# Suing Circle Legal Research Resource Guide

*Federal civil litigation for beginning researchers*

Prepared by Califa Media for Suing Circle participants
Resources and access terms checked October 22, 2026

You can begin learning federal civil litigation without purchasing LexisNexis or Westlaw. Use free sources to find the law, read the actual authorities, and keep a record of what you checked. When you need subscription commentary or a stronger check of later cases, ask a law library about public access before paying for an individual plan.

This guide responds to the research questions raised at the October 20 inaugural gathering. It supports Suing Circle's seven modules and fictional case exercises. It is general education, not advice about a participant's pending case.

## Start with these five resources

| Need | Open this resource | Cost and access |
|---|---|---|
| **Understand an unfamiliar term** | Cornell Wex | Free online legal explanations |
| **Read federal civil rules** | U.S. Courts current rules | Free official rules and PDF |
| **Find an opinion by name or citation** | Google Scholar | Free case law search; select Case law |
| **Find opinions and available case filings** | CourtListener | Free public search; RECAP coverage varies |
| **Find the correct court and its local materials** | U.S. Courts directory | Free links to official court websites |

## A dictionary is a starting aid

You do not need to buy an additional dictionary to use this guide. Start with Wex and the court's glossary. If you already own an older legal dictionary, use it for historical vocabulary; check the current statute, rule, and controlling decisions for the meaning that governs your question. A dictionary definition alone does not establish a claim, jurisdiction, or a right to relief.

About Cornell LII | Court glossary | Library of Congress free case law guide

# Free resources and what they provide

The resources below can be used without an individual legal research subscription. Free access does not mean complete coverage or a guarantee that the law is current. Check dates, amendments, and the issuing court.

| Resource | Use it for | Limit to remember |
|---|---|---|
| **Cornell LII** | U.S. Code, Constitution, federal rules, Supreme Court opinions, and Wex explanations. | A university publication, not the issuing government body. Wex is commentary; follow links to the authority. |
| **U.S. Code from the House** | Federal statutes organized by title and section. Read source credits, amendment notes, and currency information. | Check recent public laws and effective dates when an amendment matters. |
| **GovInfo** | Government publications, statutes, historical editions, and opinions from participating federal courts. | The court opinions collection is selective and is not a complete docket archive. |
| **Google Scholar Case law** | Search by case name, reporter citation, or keywords; narrow by court; explore How cited. | Citation links help find later cases but are not a full commercial citator. |
| **CourtListener** | Search opinions and follow Cited By links. Search RECAP for available federal dockets and filings. | Some filings are missing or out of date. Optional paid features do not make basic public research paid. |
| **Justia cases** | An additional free place to find federal and state opinions and selected dockets. | Read the opinion itself rather than relying on editorial or generated summaries. |
| **eCFR** | Current federal regulations and point in time research when an agency rule matters. | Regulations differ from statutes and court rules. Check effective dates and the official CFR or Federal Register when needed. |
| **Law Library of Congress guides** | Research instruction by topic and type of authority. | Guides explain how to research; they do not decide your case. |

GovInfo opinions coverage | Google Scholar instructions | RECAP coverage

# PACER and services that may cost money

## PACER is a court records service

PACER provides federal case dockets and filed documents. A docket is the court's chronological list of case activity. PACER is useful for reading a case record, but it does not replace a research library of statutes, treatises, or practice guides. An account is generally needed for remote use. Sealed filings are not publicly accessible. Some case types have restricted remote access, and older records may require a clerk or archive request.

