

1-1-2007

# Quality Online Legal Researching -- On the Cheap!

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## Repository Citation

Donovan, James M., "Quality Online Legal Researching -- On the Cheap!" (2007). *Articles, Chapters and Online Publications*. 7.  
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# Quality online legal researching – *on the cheap!*

By JAMES M. DONOVAN, FACULTY AND ACCESS SERVICES LIBRARIAN

Online legal research can be expensive. Westlaw and Lexis charges, for example, can range as high as \$145 per search depending upon the database selected or up to \$885 per hour, with additional printing and downloading fees.

For the cost-conscious practitioner, there often exist low or no-cost alternatives.

The librarians at the Alexander Campbell King Law Library, in collaboration with the Institute of Continuing Legal Education, conduct a well-received annual CLE session on Internet legal researching.

The daylong session guides practitioners through only a fraction of the tools available to them on the Web.

Highlights of these free resources are summarized in the accompanying Sources at a Glance table (see next page). Entries in the table were selected not only to offer a reliable source for primary legal materials but also to demonstrate the wide range of electronic outlets for these materials.

While having at hand a specific link can solve an immediate need, the savvy Internet legal researcher should keep in mind several general principles:

## What sources are likely to be out there “somewhere?”

A lawyer’s time is valuable, and it would be counterproductive to spend too much time looking for something free. It can help to have some idea whether the kind of information required is likely to exist with noncommercial accessibility.

Consider the original source of the material. Commercial costs sometimes cover only the interfaces that allow access to materials that actually exist in the public domain, as happens when the publication of statutes, regulations and judicial opinions has been underwritten by public dollars.

Texts for which the vendor is not the original source – such as law reviews and news articles – are also frequently accessible through alternative sites.

The legal researcher can exploit alternative resources for public domain materials and resort to the high cost providers primarily when needing their unique content, such as copyrighted treatises or annotations.

Be aware the availability of court decisions ranges widely from one jurisdiction to the next.

Inspecting both official and unofficial Web sites in order to gain a working familiarity with what is available from your favorite courts could be well worth the effort.

## How reliable is a source on the Web likely to be?

Whenever possible, resort to the homepage of the original producer. The U.S. Code, for example, is available directly from the U.S.

House of Representatives office responsible for its compilation.

When judging the reliability of a resource, consider not only the source but also the currency. Most pages include a “date last updated” statement. Be certain this date does not make a Web page unusable.

Perhaps the most significant gap in free electronic resources is an updated version of the U.S. Code. The official version can be several years out of date. Although it is possible to update this text, the process can be tedious and time-consuming. A full description of the process, however, is available as one of our Law Library Research Guides (<http://www.law.uga.edu/library/research/guides/uscodeupdate.pdf>).

## I have found what I need, but I’m not comfortable with the interface.

Any specific item can often be found at numerous locations, usually with different interfaces and formats. This is particularly true about federal materials. It pays to identify a few options and select the one that best fits your preferences.

## Can I find a list of resources in my area, rather than look for everything individually?

Law libraries often post research guides that include the latest electronic materials in each major legal specialty. As one example, the Georgetown Law Library has compiled subject-matter research guides that point the user toward the most relevant electronic-format primary and secondary materials in each category ([http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/research/browse\\_topics.cfm](http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/research/browse_topics.cfm)).

## I like to keep current, but don’t have a lot of time to browse the Web looking for new developments.

Many services offer to e-mail the content to you directly. The *Federal Register* table of contents, for example, can appear in your e-mail each day. *Govtrack.us* notifies you of changes in pending legislation, and *Findlaw.com* will let you know when new U.S. Circuit Court opinions have been posted. Taking advantage of alert features, where available, can remove the burden of navigating to sites for new updates.

## There is so much material out there! How can I keep current on new resources?

A free annotated e-publication issued by the librarians of the Cornell Law School, InSITE-L ([http://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/lawlibrary/Finding\\_the\\_Law/insite.html](http://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/lawlibrary/Finding_the_Law/insite.html)) provides updates to new Internet resources. A similar publication, *Internet for Lawyers*, makes freely available its issues at [http://www.netforlawyers.com/legal\\_research\\_news\\_archive.htm](http://www.netforlawyers.com/legal_research_news_archive.htm). Subscribing to these services can be a time-efficient way to keep on the cutting edge of Internet legal researching.



