

A child is denied admission to a school because of her race. A man stands trial without a lawyer because he cannot afford one. A customer is injured when part of a car collapses. Two people sign an agreement to sell a farm, and one later insists that the whole thing was a joke. These situations seem to belong to different worlds, yet each can force a court to answer a question that reaches beyond the people involved. What does equal protection require? When must the government provide an attorney? What responsibility does a manufacturer owe someone who uses its product? How do we determine whether a promise became an enforceable agreement? Case law is the body of law developed through courts' decisions in actual disputes. It includes the legal rules and interpretations judges establish when they explain why a case must be decided a particular way. Through those decisions, a problem involving particular people can become guidance—and sometimes a binding rule—for people who have never met them.

We will focus on the United States, where understanding case law begins with recognizing that law comes from several places. A constitution establishes a government's basic structure, powers, and limits. A statute is a law enacted by a legislature, such as Congress or a state legislature. A regulation is a rule issued by a government agency acting under authority the law gives it. Case law develops as courts interpret and apply these sources, and as they develop certain legal principles through earlier judicial decisions. Suppose a statute prohibits discrimination but the parties disagree about whether a particular employment practice falls within that prohibition. The statute provides the language; the court must determine what that language requires in the dispute before it. This is why reading a statute alone may not reveal the full legal picture. Courts may already have explained which conduct it covers, what someone must prove, and what exceptions or limitations apply.

There is a related term, common law, that deserves careful handling. In one common use, it means legal principles developed through judicial decisions rather than created entirely by a statute. Many rules involving contracts, property, and injuries have common-law roots. Case law is broader: it includes those judge-developed principles, but also decisions interpreting constitutions and statutes. For example, a court explaining the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable searches is producing constitutional case law. A court interpreting an employment discrimination statute is producing statutory case law. A court developing a rule about a manufacturer's responsibility for a dangerous product may be developing common law. These categories sometimes overlap in practice because legislatures can modify rules that courts previously developed. The important starting point is that "case law" does not mean a separate collection of laws that has nothing to do with written legislation. Courts and written laws interact constantly.

The reason an earlier decision matters to a later dispute is precedent, meaning a previous judicial decision that provides a legal rule or reasoning relevant to another case. Imagine the unfairness of two people bringing materially identical disputes to the same court and receiving opposite answers simply because the judge feels differently on

Tuesday than on Monday. Precedent helps make legal treatment more consistent and allows people to plan their conduct. You may encounter the Latin expression *stare decisis*, which refers to the practice of adhering to established decisions. The language sounds more intimidating than the idea: courts generally give weight to what has already been decided instead of approaching every recurring question as though nobody has considered it before. However, precedent is not a promise that every earlier ruling will remain forever. Courts sometimes conclude that a precedent is wrong or unworkable, and the legal system has rules about which courts may change it.

Before we can understand those rules, we need to know where courts sit. A trial court is generally where a case begins, evidence is presented, and disputed facts are resolved. Evidence may include testimony, documents, recordings, or physical objects. An appellate court, also called an appeals court, reviews challenged decisions for legal or other reviewable errors; ordinarily, it does not conduct a brand-new trial with a fresh set of witnesses. In the federal system, district courts are the principal trial courts, courts of appeals review their decisions, and the U.S. Supreme Court sits above them. States have their own court systems, and names vary. New York provides a memorable warning against guessing from a title: its highest state court is called the Court of Appeals, while its Supreme Court generally operates as a trial court. Jurisdiction means a court's legal authority to hear a category of dispute or exercise authority over the people involved. A court needs that authority before it can decide the merits, meaning the actual legal substance of the controversy. (uscourts.gov)

An earlier ruling can be binding, meaning the court must follow its controlling legal rule, or persuasive, meaning the court may consider its reasoning without being required to adopt it. A federal district court generally must follow applicable published precedent from the federal appeals court governing its circuit, which is the regional grouping to which it belongs. A decision from another circuit ordinarily has persuasive value rather than binding force. U.S. Supreme Court holdings on federal law bind both federal and state courts. A state's highest court, meanwhile, is ordinarily the final authority on the meaning of that state's own law, subject to federal constitutional limits. This is why a person cannot reliably say, "I found a case somewhere in America, so the judge has to rule for me." We must ask which court decided it, which law it interpreted, whether its rule remains valid, and whether that rule governs the present dispute. (uscourts.gov)

