



How To Read A Legal Citation

When most people make references to legal materials, they tend to do so by the *name* of the document. For instance, a case will be referred to as *Brown v. School Board*, the *Miranda* case, and the like. Laws are referred to by the title of the Act, such as the *Fair Lending Standards Act* or the *Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act*.

The legal community, however, is not like most people. Rather than use the *names* of the documents, an organization/classification tag called a citation identifies legal materials. The citation is a unique identifier that immediately indicates where in the broad corpus of legal materials the document in question may be found. While the name *Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act* tells us very little about where we might find the text of the Act; the citation *750 ILCS 5/101* tells us exactly which book and where in that book the Act can be found. The same is true of cases: the name of the case *Howard v. Francis* tells us nothing about where we might find the case. The citation *562 N.E.2d 599* gives us the exact book and page number for *Howard v. Francis*.

The key to reading a citation is understanding the three distinct components found in every cite. In a case, those components are (in order) **Volume Number**, **Series** (or volume), and **Page Number**. Thus the citation *562 N.E.2d 599 (Francis V. Howard)* is used to locate the case in the following manner: Go the 562nd volume of the Northeastern Reporter, 2nd Ed, and look on page 599. This is where *Francis v. Howard* will be found.

A citation to a law is read in a similar fashion: The three distinct components in a law cite are **Code Section**, (the name of the) **Code**, and **Code Subsection**. Thus the citation *750 ILCS 5/101* is used to locate the *Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act* in the following manner: Go to Section 750 of the Illinois Compiled Statutes, and look for the Subsection 5/101.

The above illustrations use references to an Illinois case and law, but the method of reading a citation is the same for all other federal, state, and local cases, codes, and ordinances. The first component of the citation will always be a Volume or Section number. The middle component will always be the set of books that the material is to be found in. The final component is always the page number for the case or the Subsection of the Code section.

When reading a case citation, you may encounter a variant form where a second set of page numbers follows the third component. An example might look like the following: 562 N.E.2d 599, 601. A citation in this form generally follows a quotation, and is a reference to where in the case the quotation is taken from. Thus 562 N.E.2d 599, 601 indicates the quote was taken from page 601 of the case that starts on page 599 of the 562nd volume of the Northeastern Reporter, 2nd Edition.