



USING THE WEST TOPIC AND KEY NUMBER SYSTEM\*

Topic and Key Number Overview

The Topic and Key Number System is a massive outline or index of American law. Developed by Thomson West, a legal publishing company, the system helps researchers find court cases that deal with specific legal concepts.

How the Topic and Key Number System Works

The Topic and Key Number System works like this:

- 1. All of American law is broken down into more than 400 broad topics. Some of these topics are Civil Rights, Insurance, and Constitutional Law.
2. Each of those broad topics is divided into narrower topics, which are then divided into even narrower topics, like steps in an outline. There can be up to eight steps in the hierarchy to reach the narrowest topic, which represents a specific legal concept.
3. Each of these legal concepts (and there are approximately 100,000 of them) has a unique number that allows you to find it on the outline. This number is called a Key Number.

DIGEST TOPICS
See, also, Outline of the Law by Seven Main Divisions of Law, preceding this section
The topic numbers shown below may be used in WESTLAW searches for cases within the topic and within specified key numbers.
1 Abandoned and Lost Property
2 Abatement and Revival
4 Abortion and Birth Control
5 Absentees
6 Abstracts of Title
7 Accession
8 Accord and Satisfaction
9 Account
10 Account, Action on
11 Account Stated
11A Accountants
12 Acknowledgement
13 Action
14 Action on the Case
15 Adjoining Landowners
15A Administrative Law and Procedure
16 Admiralty
17 Adoption
18 Adulteration
19 Adultery
20 Adverse Possession
21 Affidavits
23 Agriculture
24 Aliens
25 Alteration of Instruments
26 Ambassadors and Consuls

\* Adapted from The National Reporter System, a PowerPoint presentation that is part of West's Instructional Aid Series.

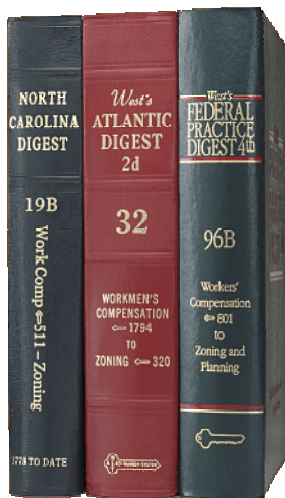


## How Do I Find the Cases on Specific Topics?

When a court decides on a case, the judge will write an opinion. A copy of the case opinion is obtained by Thomson West, a legal publishing company. West editors read the case and pick out the points of law addressed in the case. The editors summarize each of these points of law in a short paragraph called a *headnote*.

The headnotes are then passed along to another team of editors who figure out where those points of law belong in the Key Number System outline. These editors, who are called *classifiers*, find the correct location on the outline and assign at least one Key Number to the headnote. All headnotes in any jurisdiction dealing with a particular point of law will have the same Key Number.

When you know the Topic and Key Number you want, then you move on to one of the West Digests. Digests are summaries of cases, arranged alphabetically by Topic and then numerically by Key Number. There are federal, regional, state, chronological, or topical digests. All cases dealing with a legal concept in the jurisdiction, time period, or topical area covered by a Digest are grouped together.



So, to find a North Carolina case on a criminal law topic, you would follow these steps:

1. Determine an appropriate Topic and Key Number.
2. Look up that Topic and Key Number in the West North Carolina Digest (or in the Southeastern Digest, which covers North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and West Virginia).
3. Read the case summaries listed under that Topic and Key Number until you find one that sounds good.
4. Look up the case in a reporter.

## How do I Determine the Appropriate Topic and Key Numbers?

The great thing about the Topic and Key Number System is that all the West Digests use the same topics and numbers. This means that, if you look up “Criminal Law 🔑 731” in both the North Carolina Digest and the South Carolina Digest, all the cases you find will contain the specific legal concept represented by Criminal Law 🔑 731, even though the cases come from two different states.

Below are five methods for identifying Topic and Key Numbers:

### 🔑 Topic Method



## CHARLOTTE SCHOOL *of* LAW

Finding the right topic can be the first step to find the right Key Number, especially if using print research products.

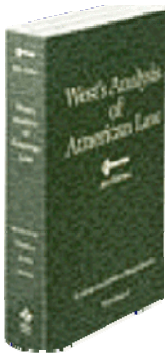
1. In the print Digest, there is a topic list at the beginning of each volume and a Subjects Included and Subjects Excluded and Covered by Other Topics section at the beginning of each topic. Skim the topics, reading the scope notes at the head of each topic.
2. On westlaw.com, click the More pull-down list in the right corner of the toolbar, select Key Numbers & Digest, and an expandable-collapsible Key Number outline will be displayed.

### **Descriptive Word Method**

Select specific words that describe the problem or concept. Then, use a Descriptive Word Index (DWI) volume to search for references to those words, which will then lead you to the proper Topics and Key Numbers.

### ***West's Analysis of American Law***

This print product is arranged first alphabetically by Topic and then numerically by Key Number. Each Key Number is titled so you can zero in on the Key Numbers that are most relevant. Use it to find West cases in print or online.



### **Library References**

ALRs, Am Jur 2d, CJS, Forms, practitioner guides, annotated statutes, and many other legal materials will contain references to relevant Topic and Key Numbers.

### **Known Case Method**

1. When you already have one case on your topic but you need more, read the headnotes for the case you already have. Pick one or two headnotes that are most relevant to your issue. Then use a Digest to look up the Topic and Key Number assigned to each of these headnotes.
2. To create a Custom Digest online, click the Most Cited Case link following a relevant Key Number in the case. You can create a Custom Digest of headnotes assigned to that Key Number in the selected jurisdiction.