| Access or service | Current cost or condition |
|---|---|
| **PACER remote access through December 31, 2026** | $0.10 per page. Most documents are capped at $3. Search results and non case specific reports have no cap; transcripts are also uncapped. A search can incur charges even when it returns no matches. |
| **Quarterly fee waiver through December 31, 2026** | Charges of $30 or less for the quarter are waived. If you exceed $30, the waiver does not merely subtract $30 from the bill. |
| **Announced change beginning January 1, 2027** | $0.12 per page and an automatic quarterly exemption of $40 or less, announced for five years. Check the live fee schedule for then applicable caps and other charges. |
| **Judicial opinions and courthouse terminals** | Judicial opinions are free through PACER. Viewing records at courthouse public access terminals is free; printing currently costs $0.10 per page. |
| **RECAP documents already available** | Free to read on CourtListener. A link that requires a PACER purchase is not a free document. |
| **Lexis and Westlaw individual plans** | Paid subscriptions. Pricing depends on the plan, coverage, term, and added content; no single student price is promised here. A trial is temporary access. |
| **vLex Fastcase** | Subscription or qualifying institutional or bar member access. Membership benefits are not free public access; eligibility and included content vary. |

## Keep records costs under control

Look for a free copy in RECAP, GovInfo, or the court's opinions page first. If PACER is necessary, use a known case number, limit docket dates, inspect the charge preview, and save the documents you retrieve. Review account usage before running more searches. A discretionary fee exemption requires court approval; inability to pay does not automatically activate one.

PACER pricing | 2027 fee announcement | Access and exemptions

Westlaw plans | Lexis price schedule | vLex Fastcase access

# Use libraries before buying subscriptions

A library may pay for access that you can use as a patron. That is institutional access, even when it costs you nothing. Public admission to a building does not necessarily include its subscription databases, remote access, or every practice guide.

| Where to ask | What to check before visiting |
|---|---|
| **Public library** | Ask the reference librarian about legal databases, legal dictionaries, research classes, and referrals to the nearest public law library. A library card may be needed for remote resources; printing or interlibrary loans may cost money. |
| **County or state law library** | Ask about public Westlaw or Lexis terminals, citators, current federal practice books, appointments, identification, and copying. Access differs by library and vendor license. |
| **University law library** | Check the law library's own visitor policy. Ask specifically about public computer and database access. Guest admission or access to government publications does not promise access to student Lexis or Westlaw accounts. |
| **Federal courthouse** | Ask the clerk about public records terminals, local forms, and self represented litigant materials. Ask separately whether any law library is open to the public; courthouse records access does not guarantee Westlaw or Lexis access. |

## Verified examples

Cook County Law Library, Illinois: its official page lists on site public access to Westlaw, Lexis, and HeinOnline. It also advertises free remote Westlaw access for Cook County residents. Confirm current registration, residency requirements, session limits, and included collections with the library. This is a local benefit, not nationwide eligibility.

Cook County research and access | Branch locations

Indiana Supreme Court Law Library, Indianapolis: public visits require an appointment and identification. Its two library computers provide Westlaw, LexisNexis Digital Library, HeinOnline, and VitalLaw. The page lists free copying of library materials and says books cannot be checked out. LexisNexis Digital Library is not a promise of a full Lexis research account.

Indiana visit rules and appointments

## What to ask the librarian

"I'm studying federal civil litigation. May members of the public use your research databases? Do you have KeyCite or Shepard's, current federal practice guides, and forms? Is access on site or remote? What identification, appointment, residency, time limits, and printing charges apply?"

Ask the librarian to show you how to search and update an authority. Librarians can help locate materials and teach research methods; they generally cannot select your claims or provide legal advice. For remote research questions, use the Law Library of Congress service below.

Ask a Librarian for law | Example university visitor policy

# Find forms and use them with the rules

Start with your district court's website. Look under Forms, Local Rules, and Filing Without an Attorney or Pro Se. Also check the assigned judge's standing orders. National forms are free to download, but a free form does not eliminate filing, service, or other case expenses.

