use them as you would a table of contents to the case. Numbers corresponding to the headnote numbers appear inside brackets within the text of the opinion. The bracketed number indicates the portion of text summarized by a particular headnote.

WestlawNext is available on the Web at lawschool.westlaw.com.

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For research assistance 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call the West Reference Attorneys at 1-800-850-WEST (1-800-850-9378).

Using the Westlaw Research Pyramid

Your 1L studies will focus on case law.

On WestlawNext, you can use the editorial enhancements added to West’s National Reporter System to retrieve relevant cases.
Key numbers
Immediately following the headnote number is the broad legal topic under which an attorney-editor has classified that particular headnote. Topics are the main headnote classification. You can look in a West digest volume for the topic that you need. A key number, representing a specific aspect or subsection of a topic, follows the topic. For example, under the topic Joint Tenancy, key number 6 covers survivorship. Attorney-editors classify a headnote under all the topics and key numbers that apply.

Case digests
Headnotes from cases are grouped in books called digests, where they are arranged by topic and key number. Once you find a relevant topic and key number, you can search for the topic and key number on WestlawNext. The lines of text in the digest are actually the headnotes themselves. Headnotes from different cases that discuss the same point of law appear together in a digest, and the same headnote may appear in two or more places in the digest.

The advantage of using the digests is that the key number assigned to a point of law is uniform throughout all of the digests. As a result, when you find a relevant case in the Washington Digest, for example, you can look under the same key number in the Pacific Digest and find other relevant cases. You can also sign on to WestlawNext and search for cases with headnotes under the same topic and key number.

Finding West Topic and Key Numbers on WestlawNext
The West Key Number Digest on WestlawNext contains the complete topic and key number outline used by our attorney-editors to classify headnotes. The West Key Number Digest helps you identify topic and key numbers related to your issue and to retrieve cases with headnotes classified under those topic and key numbers. To access the West Key Number Digest, click the Tools tab at the home page, then click West Key Number System (Figure 2). The West Key Number System page, which lists all West topics, is displayed (Figure 3).

Browse the list of topics to find the topic related to your issue. Click a topic, e.g., Double Jeopardy, to display the topic page, which contains the key numbers classified under that topic (Figure 4). If necessary, click the plus (+) symbols to display the key numbers.
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Retrieving case headnotes

At a topic page, you can select key numbers and then retrieve case headnotes classified under those key numbers. Complete these steps to retrieve case headnotes:

1. Select Specify content to search if it is not already selected. If necessary, click Expand All to display all key numbers classified under that topic. Then select the check box next to each key number for which you want to retrieve case headnotes.

2. Change the jurisdiction at the top of the page if necessary.

3. Click View Headnotes. The headnotes are displayed under the key numbers to which they are classified (Figure 5).

To retrieve headnotes from another jurisdiction, click Change next to the current jurisdiction. The Jurisdiction selector is displayed. Make your selections and click Apply, then click Search at the top of the page.

Figure 4. Topic page

Figure 5. Case headnote
Viewing a Case in a Print Reporter and on WestlawNext

The case below demonstrates how you can easily find the case synopsis and West headnotes both in print and on WestlawNext. The synopsis follows the title of the case and the headnotes follow the synopsis. In print, each headnote is numbered and is preceded by the name of the topic and the key number to which it is classified. On WestlawNext, each headnote is accompanied by the complete hierarchy of concepts from the West Key Number System® used to classify that headnote to a specific key number.

Figure 6. Case on WestlawNext

Figure 7. Case in reporter

For assistance using WestlawNext, call 1-800-850-WEST (1-800-850-9378).
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