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A Micro Guide to Citing Legal Materials in APA Style

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Providing accurate citations for legal materials can be challenging for anyone who isn't fluent in legalese. The APA Manual gives a few examples of citations for federal legal materials (with scant explanation) and refers users to *The Bluebook of Uniform Legal Citation*—which is the epitome of “information overload” for non-lawyers. To help preserve the sanity of social work writers who need to cite legal materials and readers who need to understand the information in those citations, I've compiled this “micro guide” to legal citation.

Disclaimer: This guide is my interpretation of information given in the *Bluebook*, informed by numerous citation websites, tested on databases of federal and state legislation, and reviewed by a willing legal scholar. Still, given the complexity of the law and formatting requirements, this guide comes with a caution of “buyer beware” (caveat emptor in legal Latin!).

The aim of citing legal documents is the same as citations for any other source: to provide evidence to support your claims or statements and to provide the reader with sufficient information to retrieve the source. To complicate matters, once a court hands down a decision or a law is enacted, the initial legislation often undergoes modification through challenges, appeals, repeals, or amendments. Therefore, authors need to ensure their citations of legal materials are accurate and point the reader to the correct version of the court case or legislation under discussion.

This brief guide barely scratches the surface but includes examples of in-text citations and reference formats for the most common legal citations encountered in social work writing: court cases, federal laws and state statutes, bills pending before Congress, and federal testimony or federal hearings. Understanding the legal notation and mastering these common citation formats will suffice for the vast majority of social work writers and readers.

Note. For an APA style reference list, treat legal citations as works with no authors. Arrange reference entries for legal citations alphabetically according to the first significant word or abbreviation in the entry. Reference entries use a ½” hanging indent.

SUPREME COURT DECISIONS

In-text format: (*Name v. Name, Year*) or when court case used in text... *Name v. Name (Year)*.

If more than one year is given for a court decision, cite all years.

In-text example: – **Note:** in-text citations of court case titles are set in italics

“...the much debated decision in *Roe v. Wade (1973)* upheld a woman's right to privacy.”

“Today's urban classrooms are more highly segregated than when the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in schools unconstitutional (*Brown v. Board of Education, 1954*).”

Add page number for direct quote: (*Lessard v. Schmidt, 1972, p. 53*).

Reference format (no italics):

Name v. Name, Volume Source Page (Year of Decision).

Example: *Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)*.

Deciphering a Court Case Reference

Example: *Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)*.

Name v. Name, Volume Source Page (Year of Decision).

Source: U.S. = *United States Reports*, which is the published record of all U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

Please note that the *Bluebook* uses the term **reporter** for the source.

Page = **starting** page of the decision in *U.S. Reports* (not page range). If citing a specific page (e.g., 491), add a comma after the starting page, and add specific page number:

Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483, 491 (1954).

What about multiple court cases with the same name and same year? This situation would be uncommon with Supreme Court cases, but might occur with citing decisions of lower courts. For example, several court cases in a single year could use common names such as *Smith v. Jones (2011)*. To eliminate confusion between cases with the

same names and years, the *Bluebook* recommends that the first in-text citation include the volume, reporter, and page number.

“Long-held assumptions about maternal rights in child custody cases were challenged separately in Michigan in *Smith v. Smith* (234 U.S. 129, 1923) and in Maryland in *Smith v. Smith* (333 U.S. 118, 1923).”

Try deciphering the reference entry for *Roe v. Wade* (1973) using the list of common legal abbreviations.

Example reference: *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113, 93 S. Ct. 705, 35 L. Ed. 2d 147 (1973).

Standard Legal Abbreviations:

Cong.	U.S. Congress
H.R.	House of Representatives
S.	Senate
Reg.	Regulation
Res.	Resolution
F.	<i>Federal Reporter</i>
F.2d	<i>Federal Reporter, Second Series</i>
F. Supp.	<i>Federal Supplement</i>
L. Ed, L. Ed. 2d	<i>U.S. Supreme Court Reports, Lawyers' Edition</i> , 1 st and 2 nd series
S. Ct.	<i>Supreme Court Reporter</i>
U.S.	<i>U.S. Reports</i>
U.S.C.	United States Code
Cong. Rec.	<i>Congressional Record</i>
Fed. Reg.	<i>Federal Register</i>

A more extensive list of legal abbreviations can be found at <http://www.law.siu.edu/lawlib/guides/abbr.htm>

Federal Court Decisions

In-text format: follow basic format - *Name v. Name* (Year) or (*Name v. Name*, Year)

The reference entry follows the format shown for Supreme Court decisions and adds the notation for the federal court district before the year.

