



LAW LIBRARY RESEARCH GUIDE

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FEDERAL LEGISLATIVE HISTORY WORKSHEET

Introduction

There are multiple resources for Federal legislative history. Which sources you consult and how thoroughly you research a statute will depend on your issue and when your statute was enacted. Many legislative history projects can be completed by referring to only the major committee reports. Others require a thorough review of all documents related to the legislation.

Use this worksheet as a guide through the various paper sources and online websites that you will need to check. To locate materials, refer to the [Sources for Legislative History](#) and the [Guide to Federal Legislative History](#) available from the George Mason Law Library.

For a detailed explanation of Federal legislative research, consult:

[A Research Guide to Congress: How to Make Congress Work for You](#), REF KF4950.M36 1991. Law Library First Floor Range 112. Although out of date for online materials, this is the definitive source for researching Congressional materials and is still relevant for research using print materials.

[Law Librarians' Society of Washington D.C.: Legislative Source Book](#)

1. United States Code

Identify the United States Code section you want to research. For purposes of this discussion, the terms "United States Code," "United States Code Annotate," & "United States Code Service" will be used interchangeably.

Code Section _____ (e.g. 42 U.S.C. § 256)

2. Statutes & Amendments to the Code

Using the code section, locate the **public law number** of the statute. This will be located in the History section following the text of the statute. There may be more

than one public law number following the code section if the statute has been amended since its original passage.

Public Law No. _____ (e.g. P.L. 107-251, 116 Stat. 1655)

3. Bill Number

Convert the public law number into the bill number (House or Senate). The easiest way to do this is to locate a copy of the statute. The bill number will appear near the top (e.g. HR or S).

Bill No. _____ (e.g. S. 1533)

4. History of the Bill

A bill history is a list of all actions on a bill and the documents issued as a result of those actions. Since 1963, a brief legislative history is reprinted at the end of each Public Law; however, it is rarely comprehensive. Depending on the depth of research required, you may also want to look at related bills that were not enacted from the same and/or prior Congresses.

5. Committee Reports

Congressional committees issue reports to document their consideration of most bills. These reports are usually the best source for legislative intent. Often, members of the House and Senate will convene a conference committee to resolve differences between the House-passed and Senate-passed versions of a bill. When this happens, the conference committee issues a separate report that discusses the history and treatment of each bill section under consideration. Always check for a conference report, and start your research there if there is one.

6. Assemble Copies of the Bill

The reports should indicate when and where changes were made to the bill. If it is not clear, read all versions of the bill, paying particular attention to the language of the bill as introduced and subsequently changed. This will determine when and where particular changes were made and will help to focus your research.

7. House and Senate Floor Proceedings

The *Congressional Record* contains a nearly verbatim transcript of all activities occurring on the floors of the House and Senate. Additionally, Representatives and Senators may insert material into the *Record* which is quite informative.

8. **Committee Hearings**

Of all the materials discussed thus far, hearings are by far the most difficult to obtain. Committees must edit and approve the official transcript before it is printed, a process that takes months or even **years** to complete.

9. **Other Sources**

Congressional Quarterly is the premier publisher of secondary sources covering the Congress. Their weekly periodical covers Congressional proceedings in great detail and often provides insight into legislative intent and policy considerations.

CQ Almanac (1973 – 2001), Law Library First Floor Range 102. Provides in-depth analysis of the major legislation and activities of the year.

CQ Weekly (Oct. 1983-present, available electronically) covers virtually every act of Congress, delivering nonpartisan news and analysis.

Similarly, many industry and trade publications have excellent coverage of legislative activities. Browse the topical organization of legal issues and news sources on Lexis and Westlaw to locate these publications.

Finally, law reviews and other secondary sources such as A.L.R.s can valuable sources for discerning legislative intent.

10. **Short Cuts**

This discussion focuses on compiling your own legislative history, and as you can see, it is a long process with many steps. There are several tools to research legislative history more quickly, but they are not available for all statutes, nor do they cover *unenacted* bills.

Both Lexis and Westlaw have compiled legislative histories on several statutes; search the database directories for “legislative history.” Additionally, Westlaw now has links to **selected** legislative documents directly from the code section/public law.

Loose-leaf and online services for specific practice areas often contain some legislative history materials. Check the library catalog for resources in your subject area.

Private publishers, government agencies, trade associations, and law firms also compile legislative histories. Many of these privately prepared histories are not readily available to the public; contact your reference librarian for more information: 703-993-8076.