

# *FirmEquity's* Legal Research Guide

Greetings. It's Billy, one of the founders and partners at *FirmEquity*. I teach a community organized class for [Learnapalooza 2011](#) called "How to be a Lawyer in 45 minutes." My goal is to teach non-attorneys how to think and research like an attorney.

The document also gives insight into how *FirmEquity* conducts legal research. We focus on using high-quality, high-tech resources that do not cost our clients a dime. We are able to do great free legal research that sluggish, outdated law firms charge thousands of dollars for.

Below is the guide I used to teach the class. It contains links (I did not embed the links to allow you to print the outline as a cheat sheet) to all of the helpful resources. When advising clients, I rely on many of the resources below:

- Write in plain English. There is a trend toward using simpler language in the law. Even lawyers are beginning to scorn legalese. Legalese should die and you should help kill it. "Don't write like a lawyer; write like a storyteller." If you watch Bryan Garner's interviews with attorneys and judges, you will learn more than taking 10 law school classes on legal writing: <http://lawprose.org/interviews/interviews.php>
- Have confidence. The Internet can give you knowledge similar to that of an attorney on nearly any legal issue.
- Find the Groove. You might not know how to describe your legal problem. You might not know what area of law you should search. That's OK. Lawyers will often search for "the Groove." Once you find the Groove for your legal question, the answers will flow. Don't get frustrated if it takes an hour or more to find your Groove.
- Logic. Use precise and sharp logic. Do not allow your arguments to rely on assumptions. State even the most obvious facts and arguments.
- Strength of Authority. It's important to understand the hierarchy of the law. Most of the time, federal cases and laws trump state cases and laws. There are a few issues that are purely intrastate that the federal lawmakers cannot touch. Within either the federal courts or the state courts, the highest court (usually called the Supreme Court by NY is notable exception) trumps the appellate court. The appellate court trumps the lower level, or trial court.
- Persuade. Write persuasively. Speak persuasively. Being polite and friendly to opposing or neutral parties is often the most persuasive thing you can do.
- Google. Just search it.
- Google Scholar. Click the "Legal opinions and journals" radio button. Search by citation (347 US 483) or by case name (Brown v. Board of Education). Click on cases cited by the court (Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537). Click on the "How Cited" tab to see how cases decided after the one you are viewing relate to the one you are viewing. Click on "all ### citing documents" to see the cases that cite to the case you are viewing. Narrow your search further by clicking "Search within articles citing the

case you are viewing” and then typing in search terms. Restrict results by date with the “anytime” drop down. Set up an email alert for new cases citing to the case you are viewing. Read “How the document has been cited.” Advanced Scholar Search will allow you to restrict results by date and to specify a court (Illinois courts only). This is an awesome resource. It democratizes the ability to read State and Federal opinions. Until Google launched this product, it cost thousands of dollars to do legal research via LexisNexis and Westlaw. Large law firms are still dumb enough to pay for those two resources. <http://scholar.google.com/>

- The English common law system connects cases in a huge tree of ancestors and progeny. Google Scholar helps you search that family tree.
- Learn more about legal citations: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/>
- Pin Cites: 347 US 483, 486. Pin cites simply indicate the precise page.
- Illinois Legal Aid. They are an excellent and generous resource. They write with clear language aimed to help everybody: <http://www.illinoislegalaid.org/>
- Nolo’s Plain English Law Dictionary. It’s free online, or you can buy a copy: <http://www.nolo.com/dictionary/>
- Nolo. Check for Nolo books in your local library. They are straightforward and comprehensive. Click on “Get Informed: Free Legal Information” for a wealth of free info. You can also buy various forms from Nolo. I would recommend looking for a free form before buying one, but Nolo forms are often worth the modest prices. Some Nolo books in the library will include forms. <http://www.nolo.com>
- Cyber Drive Illinois. The Rules of the Road will help you with a lot of common questions about traffic violations. You can File Corp & LLC Articles Online for your startup. <http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/>
- Search Illinois Business Names. You can also search companies in Illinois so that you can create a unique name for your business. <http://apps.ilsos.gov/corporatellc/>
- Search Illinois Trademarks. <http://www.ilsos.gov/trademarksearch/>
- PACER. Public Access to Court Electronic Records. Not surprisingly, the government websites are the most complicated resource to use. Many attorneys struggle with it. You must register with PACER to use it. They will want a credit card. It costs 8 cents per page that you view. PACER is powerful because it will give you access to the dockets of all federal courts. The docket simply shows the current business of the court. PACER is generally used to monitor ongoing cases. I’d recommend Google Scholar for cases that have already been decided. <http://www.pacer.gov/>
  - You can enter case numbers in each of the following formats:

- yy-nnnnn
- yy-tp-nnnnn
- yy tp nnnnn
- yytpnnnnn
- o:yy-nnnnn
- o:yy-tp-nnnnn
- o:yy tp nnnnn
- o:yytpnnnnn

<b>yy</b>	case year (2 or 4 digits)
<b>nnnnn</b>	case number (up to 5 digits)
<b>tp</b>	case type (up to 2 characters)
<b>o</b>	office where the case was filed (1 digit)

- RECAP. There is a movement to make all PACER filing free to access. Some smart people have developed a Firefox plugin called RECAP that allows you to access some PACER documents for free. You can access documents that other RECAP users have paid for and automatically uploaded to the communal RECAP cloud. RECAP will notify you when you can access a docket or a document for free. Most attorneys don't even know this tool exists. <https://www.recapthelaw.org/>
- State and Local Courts. State and Local courts are inconsistent with the resources that they offer on their websites. If you want to research a case that is currently in a State or Local court, go to their website and see if they are advanced enough to have an online docket. If they have an online docket, it will most likely have an awful user interface, but it will still help you. Usually the Clerks will have the dockets that you're searching for. For instance, Cook County's awful website can be searched here: <http://www.cookcountyclerkofcourt.org/?section=CASEINFOPage&CASEINFOPage=2400>
- Legal Information Institute - Cornell Law. They have a wealth of legal resources, such as the Uniform Commercial Code. <http://www.law.cornell.edu/ucc/ucc.table.html>
- USPTO. The federal US Patent and Trademark Office is an incredible resource for a complicated area of our law. You can search patents and trademarks. Don't be shy about calling them on the phone. They can be very helpful in guiding you, particularly to the resources on their site. Basic Word Mark Search for "polity." Advanced boolean search for patents: "IN/Zuckerberg-Mark" <http://www.uspto.gov/>
- Google Patents. The USPTO has a primitive user interface. Google provides a smoother user experience, however, I believe it does not allow the search of trademarks. As expected, their advanced search functions are more user friendly than the USPTO site, so use them. <http://www.google.com/patents>
- Thomas. Search Congressional bills from 1989 to Present. Searchable by bill number, keyword, or Congressional sponsor. <http://thomas.loc.gov>
- Illinois Statutes. This resource is not user friendly, but it can be fun to browse Illinois laws. Getting lost in the statutes will give you perspective on how they all fit together. <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/ilcs/ilcs.asp>
- IICLES. Law libraries generally carry helpful books called IICLES. They are intended for lawyers, so they can be somewhat difficult. But, they are a great resource.
- IRS. The IRS website can be very helpful for individuals, businesses, and nonprofits. They have comprehensive articles on many subjects. Also, do not be shy about calling them with a question. They can be very helpful on the phone. <http://www.irs.gov/>
- Immigration. This is another government website with great legal info. <http://www.uscis.gov/>
- Securities. <http://www.sec.gov/>
- Lexis Web. Lexis Web searches legal resources. It is OK. It often returns poor results. Also, some of the results can only be accessed by paying for them. <http://www.lexisweb.com/>
- FindLaw. It's OK. <http://lp.findlaw.com/>

- Legal Forms. Washburn Law Library has a good listing of websites offering free legal forms. It takes effort to find the form that will fit your situation. In many cases, you will want to find a form tailored to Illinois law. <http://www.washlaw.edu/legalforms/>
  - FormsWorkFlow has a bundle of Illinois forms that you can download for free to fill out by hand. Oddly, they charge you to download an interactive PDF. <http://www.formsworkflow.com/>
  - LawInfo also has some free forms. <http://www.lawinfo.com/>
  - There are 1000 places on the Internet to find paid forms. Good, free forms are harder to find, but it can be done.
- University of Washington Law Library. They have tons of links to free resources. <http://lib.law.washington.edu/research/research.html>
- Georgetown Law Library. <http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/guides/freelowcost.cfm>
- Duke Law Library. <http://www.law.duke.edu/lib/researchguides/intresearch>

The resources provided above will empower you to research many legal issues. However, if you are in serious legal trouble and the issues are complex, please do hire a sharp attorney. Also, please don't try to represent someone else. You need to be a licensed attorney to represent another person. If you do not wish to hire an attorney to defend yourself, you can represent yourself pro se.

Please suggest additional resources in the comments below.

Contact me at [billy@firmequity.com](mailto:billy@firmequity.com) if you have any questions. You can also call me at 847-207-9064 or Twitter follow [@billyjoemills](https://twitter.com/billyjoemills).

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