Reference format: *Name v. Name*, Volume Source Page (Fed. Court District. Court Date),

Reference example: *Wienhorst v. Stonebraker*, 356 F. Supp. 1078 (E.D. Wis. 1988). In this example, “E.D. Wis.” is the notation for the Eastern District Court of Wisconsin.

North Carolina State Court Decisions

In-text citation: follow basic format - *Name v. Name* (Year) or (*Name v. Name*, Year)

Reference format: *Name v. Name*, Vol.No. Reporter abbreviation Page (Year).

Reference example: *Standley v. Town of Woodfin*, 661 S.E. 2d 728 (N.C. 2008)

or

Standley v. Town of Woodfin, 362 N.C. 328 (2008)

Wait a minute! What’s with different citations for the same court decision? The first example cites Vol. 661 of the regional reporting service, *South Eastern Reports, Second series* (661 S.E. 2d). The second example cites Vol. 362 of the state reporter, *North Carolina Reports* (362 N.C.). Either citation would be correct and enable your reader to retrieve the information, but the *Bluebook* states a clear preference to cite to the regional reporter. **Note** the addition of “N.C.” to the year when citing the regional report.

In-text examples:

“In *Standley v. Town of Woodfin* (2008), the North Carolina Court of Appeals upheld the town’s law prohibiting registered sex offenders from entering town parks. “

“The North Carolina Court of Appeals held that use of public parks is not a fundamental right of a town resident and that municipalities can prohibit categories of citizens from access to public parks based on potential harm to others (*Standley v. Town of Woodfin*, 2008).”

LEGISLATION (a.k.a. STATUTES, PUBLIC LAWS, U.S. CODE)

In your text, give the official name of the act and the year it was passed. The name of the statute is capitalized but not italicized.

In-text format: Name of Act (Year) or year included as part of law's name Name of Act of Year

In-text examples: "To prevent people with disabilities from being discriminated against in the workplace, Congress passed the [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990](#)."

"Employers with more than 50 employees are required to provide 'reasonable accommodations' for employees with disabilities ([Americans with Disabilities Act \[ADA\], 1990](#))."

Note. The square brackets are used to define the ADA abbreviation that will be used to refer to this law throughout the rest of the paper.

"The [National Environmental Policy Act \(1969\)](#) established the Council on Environmental Quality."

"The [National Environmental Policy Act of 1969](#) established the Council on Environmental Quality."

Reference format:

Official name of the act, source, and section number of the statute (pub. date of the statute).

Reference example:

[Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, § 2, 104 Stat 328 \(1991\).](#)*

Note: The § symbol stands for "section." To find this symbol in MS Word, go to "Insert" and click on "Symbol." Look in the "Special Characters" tab or in the "Latin 1-Supplement" subset. Use the § symbol twice (§§ 141-156) to indicate a range of sections.

*Year 1991 is the "Session Law year" in which the law was passed and published. The in-text citations use the year included in the law's name and not the session law year. I don't have an explanation for this conundrum. I'm beginning to think of APA citation as very simple and logical!

CITE LAWS TO THE U.S. CODE - whenever possible

Reference format

Name of Act § Section number, Volume number U.S.C. § Section number (Year).

The year in this format refers to the date of the code edition.

Reference examples citing U.S.C. (United States Code)

[No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 \(2008\).](#)

[National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 § 102, 42 U.S.C. § 4332 \(1994\).](#)

[Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9601-9675 \(2000\).](#)

- U.S.C. stands for the United States Code. If you are using the annotated version, use U.S.C.A.
- Use the most current version of the statute unless you are citing a specific version of the statute for historical reasons.
- In your text, you can either use the name of the act in the body of the paper (followed by the year) or place the whole citation within parentheses.