Consider *Marbury v. Madison*, decided in 1803, as an early lesson in how much can turn on a court's authority. William Marbury sought a court order requiring delivery of the official document confirming his appointment to a government position. The Supreme Court concluded that he had a right to the commission, yet it did not give him the order he requested. Why? The Court held that Congress could not expand the Supreme Court's authority to hear cases initially beyond the categories established by the Constitution in the way the relevant statute purported to do. The decision became foundational to judicial review, the power of courts to determine whether government action conflicts with the Constitution. Notice the distinction: recognizing that a person has been wronged does not automatically mean that a particular court can provide the requested remedy. A

remedy is the relief the law makes available, such as money, a new trial, or an order requiring or prohibiting an action. *Marbury* teaches us to examine both the claimed right and the court's power to act. ([Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center](#))

To read any case intelligently, separate its story from its legal work. The facts describe what happened, although at some stages a court must assume allegations are true without deciding whether they have been proved. The issue is the legal question the court must answer. The holding is the legal determination necessary to resolve that issue on the relevant facts. The reasoning explains why the court reached that determination. The judgment is the court's formal disposition of the dispute. Those distinctions become useful immediately. A court might hold that a defendant's trial involved a constitutional error, reverse the conviction, and send the matter back for further proceedings. Reverse means overturn the challenged lower-court decision; remand means send the case back. Neither word necessarily means the person has been declared innocent. Likewise, winning an appeal may mean receiving another opportunity to prove a claim rather than receiving money immediately. Understanding what the court actually ordered prevents us from turning a legal victory into something larger or different than it was.

We can see the power—and the danger—of precedent in the history surrounding *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The earlier decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, from 1896, had upheld racial separation in railway accommodations under the “separate but equal” doctrine. A doctrine is simply an established legal principle or framework. That doctrine helped support a system in which governments separated people by race while claiming that separate facilities could satisfy constitutional equality. In *Brown*, families challenged government-imposed racial segregation in public schools. The Supreme Court unanimously held that separating children in public education solely because of race denied equal protection, even where physical facilities and other measurable conditions might be equal. Equal protection, guaranteed against state action by the Fourteenth Amendment, requires government to comply with constitutional standards of equal treatment. The Court rejected the idea that educational segregation became lawful merely by supplying comparable buildings or books. ([Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center](#))

The learning here goes beyond remembering that *Brown* ended the constitutional legitimacy of state-imposed school segregation. It shows that a precedent can preserve injustice until successfully challenged. It also shows that a legal rule and its enforcement are separate problems. A Supreme Court decision does not physically rearrange classrooms, enroll children, or make resistant officials cooperate. In *Cooper v. Aaron* in 1958, arising from resistance to desegregation in Arkansas, the Court reaffirmed that state officials could not disregard the constitutional rule announced in *Brown*. The rule needed people, institutions, and further legal action to make it effective. We should therefore read civil rights cases with attention to both the legal reasoning and the families who bore the cost of bringing the dispute forward. A name printed in a law book can represent years of exclusion, risk, organizing, and persistence. Case law records judicial answers, but those answers often exist because ordinary people refused to accept their treatment as the final word. ([Rule of Law](#))

Loving v. Virginia, decided in 1967, offers another lesson in how courts examine an argument rather than merely repeat it. Richard and Mildred Loving challenged Virginia's laws prohibiting interracial marriage after being convicted for their marriage. Virginia defended its system partly by arguing that it punished the white and nonwhite participants alike. At first glance, someone might call equal punishment equal treatment. The Supreme Court rejected that reasoning because the underlying restriction itself depended on racial classifications and served an unconstitutional purpose. The Court held that Virginia's laws violated both equal protection and the constitutional protection of the freedom to marry. Due process, another protection in the Fourteenth Amendment, includes requirements of fair government procedures and, under Supreme Court decisions, protection for certain fundamental liberties. *Loving* illustrates why a legal argument must examine what a rule does, not merely how evenly its penalties are distributed. A government cannot make an unconstitutional racial restriction acceptable by applying its punishment to both people involved. ([Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center](#))