## Sources at a Glance

Additional links of interest compiled by librarians at Georgia Law's Alexander Campbell King Law Library can be found both in its CLE materials ([http://www.law.uga.edu/library/research/internet/resource\\_list2006.htm](http://www.law.uga.edu/library/research/internet/resource_list2006.htm)) and through its Legal Research Links Web page (<http://www.law.uga.edu/library/research/internet/>).

### STATUTES

#### Federal

- U.S. Code <http://uscode.house.gov>. Official source sponsored by the U.S. House of Representatives
- Public Laws <http://thomas.loc.gov>. Project of the Library of Congress, THOMAS makes legislative material freely available
- Pending Legislation <http://www.govtrack.us>. E-mail alerts notify about changes in proposed legislation

#### Georgia

- Code <http://www.legis.ga.gov/legis/GaCode>. Text of the current unannotated Georgia Code
- Session Laws <http://www.galileo.usg.edu/express?link=zlg&rkey=leg>. HTML version of laws from 1755 to 2000
- Pending Legislation [http://www.legis.ga.gov/legis/2005\\_06/leg/legislation.htm](http://www.legis.ga.gov/legis/2005_06/leg/legislation.htm). Calendars, votes, bills and resolutions for each legislative session
- Local Ordinances <http://www.municode.com>. Codes for over 1,500 local governments

### REGULATIONS

#### Federal

- All Agencies <http://www.regulations.gov>. Find regulations from all federal agencies
- Federal Register <http://origin.www.gpoaccess.gov/fr>. Backfile from 1994 to present; subscribe to daily e-mailed table of contents
- Code of Federal Regulations <http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov>. Experimental version that updates the CFR daily

#### Georgia

<http://rules.sos.state.ga.us>. Offering 14,707 links to state regulations

### OPINIONS

#### Federal

- Supreme Court
- Opinions* <http://www.supremecourtus.gov/opinions/opinions.html>. Includes PDF U.S. Reports volumes beginning in 1991
- Records/Briefs* <http://curiae.law.yale.edu>. Nonexhaustive collection of U.S. Supreme Court records and briefs
- Oral Arguments* <http://www.oyez.org/oyez/frontpage>. Audio files for all arguments from 1995; earlier years included selectively
- Circuit Courts <http://newsletters.findlaw.com/nl>. Subscription available to e-mail case law summaries from each circuit
- <http://www.law.cornell.edu/usca/search>. Interface allows omnibus searching of all circuits simultaneously

### OPINIONS (cont.)

- District Courts <http://www.uscourts.gov/courtlinks>. Clearinghouse from and about the judicial branch
- Agencies [http://www.lib.virginia.edu/govdocs/fed\\_decisions\\_agency.html](http://www.lib.virginia.edu/govdocs/fed_decisions_agency.html). Links to administrative rulings and decisions
- Georgia
- Supreme Court [http://www.gasupreme.us/sc\\_op\\_index.php](http://www.gasupreme.us/sc_op_index.php). Decisions from 2005 to present
- Appeals Court <http://www.lexisone.com>. Last five years of state and federal cases available free of charge
- Attorney General <http://www.state.ga.us/ago/opinions.html>. Opinions from 1994 to present

### COURT RULES

#### Federal

<http://www.llrx.com/courtrules>. Links to more than 1,400 sources for state and federal rules and dockets

#### Georgia

<http://www.georgiacourts.org/rules.html>. Collects links to all the various Georgia state courts

### FORMS

#### Federal

- Judicial <http://www.uscourtforms.com>. 60,000 forms from federal, state and local jurisdictions
- Agencies <http://www.forms.gov>. Contains over 5,400 forms for business and personal use

#### Georgia

- Judicial <http://www.georgiacourts.org>. Probate and juvenile court forms, plus inmate and protective order samples

### SCHOLARSHIP

- Social Science Research Network (SSRN) <http://www.ssrn.com/lrn/index.html>. E-journals of latest working papers from law schools (all free) or by subject matter (many free)
- Berkeley Electronic Press (Bepress) <http://researchnow.bepress.com/workingpapers.html>. E-mails or Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds of working papers by subject or institution
- Law Review Alerts <http://www.findlaw.com/info/write/forms/subscribe.html>. Notification of new law review and law journal article abstracts

### NEWS ARTICLES

- General <http://www.nytimes.com/mem/email.html>. After member registration, daily headlines delivered via e-mail
- Legal <http://jurist.law.pitt.edu>. E-mail alerts available; compiled by the University of Pittsburgh School of Law