Find your court | National forms directory | Civil pro se forms

| Form or collection | Purpose and access |
|---|---|
| **Pro Se 1** | Complaint for a Civil Case. A general starting form; review local requirements and the law governing the claim. |
| **Pro Se 15** | Complaint for Violation of Civil Rights for a non prisoner. The form does not establish that a civil rights claim exists. |
| **AO 239** | Application to Proceed Without Prepaying Fees or Costs, long form. The national directory also lists short form AO 240; use the version the district requires. |
| **AO 440** | Summons in a Civil Action. Find by number in the national directory; check the clerk's issuance and service instructions. |
| **AO 398 and AO 399** | Notice and request to waive service, and waiver of service. Find in the national directory; read Rule 4 before using. |
| **JS 44** | Civil Cover Sheet. Obtain the current version and any local supplement from your district court; this is not a complaint. |
| **AO 88A and AO 88B** | Civil deposition and document subpoenas. Find in the national directory; read Rule 45 and local procedures before using. |

## Form books and practice guides

Search a library catalog for Federal Practice and Procedure, Moore's Federal Practice, and federal pleading or civil procedure form books. Availability, editions, and subscription coverage vary. These are secondary sources that explain procedure and suggest drafting patterns; their sample language must be checked against current rules and your facts.

The course folder already contains Jurisdictionary references, including Forms for Civil Cases. Use those for study alongside current official sources. This guide supplies research access and verification methods rather than reproducing the author's forms.

## Check before you adapt a form

Confirm the court, form date, parties, type of claim, required attachments, signatures, service, and filing method. Read Rules 8, 10, and 11 for pleadings; check Rule 5.2 before including personal information. A sample from someone else's docket is an example of what was filed, not proof that it was correct or accepted.

Federal civil rules | Privacy rule

# Locate the authority step by step

### 1 Write a narrow research question

Identify the court, issue, and stage of the case. “What evidence may a federal court consider on summary judgment?” is more useful than “How do I win?” Keep facts, possible legal claims, and procedural questions separate. Record any actual deadline before beginning research.

### 2 Learn the vocabulary from a secondary source

Read Wex, a library research guide, or a current practice guide to find the terms used by courts. Secondary sources explain the law; primary authorities include constitutions, statutes, regulations, procedural rules, and judicial decisions. Follow the cited primary sources and read them yourself.

Primary authority | Secondary authority

### 3 Open the governing text

For a statute, search the title and section, such as “28 U.S.C. 1331,” at the House U.S. Code site or LII. Read the surrounding sections, definitions, amendment notes, and effective dates. For procedure, open the current federal rule, then check local rules and relevant court orders. A rule proposal is not the same as a rule in effect.

U.S. Code | Current federal civil rules

### 4 Search for opinions and follow citations backward

In Google Scholar, select Case law, enter a topic or exact citation, and choose Select courts to narrow results. In CourtListener, search opinions and filter by court and date. Begin with Supreme Court and relevant circuit decisions. Open useful opinions, locate the actual discussion, and follow the authorities cited there. Repeat as needed; keep a list so you do not circle through the same cases.

Google Scholar court search instructions | Free case law research guide

### 5 Decide how much weight each case carries

A case may be primary authority without binding your court. On federal law, relevant Supreme Court holdings bind lower federal courts; precedential decisions of your circuit generally bind district courts within that circuit. Other circuits and district court opinions generally offer persuasive authority. Check publication status, circuit citation rules, and later history. State law issues require a separate analysis of the relevant state authorities.

Separate the holding, the rule needed to decide the issue, from dicta, observations not necessary to the decision. Read the majority opinion or controlling disposition. A dissent, syllabus, headnote, or database summary is not the court’s holding.