Now move from the right to marry to the ability to defend yourself when the government accuses you of a crime. In *Gideon v. Wainwright* in 1963, Clarence Earl Gideon faced a Florida felony prosecution and asked for a lawyer because he could not afford one. A felony is a serious category of criminal offense, generally distinguished from a misdemeanor by the authorized punishment and the jurisdiction's classification. His request was denied, he represented himself, and he was convicted. The Supreme Court held that the constitutional right to counsel required states to provide an attorney to a defendant unable to afford one in a case of that kind. Counsel means a lawyer providing legal representation. The decision overruled *Betts v. Brady*, an earlier precedent that had applied a narrower approach to appointed counsel in state prosecutions. Here we see a court expressly replacing an earlier constitutional rule with a different one. ([Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center](#))

The educational value of *Gideon* lies partly in understanding why the lawyer matters. A criminal trial operates through rules about evidence, questioning witnesses, legal objections, and the government's obligation to prove its charge. A defendant may understand what happened and still lack the knowledge to test the prosecution's case effectively. The Supreme Court did not declare that Gideon must be innocent because he had lacked a lawyer. It required a constitutionally adequate process. Nor does *Gideon* mean that the government must provide a free lawyer for every legal problem, including every divorce, contract disagreement, or civil lawsuit. Later cases further developed the right to appointed counsel in other criminal settings. The discipline we are practicing is to appreciate a ruling's importance while keeping its boundaries visible. A constitutional protection becomes easier to understand when we identify what it guarantees, when it applies, and what questions the particular decision did not settle.

Miranda v. Arizona, decided in 1966, supplies an especially useful example because popular culture often teaches it incompletely. The decision addressed the pressures of police questioning when a person is in custody. Custody, for these purposes, generally means a formal arrest or a comparable restraint on freedom under the legal test;

interrogation involves questioning or its legally recognized equivalent likely to elicit an incriminating response. The Court required safeguards, including warnings about remaining silent and having an attorney, before custodial interrogation, absent an effective alternative. The protection concerns self-incrimination, meaning being compelled to provide testimonial evidence against yourself in a criminal matter. But “the police did not read me my rights” does not automatically mean an arrest was unlawful or every charge must disappear. Whether warnings were required depends on the circumstances, and a violation generally concerns the use of resulting statements in the prosecution’s main case, subject to legal qualifications. The exact trigger matters as much as the familiar words. ([LII / Legal Information Institute](#))

Compare that with *Mapp v. Ohio*, decided in 1961, which concerned an unlawful search and the evidence obtained through it. Dollree Mapp challenged her conviction after police searched her home and seized materials used against her. The Supreme Court held that the exclusionary rule applied in state criminal proceedings to evidence obtained in violation of the Fourth Amendment. Exclusion means keeping evidence out of the proceeding for the relevant purpose. The decision teaches a distinction between a right and a mechanism for enforcing that right: a promise against unconstitutional searches has limited practical force if the government can routinely benefit from violating it. However, exclusion is not automatic after every police mistake. Later decisions recognize exceptions and impose requirements concerning whose rights were violated and the relationship between the violation and the evidence. A careful reader therefore treats *Mapp* as a foundational decision within a developing body of law, rather than a one-sentence answer to every search dispute. ([Justia U.S. Supreme Court Center](#))