In-text examples: "The [No Child Left Behind Act \(2001\)](#) included sanctions for poor performing schools that led to a culture of 'teaching to the test.'"

"The Congressional paralysis on meaningful legislation is less irritating when considered in light of the mess created in the public schools when Congress did agree on legislation (i.e., [No Child Left Behind Act, 2001](#))."

- If you have several references to various parts of the act or quotations from several provisions in the act, you should include the specific subheadings in the citation.

Example: [No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: **Qualifications for Teachers and Professionals**, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 \(2008\).](#) [subheading in bold for emphasis – do not use bold in your citations]

- In the text, include the name and subheading of the statute:

Example, "Requirements for teachers' education are clearly delineated to ensure all children receive quality instruction ([No Child Left Behind Act: **Qualifications for Teachers and Professionals**, 2008](#))."

What Is the Difference Between Public Law and U.S. Code?

The simplest answer is that the U.S. Code organizes laws in a numbered code book by subject matter.

Public laws represent specific bills enacted by Congress, which are numbered chronologically in the order of passage. For example, [Pub. L. No. 101-337](#) might authorize payment of a judgment in the U.S. Court of Claims, [Pub. L. No. 101-338](#) might amend the definition of breach of copyright, and [Pub. L. No. 101-339](#) might propose an amendment to the Constitution. (Fictitious public laws and numbers – don't cite these!) On the other hand, U.S. Code organizes public laws based on subject matter into appropriate topic headings such as the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the federal penal law, federal environmental law, and the Bankruptcy Code.

CITING STATE STATUTES

The APA manual information on citing federal laws does not easily translate to citations for state laws. [Cornell University's Legal Information Institute](#) provides state-specific examples for reference entries. The example and explanation below are reproduced from the Cornell website.

Citing North Carolina Statues

NC laws can be cited as both Session Law and General Statutes. The session laws reproduce each individual bill, as it passed, during a particular session of the General Assembly. The whole body of statutes makes up the General Statutes—the permanent, statutory law of the state—organized by subject matter title, article, part, and section.

Reference format: *State Abb. General Statutes/Session Law Chap. No.-Article-Part.*

Reference example: *N.C. Gen. Stat. § 25-1-101 (1965).*

*N.C.G.S. § 25-1-101.**

* "Within North Carolina, this more economical statutory citation format, without currency information, is used in decisions of the state's own courts and submissions to them." (quoted from

http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/3-300.htm#3-320_North_Carolina)

My explanation reference notation: *N.C.G.S. = North Carolina General Statutes. Chapter 25, Article 1, Part 1*

Note that § is used here for "chapter" rather than section. (Aren't you glad that you chose social work instead of law school?)

The NC General Assembly has a handy-dandy website with most of the information needed to create a reference entry for a state law. For example, the info for the law regarding cleanup of abandoned mobile homes is

<http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/BillLookUp/BillLookUp.pl?Session=2007&BillID=h1134>

Example from the Writing Support mailbag:

We received an e-mail from a student who needed to cite the above example on the [Cleanup of Abandoned Manufactured Homes \(2008\)](#), which was passed by the legislature and signed by the governor but isn't yet listed in the General Statutes. In this case, the law is referenced through the records of the Session Laws—laws passed each session of the General Assembly—as *N.C.S.L. 2008-136*.

In-text format: *(Name of Law, Year Enacted)*

In-text examples: "The public health and environmental hazards of short-lived trailer housing has been addressed by the North Carolina General Assembly ([Cleanup of Abandoned Manufactured Homes, 2008](#))."

"The public health and environmental hazards of short-lived trailer housing has been addressed by the North Carolina General Assembly (*N.C.S.L. 2008-136, 2008*)."

Reference example: [Cleanup of Abandoned Manufactured Homes, N.C. S.L. 2008-136. \(2008\)](#).

FEDERAL TESTIMONY AND HEARINGS

The [Federal Digital Systems \(FDSys\) website](#) that publishes and archives transcripts of federal hearings. Transcripts of most congressional hearings are published 2 months to 2 years after they are held. The organization of the FDSys cataloging system is key to the information you'll need to create the reference entry because the reader will need the citation info in the correct sequence to retrieve your source. The archives catalog the hearings under the (a) Congressional session; (b) whether the hearing was held in the House, Senate, or a joint hearing; (c) subcommittee(s); of (d) the committee; and (e) topic of the hearing. Hearings include testimony from many witnesses, so your entry should include an individual's name if you are referencing only that person's testimony.