Binding precedent | Persuasive authority | Dicta

# Verify every citation and update the law

Finding a case is only the first check. You also need to confirm what it says, whether it fits the issue, and what happened to the authority afterward. Use this process for citations from books, other filings, search engines, and AI.

| Check | What you should do |
|---|---|
| **Identity** | Match the case name, court, decision date, docket number, and reporter citation. Search the exact citation in a second database or the issuing court's site. A matching name by itself is not enough. |
| **Actual support** | Read the relevant passage in context. Confirm that a quotation appears in the opinion and says what the writer claims. Record the pinpoint page or paragraph. Distinguish the court's reasoning from quoted arguments and separate opinions. |
| **Procedural fit** | Identify what the court was deciding: a motion to dismiss, summary judgment, trial, or appeal. Do not import a standard from a different stage without checking why it applies. |
| **Later treatment** | Use Google Scholar How cited and CourtListener Cited By. Search the exact name and citation with terms such as overruled, reversed, vacated, abrogated, and distinguished. Read the later decisions, especially Supreme Court and relevant circuit cases. |
| **Case history and legal changes** | Check whether the opinion was withdrawn, amended, reversed, or superseded. Check current statutes and rules for amendments. A later decision may reject one proposition while leaving another intact. |
| **Final check** | For an authority central to a filing, seek library access to Shepard's or KeyCite when available. Read the treatment and underlying decisions; a warning flag alone does not explain which proposition is affected. |

Free citation links and keyword searches can miss later treatment. No search result is a certificate that a case remains good law. Even commercial citators require judgment. Record your search date and any unresolved gap; do not describe an authority as fully verified when you have not completed the check.

Library of Congress on CourtListener citation checking | Google Scholar citation tools

## Use AI to suggest a path then check it

AI can suggest search terms or explain a passage you supply. Treat a generated citation or quotation as unverified until you locate and read its source. If you cannot find the authority, remove it from the draft or clearly mark it as unresolved while you continue researching. Asking the same AI to confirm its own answer is not independent verification.

Rule 11 requires reasonable inquiry into legal and factual contentions by attorneys and unrepresented parties. Check the court's own AI requirements as well. Keep a research log and use only authorities whose text and relevance you can explain.

Rule 11

# Practice a federal research question

Study question: In a federal civil case, can a party opposing summary judgment rely only on the allegations in the complaint? This is a research exercise, not a conclusion about a participant's case.

## Begin with the current rule

Open Rule 56. Read subsection (a) for the governing standard, (c)(1) for support by specific record materials, and (d) for a party who cannot yet present essential facts. The answer depends on the motion, the record, and the applicable burdens; a factual allegation does not automatically supply the needed evidentiary support.

Read Rule 56

## Locate and read an actual decision

In Google Scholar Case law, enter "477 U.S. 317." Open Celotex Corp. v. Catrett, 477 U.S. 317 (1986), and compare its identifying information with the LII opinion linked below. Read pages 322–324. The Court explains the failure to establish an essential element after adequate time for discovery and discusses the required response to a properly supported motion. Read the majority opinion, not only the syllabus.

Celotex opinion

Citation anatomy: 477 is the reporter volume; U.S. means United States Reports; 317 is the opinion's first page; 322–324 identifies the passage; 1986 is the decision year. A docket number identifies a case within a court and is different from this reporter citation.

## Trace backward and forward

Follow the cases cited in Celotex, then use How cited or Cited By to find later treatment. One later example is Tolan v. Cotton, 572 U.S. 650, 656–657 (2014): read its discussion of viewing evidence and reasonable inferences in the nonmoving party's favor. Tolan illustrates that the summary judgment standard also constrains how a court reads the record. It does not establish that every dispute defeats the motion.

Tolan opinion

Celotex quotes an older version of Rule 56. Compare the current text and amendment notes rather than copying its historical subsection references. Then search your own circuit's later decisions and your district's local summary judgment requirements. These two examples alone do not complete the updating process.

## Record the result and any unfinished check

| Research log field | Example entry |
|---|---|
| **Question and authority** | Summary judgment response; Rule 56(c); Celotex, 477 U.S. at 322–324. |
| **Source and proposition** | Saved full opinions and rule; record materials and burdens must be examined. |
| **Verification date and later treatment** | Enter your actual search date and list the later cases you read, including unfavorable cases. |
| **Status and next step** | Located and read. Current circuit, local rules, and full later treatment still to be checked; do not label fully verified yet. |