Technology makes that development particularly visible. In *Riley v. California* in 2014, the Supreme Court considered whether police could search digital information on a cellphone seized from an arrested person without a warrant simply because the phone was found during the arrest. A warrant is judicial authorization for a search or other specified action based on the required legal showing; a search warrant ordinarily requires probable cause, a legally sufficient basis for believing evidence will be found in the place to be searched. Earlier cases allowed certain searches associated with a lawful arrest to protect officers and prevent destruction of evidence. But a phone’s digital contents raise privacy concerns far beyond those of an ordinary physical item in a pocket. The Court held that officers generally must obtain a warrant before searching that digital information, while recognizing that a genuine emergency may justify an exception. The Fourth Amendment did not need to name smartphones for its protection to apply. Case law supplied the reasoning connecting an existing constitutional protection to a newer form of personal information. ([LII / Legal Information Institute](#))

This brings us to distinguishing a case, one of the most important skills in legal reasoning. To distinguish an earlier decision is to explain why a meaningful difference in facts or legal context makes its rule inapplicable or calls for a different result. The difference must matter to the reasoning. The color of a phone usually has nothing to do with whether its contents may be searched; the existence of an immediate threat to

someone's life may matter greatly. Likewise, a rule permitting officers to inspect a physical object does not automatically answer whether they may explore years of messages, photographs, and records stored digitally. *Riley* shows why sound legal comparison goes beyond saying, "Both things were in a pocket." Lawyers look for a material fact, meaning a fact that can affect the legal outcome. Learning to separate material facts from colorful but irrelevant details is part of learning to think through a case instead of merely remembering its story.

Students' speech provides another pair of real examples. In *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* in 1969, public school students were suspended for wearing black armbands to protest the Vietnam War. The Supreme Court held that the students' expression was constitutionally protected on the record before it. Public schools could not suppress that expression merely because officials feared controversy; the Court discussed material and substantial disruption and interference with the rights of others as grounds relevant to school authority. The word public matters because the First Amendment generally restrains government action. A public school exercises government authority; a private organization presents different legal questions. *Tinker* therefore teaches both a right and a boundary: students retain constitutional protection, but the decision does not mean that every form of expression must be permitted in every school setting regardless of its effects. ([Tinker v. Des Moines](#))

Decades later, *Mahanoy Area School District v. B. L.* in 2021 considered a student's profane social media posts made away from school after disappointment over cheerleading. The school suspended her from the cheerleading team. The Supreme Court held that the punishment violated the First Amendment in those circumstances, while declining to say that schools can never regulate off-campus speech. Threats, serious bullying, and other situations may raise different concerns. Compare the two decisions carefully: *Tinker* involved expression at school, while *Mahanoy* involved expression outside it, on social media. The later Court had to consider how far school authority reaches into students' lives away from campus. It worked with existing principles without pretending the setting was identical. Together, these cases teach us that "students have free speech" is a starting point. Understanding the law requires asking who acted, where the speech occurred, what it involved, and what legitimate interests the school claimed. ([LII / Legal Information Institute](#))

Case law also reaches agreements that have nothing to do with constitutional rights. In *Lucy v. Zehmer*, decided by Virginia's highest court in 1954, a dispute arose over a written agreement to sell a farm for \$50,000. Zehmer later argued that the transaction had been a joke and raised his drinking as part of his defense. The court examined what the parties had said and done, the written terms, the discussion surrounding them, and whether Lucy reasonably understood the agreement to be serious. It held the agreement enforceable. The central teaching concerns objective agreement: contract formation generally turns on outward expressions reasonably understood in context, rather than a secret intention someone later claims to have held. The result was not a rule that jokes always create contracts or that intoxication never matters. The court concluded that the

evidence in this transaction supported a serious agreement and did not establish the claimed inability to understand it. (law.justia.com)

The remedy in *Lucy* also teaches us something new. The buyers sought specific performance, a court order requiring a party to carry out the agreed transaction, rather than merely pay compensation for failing to perform. Damages, in contrast, means money awarded for legally recognized harm. Courts do not automatically order specific performance whenever someone breaks a promise; the kind of agreement, adequacy of money as a remedy, and fairness of enforcement matter. Land transactions have traditionally been an important setting for this remedy because one piece of property may not be adequately replaced by money used to buy something else. Imagine reading only a headline saying, “Man forced to sell farm after joke.” That phrasing makes the outcome sound arbitrary. Reading the actual decision reveals that the court evaluated whether the transaction reasonably appeared serious and whether enforcement was justified. Case law often becomes much clearer when we stop treating its most memorable detail as its entire explanation.