Reference format: *Topic: Hearing before Subcommittee of Committee, Branch of Congress, Congressional ID, Congressional session number (Year) (Individual who gave testimony).*

Example: *Urban America's Need for Social Services to Strengthen Families (official title of hearing)*

For the in-text citation, treat the hearing as a source without an author. That is, use the first word or words of the reference entry to identify the reference entry.

In-text example: “Morales clearly outlined 12 constructive steps needed to protect low-income families ([Urban America’s Need, 1992](#)), but Congress failed to initiate any of the policy reforms.”

Reference example:

[Urban America’s Need for Social Services to Strengthen Families: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives, 102d Cong. 1 \(1992\)](#) (testimony of Alex Morales).

BILLS AND RESOLUTIONS (also for Pending or Unenacted bills)

The number of a bill or resolution is placed within parentheses and preceded by H.R. (House of Representatives) or S. (Senate). When used in the text, spell out the branch of Congress that is the source of the bill.

In-text example: “[Senate Bill 5936 \(1992\)](#) might be the most important for providing funding to assist low-income housing.”

“One of the bills ([S. 5936, 1992](#)) would provide desperately needed operating funding to support low-income housing.”

Reference format: Title of bill [if avail.], [H.R. or S.] bill or resolution number, xxx Cong. (year).

Reference examples:

[S. 5936, 102d Cong. \(1992\)](#)

[Equitable Health Care for Severe Mental Illnesses Act of 1993, H.R. 1563, 103d Cong. \(1993\).](#)

[Equitable Health Care for Severe Mental Illnesses Act of 1993, S. 671, 103d Cong. \(1993\).](#)

Explanation: The bill in the first example did not have a title. The second example is a reference entry for a bill created in the U.S. House of Representatives during the 103rd Congress (legal notation drops the “r” and “n” in abbreviations of second and third); it was assigned the bill number 1563. The third example is the Senate’s version of the same bill, which was assigned bill number 671 in the Senate. (Examples from the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 6th ed. p. 222)

NORTH CAROLINA BILLS OR RESOLUTIONS

According to the *Bluebook*, when citing a state bill or resolution, you should include the name of the legislative body using abbreviations (see *Bluebook* Table T9), the number of the bill or resolution, the number or year of the legislative body, and the number or designation of the legislative session. The *Bluebook* provides these examples:

[H.D. 636, 1999 Leg., 413th Sess. \(Md. 1999\).](#)

[H.R. 189, 145th Gen. Assem., Reg. Sess. \(Ga. 1999\).](#) **Note legal citations use traditional state abbreviations** (e.g., Alabama = Ala. Oregon = Ore.) and internal periods with abbreviations for two-word state names (e.g., North Carolina = N.C.); same abbreviations used in Associate Press (newspaper) style. [Click here for list.](#)

Following those examples, I would cite North Carolina’s Defense of Marriage bill as:

[S. 514, 2011 Gen. Assem. \(N.C. 2011\).](#)

S. = Senate; 514 = Bill No.; 2011 General Assembly = Legislative year Legislative body; (N.C. 2011 - Legislative session)

In-text example: “Beyond denial of basic human rights, legislation such as North Carolina’s Defense of Marriage ([S. 514, 2011](#)) discriminates against same-sex couples by denying the tax benefits given to married couples.”

Still have questions about citing legal materials? Check out the resources below or make an appointment with the Writing Support Team (SOSWwritingsupport@gmail.com), and we’ll work it out together! Find an error in our citations? We welcome all corrections, explanations, examples, and resource referrals.

Resources:

Martin, P. W. (2012). *Introduction to Basic Legal Citation* (online ed.). Retrieved from <http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/>

Westfield State University. (2010). *Citing legal materials in APA style*. Retrieved from <http://lib.westfield.ma.edu/legalapa.htm>

John Jay College of Criminal Justice. (2010). How to cite legal materials. Retrieved from <http://www.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/research/quicklegalcite.pdf>