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the[digitledge](#) — A Garden of Good Research
Free (or Inexpensive) Legal Resources on the Internet

By Kristi L. Bergemann

If you work for governmental agency, non-profit, or even a small firm, there is a good chance that your access to online research databases, such as Westlaw® and LexisNexis®, are limited or nonexistent due to high subscription costs.

Fortunately, there is a veritable garden of free or inexpensive online research resources for lawyers. Lawyers who have Westlaw and LexisNexis subscriptions also can find these other online resources useful as some are more specialized to a certain area of inquiry, more streamlined for easier access to information, or more readily accessible when you do not have a password at your fingertips.

There are several categories of research resources available for the picking on the Internet:

Case law

There are several free online options when searching for federal and state cases.

You might choose to start your search for federal cases by reviewing federal courts Web sites. The U.S. Supreme Court's Web site at www.supremecourt.gov has the Court's latest slip opinions and bound volumes of opinions available (the Supreme Court Database through the Washington University in St. Louis at <http://scdb.wustl.edu> also can provide extra insight into Supreme Court cases). Federal appeals and district courts can provide access to opinions or orders through their Web sites; you can find such Web sites through the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts' Web site www.uscourts.gov.

If you are interested in finding state court opinions, visit the National Center for State Courts Web site at www.ncsc.org to find various state court Web sites. State courts can provide access to opinions and orders through their Web sites.

Besides federal and state courts Web sites, there are other free online databases for case research. While these Web sites are not the "official" sites for cases, you can browse these sites for opinions and other legal research. Such Web sites include Justia.com, lexisONE.com, FindLaw.com (legal professionals version), The Public Library of Law (www.plol.org), and Google™ Scholar.

Codes, statutes, ordinances, and more

For the United States Code, there are two main research options: (1) the searchable United States Code provided by the Legal Information Institute (LII) at Cornell University Law School (www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode), which allows you to search by citation or browse by title, and (2) the Government Printing Office's (GPO) United States Code Web site (www.gpoaccess.gov/uscode/index.html), where you can search by citation and receive statutory text through a variety of delivery options.

At the state level, most jurisdictions offer their statutes and administrative regulations online for public use that usually can be found through their government Web sites. A state directory is available from Cornell's LII at www.law.cornell.edu/statutes.html. You also might try the Washburn University School of Law's free legal research Web page for detailed state information at www.washlaw.edu.

These resources can be challenging to search but can be easy to use if you know your desired citation. They often allow you to read a statute within the context of surrounding statutes with much greater ease than on Westlaw.

Finally, you even may find free access to municipal codes and ordinances online if your focus is on the local level. To easily find these for the locality of your interest, check out www.municode.com; this Web site offers a free, searchable municipal code library for many (but not all) city and county governments.

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Likewise, there are similar resources available for court rules and administrative regulations at local, state, and federal levels, whether provided by LII or other educational institutions, local governments and court systems, or state and national agencies. Root out these resources via an Internet search!

Public records

Sometimes you may find it necessary to obtain public records information about a witness, opposing party, or even a client. While public records databases are most often premium services on Westlaw and LexisNexis, there are a few affordable options available online.

First, many counties and large municipalities provide online access to public records on their Web site for the Clerk of Court. Some counties post online court records and official records, which may include deeds and mortgages, liens, judgments, and more (subject to applicable privacy and confidentiality laws and regulations), while some counties may only provide access to court records or public records. Additionally, some counties may provide access to property records on a separate Web site, such as that maintained by the Property Appraiser; you should check there when you are wandering through the online research garden.

Second, there are similar searchable databases of public records for entire states provided by public or private entities. These can be useful if you are not certain where the person being researched may reside within the state or if the person has moved within the state. However, most of these statewide Web sites do not provide unified access to court records; you still must search for court records on a county-by-county basis. Additionally, if you need information about a company rather than a person, your state likely has a searchable database of business registrations through its division or department of corporations; these databases contain names and addresses of shareholders, copies of annual reports, and articles of incorporation. You also may be able to ascertain whether a person or entity is licensed through a state regulatory body through an online governmental database.

Third, you can search public records from all over the country on general public records Web sites, such as www.searchsystems.net or www.publicrecordscenter.com. These Web sites provide links to many free governmental public records Web sites, such as those provided by your state or county and links to fee-based resources.

Other resources

Another type of resource often out of reach on Westlaw or LexisNexis is the law review article. Law review articles often provide an educational overview of an area of the law that you may be unfamiliar with and can serve as a starting point for further research. A new searchable law review database was recently unveiled by the ABA Law Technology Research Center (LTRC) and even includes international sources. Give it a try at www.abanet.org/tech/ltrc/lawreviewsearch.html.

Finally, as you research, you need to be aware of when your resulting written product is due or when your opponent will have to respond to your fine research. To aid in time management, check out the deadline and filing calculator provided by Todd Olivas & Associates, Inc. at www.toddolivas.com/court_reporting_articles/deadline-calculator.asp.

Stop and smell the flowers in the garden of free and inexpensive legal research—always with a critical eye concerning the source of information.

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