In *MacPherson v. Buick Motor Co.*, decided in 1916 by New York’s highest court, a defective automobile wheel caused injury to a person who had purchased the car through a dealer. Buick had obtained the wheel from another manufacturer. The dispute involved whether Buick owed a duty of reasonable care to the injured user even though the user had not bought directly from Buick. Older approaches often placed great weight on privity, meaning a direct contractual relationship between the parties. The court held that a manufacturer’s duty of care could extend beyond its immediate buyer when a product, if negligently made, foreseeably endangered people expected to use it. Negligence means failing to exercise the care the law requires under the circumstances. The case helped move responsibility toward the real chain of production and use: a manufacturer could foresee that the person exposed to the danger would often be someone other than the dealer who placed the order. (law.justia.com)

Yet an injury alone does not establish every element of negligence. Elements are the separate requirements that must be proved for a legal claim to succeed. A negligence claim commonly involves a duty of care, a breach of that duty, a legally sufficient connection between the breach and the injury, and actual harm. *Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad Co.*, decided in New York in 1928, illustrates why those requirements matter. Railroad employees assisted a passenger boarding a train. A package fell; unknown to the employees, it contained fireworks. The explosion caused scales some distance away to fall and injure Helen Palsgraf. The majority concluded that the conduct did not involve a reasonably apparent danger to her and that negligence toward her had not been established. The decision forces us to examine foreseeability, meaning whether a risk to someone in the plaintiff’s position could reasonably have been anticipated. Being part of a chain of events is not always enough to create legal responsibility for everything that follows. (nycourts.gov)

Palsgraf also gives us a useful way to understand separate judicial opinions. A majority opinion states reasoning supported by a majority of the deciding judges and ordinarily supplies the controlling rule. A dissent explains why a judge disagrees with the result or governing approach. Judge William Andrews's dissent in *Palsgraf* took a broader view of duty and treated the boundaries of responsibility more through the question of how closely the negligence was connected to the injury. A concurrence is different: the judge agrees with the result but writes separately, perhaps because the judge follows another route or wants to emphasize a limitation. These writings are not interchangeable. A powerful sentence in a dissent may influence later legal thought, but it does not become the holding merely because it is convincing. When reading a case, we must always know whose words we are reading and whether enough judges agreed with them.

(nycourts.gov)

Statutory interpretation becomes concrete in *Bostock v. Clayton County*, decided in 2020. Title VII, part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibits covered employers from discriminating against individuals because of specified characteristics, including sex. The Supreme Court held that firing someone merely for being gay or transgender violates that prohibition. The majority's reasoning focused on the role an individual's sex plays in such a decision: changing that characteristic while holding other relevant circumstances constant changes the employer's treatment. The decision therefore interpreted an existing statute rather than amending its wording. It also carefully left other questions unresolved, including various questions involving religious protections and other settings. The teaching is that a statutory phrase can apply to circumstances that were not the main focus of the people who originally debated it. At the same time, a ruling about a particular employment statute is not automatically a ruling about every law that uses similar language. ([LII / Legal Information Institute](#))

An especially direct example of changing precedent is *Loper Bright Enterprises v. Raimondo*, decided in 2024. The case involved federal regulation of fishing operations and helped bring before the Court a broader question about who decides the meaning of an unclear statute. Under the approach associated with *Chevron U.S.A. Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council* in 1984, courts in qualifying circumstances deferred to an agency's reasonable interpretation of an ambiguous statute it administered. Deference means giving another decision-maker's judgment a legally prescribed degree of acceptance; ambiguous means capable of more than one reasonable interpretation. *Loper Bright* overruled *Chevron* and held that courts must exercise independent judgment on the statutory question rather than defer merely because the statute is ambiguous. Agencies can still supply expertise, and Congress can still delegate choices within lawful boundaries. The decision also did not automatically erase every earlier judgment that had relied on *Chevron*. ([LII / Legal Information Institute](#))

