How to Read Legal Citations

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

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:

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/