

Free Online Tools for Out-of-State Primary Law Research

BY ANNAKATHERINE WHERREN

Large subscription databases offer streamlined access to primary authority from each state, albeit at increasing cost. Even with the most proficient research skills, an attorney may be constrained by the limitations of the terms of their plan or the cost of ad hoc coverage, which may not be feasible for solo practitioners. This article explores four free online legal resources that can serve as valuable alternatives to conducting out-of-state legal research.

FindLaw

FindLaw (findlaw.com) is a free online database that provides both federal and state case law and codes. The main search on FindLaw's "Resources for Legal Professionals" page (lp.findlaw.com) allows you to search for codes by keyword or citation, or search for cases by court and party name. The cases can be narrowed by the US Supreme Court, federal circuit courts, and the most searched state supreme and appellate courts.¹ To discover single state-only searching with more options, however, you must scroll down to the center of this page and choose the "Caselaw" link under "Cases and Codes." This takes you to the Case Law Resources page (caselaw.findlaw.com). From here, you can use the search field to search all available courts by citation or keyword. But there is no way to limit your search to just one state.

For state-specific research, you'll need to scroll down to the US map at the center of the page. From here, you can either select a state from the map or click the "show all states" link and select a state from the resulting list. If you

select Arizona, for example, you'll proceed to a page full of helpful links for conducting Arizona legal research, including links to various Arizona courts. ¹ It's worth noting that court coverage varies by state. For example, Arizona's coverage includes tax courts, as well as appellate and supreme courts. Once you select your desired court, you'll proceed to a page where you can search by party name, keyword, docket number, and desired date range. The resulting opinions are full text with footnotes; however, FindLaw does not provide links to cases mentioned within the opinion that it also hosts in its database.

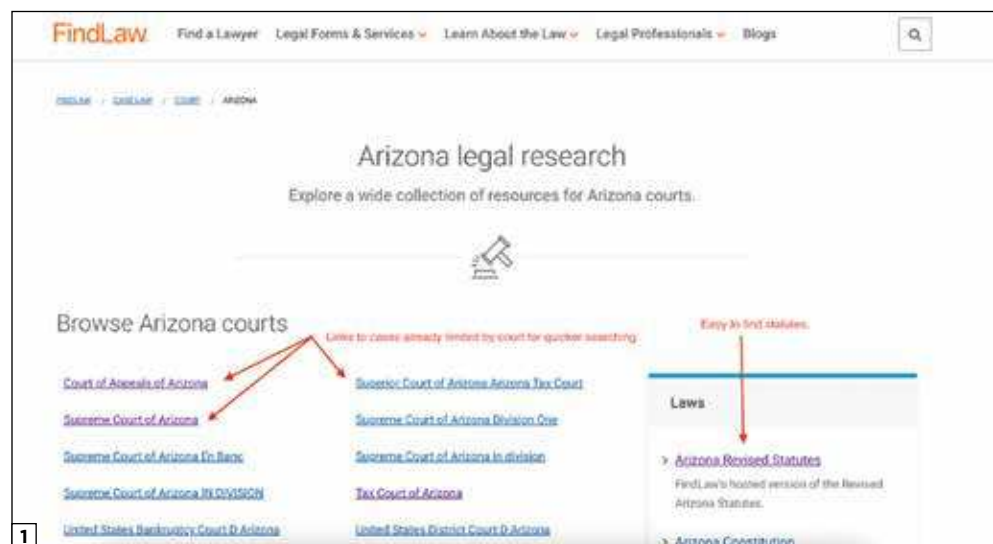
In addition to enabling case law research, the Arizona Legal Research page allows you to search FindLaw's hosted version of the Arizona

Revised Statutes. Simply click "Arizona Revised Statutes" under the "Laws" heading to get to the Arizona-specific page (codes.findlaw.com/az). From here, you can search the Arizona statutes by entering a keyword or citation into the search field. The results page will not only bring up the applicable Arizona statutes but also provide a link for expanding the results to a nationwide search.

