HOW TO READ LEGAL CITATIONS

Most case citations follow a standard format, shown here by the citation to the landmark decision of Brown v. Board of Education:

FIRST PAGE of the opinion

PINPOINT of the exact page being cited

VOLUME of the series

YEAR of the decision; if clarification to identify the COURT is needed, it will also go here (e.g., 11th Cir.)

Abbreviation of the series TITLE

347 U.S. 483, 495 (1954)

On page 495 the reader finds the U.S. Supreme Court’s famous conclusion that “Separate education facilities are inherently unequal.”

Decisions are often reported in more than one set of books. A case name might therefore be followed by several cites, called parallel cites. The text is identical, although the pagination will be different. Parallel cites to the Brown decision look like:


Citations to statutes look very similar, although the numbers refer to different things:

Refers to the statutory TITLE, not the book volume

Abbreviated TITLE of code

Refers to the SECTION [§] of the statute, not the page of the book

42 U.S.C. § 1983

Some statute citations look different, however. Cites to the Georgia Code follow this style:

OCGA 18-4-22

The title abbreviation is followed by TITLE-CHAPTER-SECTION numbers.

For more information about legal citation, see Introduction to Basic Legal Citation (LII 2003 ed.) by Peter W. Martin, at http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/