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**A 1L's Quick Guide to the American Law Reports
For Use with the Written Volumes**

1. Formulate the Topic of Your Search

- Usually the easiest portion of the research process, this step requires you to distill the topic for which you are searching into a few words. Usually, this portion of research will be the starting point from which research begins, such as when your boss or professor asks you to research a specific topic. Sometimes, however, no specific topic will be given to you. Instead, a case with multiple issues will be your starting point, and from there you will have to consider which issue will become the basis for your search topic. For example, if your boss requires you to research *Michael H. v. Gerald D*, 410 U.S. 110 (1989) you will want to narrow down whether he wants you to find out about substantive due process, paternity, presumptions in family law, or one of the other topics that case covers.

2. Find out Which Area of Law you are Going to be Searching

- Law in the United States can be divided into two major categories: state and federal. State common, statutory, and constitutional law are the focus of state law, while federal statutes and the federal Constitution are the primary sources of federal law. It is important, before you go to search the ALR, to know which type of law you are looking for as these two types of law fall under different sets of ALR indices.

3. Find and Search the ALR Index or Digest

- The ALR Index is an alphabetical guide to state law topics covered in certain sets of ALR volumes. On the other hand, the ALR Digest is an alphabetically organized set of state case headnotes according to their West Key Number. In the federal realm, ALRFed Quick Index combines both of the styles of these two. These search guides allow you to quickly jump to your desired topic. Additionally, the ALR Digest breaks down each topic according to its West Key Number, giving you the total picture of relevant law in a certain field. Of course, you should be careful to check the pocket part of the index you're working with to make sure to find the most up-to-date information. For example, if you wanted to search for what happens when a child allows the police to search his or her parent's home, you might look up "police power" in the ALR index. When you got there, you would find that "Search and Seizure" was described in another volume of the index. Once you got to the search and seizure section of the ALR Index,

you would then go down the alphabetical list of subtopics until you got to the term “Relatives.” In this subsection, you would find the volume number and page number of the annotation for the subject matter in both the ALR and the ALRFed.

4. Go to the Designated ALR Volume and use the Annotation

- At this point, the ALR has saved you countless hours of individual research, as long as you know how to read the indices. Important to understand, there are 6 series of ALRs and 2 series of ALRFeds. A later series’ annotation may supersede an annotation on the same subject in the series before it, or may not have an annotation about that topic at all. It is important to keep in mind the recentness of the information you have found. Now that you have found your way to the topic you were searching for, you must read and consider the annotation. The annotation will usually begin with a short descriptive paragraph detailing its scope, then proceed to an article outline and practice pointers, give a list of cases dealing with the topic area (categorized based on jurisdiction), and finally explain the principle which you are searching for. Remember always to look through the pocket part!

5. Don’t stop here!

- Once you have read the annotation and checked out some of the cases, remember that this is only the beginning of legal research. One should consider many other resources before one begins to write on a specific topic area. In particular, there may be law review articles which are helpful or explanatory for your particular topic, and of course, one may want to look for newspaper or magazine articles to round out their understanding of the facts underlying the case.