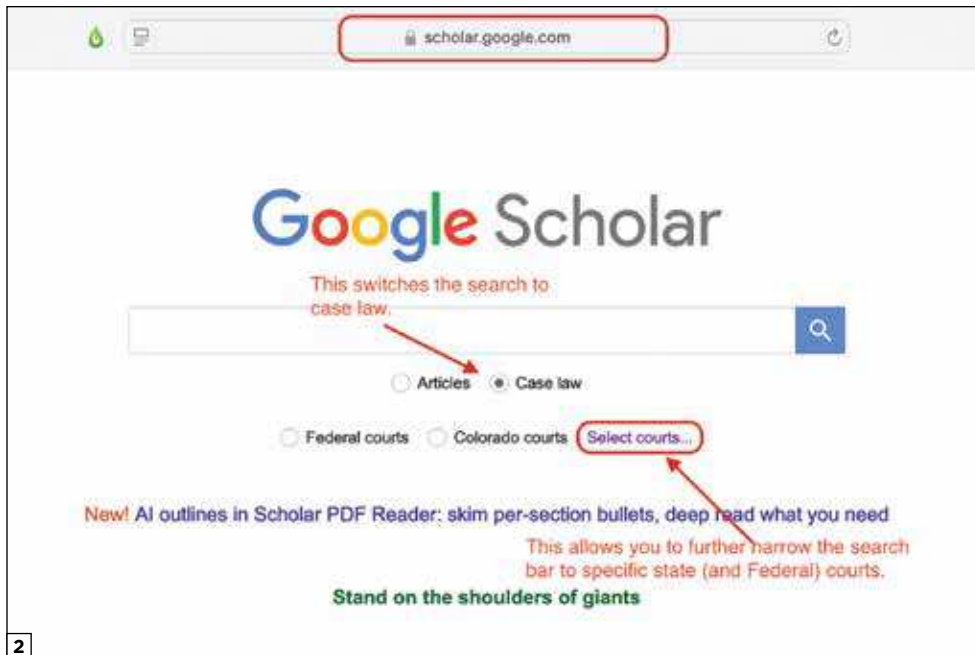
A second way to research state-specific statutes is to browse the statutes using the Titles list located just below the search field. It's worth noting that the Title listings appear as if they will contain nested menus; however, they are actually links to the chapters, and the chapters are then nested menus to the articles and sections. Opening a section brings up currency information at the top, followed by the text of the statute. Links back to the chapter index, as well as buttons to scroll to the previous and next sections, appear at the bottom above citation information. FindLaw also includes links to the annotated, updated statutes on Westlaw.

Google Scholar

Google's sister search engine for scholarly publications, Google Scholar, is another free source for published state and federal court opinions. Coverage across the courts varies, but its appellate and state supreme court opinions



FindLaw's Arizona legal research landing page (caselaw.findlaw.com/court/arizona) offers links to courts for quicker searching, as well as links to other state-specific laws, including the Arizona Revised Statutes.



Google Scholar's homepage defaults to an article search, but once you select the case law option, you'll be offered more ways to make the search more precise.

date back to 1950.² The default for Google Scholar is articles, so from the main page (scholar.google.com), you'll need to select the case law radio button to search opinions. **2** Doing so automatically brings up radio buttons for both federal courts and your own state court; selecting one of these options sets the home search bar to that specific choice.

But for out-of-state research, you'll want to instead select the "Select courts" link located to the right of the buttons. This option leads to a page showing each state and each court that Google Scholar covers.³ You can then select as many courts as you want to include in your search. Once you've made your selections, simply click "done" and then enter your query into the resulting search box. After you run the search, you can limit your results further by date and, if the search is successful, even create an alert to send emails to your inbox when it yields new opinions.

One of the most useful aspects of Google Scholar's case law search is the "How cited" feature that appears at the top left of each opinion. Clicking this link brings up a list of linked opinions on Google Scholar that have cited your opinion or are related to the opinion. From here, you can click the "all cited documents" link at the end of that list to further narrow the results using keywords and date filters, allowing for results that are more tailored to the legal issue you may be researching.