That example helps separate overruling from reversing. Reversing changes a lower court's decision in the case under review. Overruling rejects a legal rule established by an earlier precedent. A court can reverse a decision because a lower court failed to apply existing law correctly, without changing that law at all. Conversely, when an authorized

court overrules a precedent, the effects can reach far beyond the immediate parties. Legislatures can also change the legal setting by amending a statute or replacing a common-law rule, subject to constitutional limits. If a court's holding rests on the Constitution, an ordinary statute cannot simply command courts to disregard the constitutional requirement. These distinctions explain why case law research must include later history. The fact that a decision appears in an official volume proves that it was issued; it does not prove that every proposition it contains remains controlling.

You will also encounter statements called dicta, meaning observations in an opinion that go beyond what was necessary to decide the case. Such observations may be thoughtful and influential, but they generally do not carry the same binding force as the holding. Likewise, a headnote, an editor's short description of a legal point, is not itself the court's ruling. The Supreme Court's introductory syllabus, a summary prepared to help readers, is also not part of the Court's opinion. These distinctions protect us from a common research mistake: finding a sentence that sounds useful without checking its source, context, or legal status. A judge may describe one side's argument before rejecting it. An opinion may recount a lower court's reasoning before reversing it. If we copy the sentence without following the discussion, we can accidentally present the losing argument as the law.

Even a case citation becomes manageable once someone translates it. Take *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). The names identify the dispute; "v." means "versus." The number 347 identifies the volume of *United States Reports*, abbreviated "U.S.," where the decision appears. The number 483 identifies its starting page, and 1954 identifies the year. A reference to a later page points the reader to a particular passage. Other courts use other reporting systems, and a decision may have more than one citation. The purpose is practical: a citation allows someone else to locate and verify the authority. It should function like a reliable address. It is not decoration, and a large number of citations does not make an argument sound if the cited cases do not actually support it.

When you begin studying cases yourself, slow down enough to reconstruct the path of the dispute. Identify who brought the action and what they requested. In a civil lawsuit, the person bringing the claim is ordinarily the plaintiff, while the person responding to it is the defendant. On appeal, you may instead see appellant and appellee, or petitioner and respondent, depending on the proceeding. Ask what the earlier court decided and what question the reviewing court was authorized to address. Then explain the holding in your own words, followed by the facts that made that holding applicable. Read the separate opinions only after you understand the controlling opinion well enough to see what they dispute. Finally, check how later courts treated the decision. Legal research services call this updating or checking the subsequent history and treatment of a case; tools known as citators help trace those later developments.

There are limits to what any single case can tell us. A settlement, an agreement resolving a dispute, ordinarily does not establish judicial precedent merely because the dispute

was important. A jury's verdict ordinarily does not become a binding legal rule for other juries. Trial-court opinions can be useful without binding other judges in the way a higher court's controlling decision would. Some appellate decisions are designated nonprecedential, and the rules governing their citation and weight vary. The Supreme Court's refusal to hear a case generally does not mean it approves the lower court's reasoning. These distinctions matter because public discussion often treats every courtroom event as "the court making law." A verdict, an emergency order, a final appellate opinion, and a denial of review can have very different meanings.

The strongest habit we can develop is to make our understanding explainable. With *Lucy*, we should be able to explain why the outward appearance of agreement mattered. With *Gideon*, why a fair criminal process could require appointed counsel. With *Riley*, why digital information called for analysis beyond the physical object carrying it. With *Brown*, why equal-looking facilities did not cure government-imposed racial segregation. We should also be able to identify the limits of each lesson. That combination—understanding a rule and understanding its boundaries—is what turns legal reading into legal reasoning. Behind every case are people seeking something concrete: an education, a defense, compensation, privacy, enforcement of a promise, or freedom from an unlawful restriction. Reading the decision carefully allows us to see how their experiences became questions of law, how judges answered those questions, and what those answers require of the people and institutions that come after them.