

Chapter Headings

How to Begin Your Research
Know the Source of Law Likely to Affect your Case
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Let's Review

If you are involved in a lawsuit, have a legal question, or are looking for legal information, you might be wondering how to go about researching the law. You may be planning to handle your own case, or possibly you'd just like to find out more about your situation before you talk to a lawyer. Researching the law can be challenging unless you have a plan. This two-part series will give you an overview of the basics of legal research. In part one we will cover what you need to know before you get started.

Let's look at how to begin your research.

Chapter Heading: How to Begin Your Research

You will want to follow these preliminary steps.

First, clearly identify the legal question that you need to answer. Be specific. Sometimes as you research, your question might change or grow. Having a clearly defined question will focus your research.

Second, identify the jurisdiction. Jurisdiction refers to the court's power to hear and determine a case. This word is often confusing because it refers to both a geographical area as well as subject matter. Ultimately, however, it means that courts only have the power given to them by the Constitution or the Laws of the State. Some courts hear only certain types of cases. Court jurisdiction is also limited by geography. For example, criminal matters are normally brought in the court in the county

where the incident took place. Non-criminal civil cases have different rules that govern which court has jurisdiction. For more information about jurisdiction, talk to a lawyer.

Third, know the source of law likely to affect your case.

Chapter Heading: Know the Source of Law Likely to Affect your Case.

You must determine which laws cover your legal question. You also must understand the following:

- Whether your case involves state, federal or even international law.
- Whether the issue you are concerned with is governed by one or more of the following:
 - Local laws, usually called “ordinances.”
 - State or federal laws which are called statutes.
 - Case law, which refers to court decisions interpreting the law.
 - Regulations, which are special rules issued by state agencies that administer the law.
 - Court rules, which govern how court cases are managed.

These are the various sources of law that might govern your case. For more information on sources of law, see the My Laws, My Courts, My Maryland video, *What Is the Law?* If you’re still not sure the source of the law that applies, write down your legal question and where the people and property involved are located. Consider talking to a law librarian for help on determining where to begin your research. Visit mdcourts.gov/ccll to find a Maryland law library near you.

Finally, get organized.

Chapter Heading: Get Organized

Take notes. Keep your research in one place for example a folder or binder. When you find useful information, make sure you write down where you found it. This is called “citing” the law. It is

important to write down your sources for two reasons. First, you want to be able to find them again if you need to do follow up on research. Second, you may need to tell others, like an attorney or judge, where you found your information.

Let's talk about where to look for legal information and next steps.

Chapter Heading: Where to Look for Legal Information and Next Steps

Ready to get started? Here are some key online resources you can use when doing legal research. You might want to take some notes so you can remember these resources.

For a general overview of an area of law, visit our website at www.mdcourts.gov/courthelp, or the People's Law Library of Maryland at www.peoples-law.org. There you can find links to most of the information we are discussing today, including links to court forms, Maryland law and regulations, and court rules.

To find Maryland statutes, case law or regulations, and links to local ordinances, visit the State Law Library page, mdcourts.gov/lawlib and look for the Gateway to Maryland Laws. There you can find statutes, regulations, and case law you can review online for free. Lexis and Westlaw are also available for free at most public law libraries. Google Scholar is another option. Go to scholar.google.com to find case law.

Before you get started on your research, let's review.

Chapter Heading: Let's Review

We talked about how important it is to identify your legal issue, the jurisdiction, and the type of law that would govern your case. We also talked about getting organized before you start the research and where you can find the law itself. In Part 2 of this series we will go into more detail about how to conduct the research and where you can get help. Thanks for watching. I hope this information has been helpful.