Justia

Justia offers free access to state case law and codes, as well as some city codes. Like FindLaw, there's no option to limit your search to just one state's opinions. But that's not to say it's not useful. Justia offers a wealth of helpful resources—you just need to have a good idea what you're looking for.

There's also a trick for accessing state-specific resources. This might seem counterintuitive, but selecting the "US States" link from the Justia homepage (www.justia.com) and picking a state from the subsequent list is not the best way to find the case or code. Instead, you'll want to select the "Legal Research & Law Practice" heading link from the homepage. **3** This takes you to the main US Law page (law.justia.com),



Justia's homepage is divided into several sections to help you get started. The Legal Research & Law Practice section is organized specifically for practitioners and is a great place to start your research.

com/new-mexico). You can then scroll down to find links for the unannotated New Mexico Statutes from 2006 to 2023. The statutes are organized in click-through pages of chapters, articles, and sections, providing a graphical overview that also serves as a handy index. The text of each section begins with a copyable universal citation based on the American Association

Justia also includes New Mexico's administrative code, which is organized much like the

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state statutes. While Justia does provide some city codes, they are not comprehensive. Most link to city websites, so keep in mind that city codes may not be consistently updated. But it is worth checking even for Colorado coverage.

New Mexico's page also provides supreme court and appellate court opinions dating back to 1950 and 1966, respectively. These opinions are browsable by year, but there is no way to limit searches by state, by court, or by year or date range. Given this limitation, Justia can be a great place to check when you can't find an opinion somewhere else. As a bonus, most of the opinions include a downloadable PDF and the option to sign up for email alerts with free summaries of new opinions from that court.

State Government Websites

State government websites can run the gamut from poorly maintained, hard to navigate, and sparse to well-organized, sleek, and jam-packed with useful information. Luckily for practitioners, your AALL legal librarians have done a lot of the work for you. AALL's Online Legal Information Resources Guide serves as a central hub linking users to legal resources for all 50 states and the District of Columbia.⁵ This guide is a great place to start if you want to quickly locate state resources.

To research a legal issue involving Utah, for example, click on the "Utah" link, which takes you to a printable PDF that's populated with clickable links.⁴ At the top left of the PDF, you can see when the PDF was last updated (in this case, March 29, 2022). Within the table itself, the clickable links lead to the official government sites where the specified information can be found. In Utah's table, you'll find links to the Utah session laws, code, state bulletin of administrative rule updates, administrative code, and appellate and supreme court opinions. This can be a huge time saver at the onset of a research project.

But this guide does more than that. The guide (including all its state sections) provides documentation as to the official status, authentication, online preservation, and copyright claim status of each of the linked documents. Furthermore, it identifies whether the state has enacted the Uniform Electronic Legal Materials

Act (UELMA), as well as the date it was enacted and the date it became effective. And whether citation is your struggle or your pride and joy, the guide tells you whether a universal citation has been adopted for each source. Finally, the table ends with the public state law libraries' contact information, including their websites. Libraries can be an invaluable resource for documents you cannot find online; research librarians can often scan print materials they have on hand, as well as lend their state expertise to your research questions.

Conclusion

These are just a few of the free online options that can help practitioners efficiently and effectively conduct state-specific legal research. Whether it's court opinions or state codes, the material is out there, and you don't necessarily need an expensive database to access it. 



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NOTES

1. As of the date of this article, FindLaw's most searched courts were the California Supreme Court, California Court of Appeals, New York Court of Appeals, Texas Supreme Court, Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, Illinois Supreme Court, Illinois Court of Appeals, Florida Supreme Court, and Delaware Supreme Court.
2. Search Help, Google Scholar, <https://scholar.google.com/intl/en/scholar/help.html#coverage>.
3. Selected Courts, Google Scholar, https://scholar.google.com/scholar_courts?hl=en&as_sdt=0,6.
4. Universal Citation, Justia, <https://law.justia.com/citations.html>.
5. Online Legal Information Resources, AALL, <https://www.aallnet.org/advocacy/government-relations/online-legal-information>.
6. Utah, AALL, <https://www.aallnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/OLIR-Utah.pdf>.

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