

Legal Research Tip: Digests

What is a digest?

A digest is a subject index to case law. All legal issues in a case are assigned headnotes which include a description of the legal issue, an alphabetical Topic and numerical Key Number (subtopic) as part of the West classification scheme. Once you have identified an appropriate Topic and Key Number (Criminal Law § 32 for example), you can use the same Topic and Key number in any print digest to find relevant cases for your topic in that jurisdiction. There are more than 400 legal Topics in the West Digest system.

How do you find information in a digest?

There are several ways to locate material in a digest. Each major Topic has an outline at the beginning that lists the various subtopics or Key numbers. This method works well if you already know enough about a particular area of law to know where to start your search. A more common approach is to use the Descriptive Word Index at the end of the set where you can look up your legal terms and are given the corresponding Topics & Key Numbers. Or if you already have a good case, you can use the Topic & Key Number from one of the headnotes in that case to find additional cases on the same legal issue in a digest.

What about jurisdiction?

Digests are available for individual states (Colorado) or regions of the country (Pacific Digest - 15 states including Colorado). There are also digests for the different levels of federal courts:

Federal Practice Digest

U.S. Supreme Court Digest

The American Digest system including Decennials & General Digest covers all federal & state cases in the United States.

What is a series?

Some digests also come in series that are broken up by time frames. For example, the Federal Practice Digest, 4th includes cases from the mid-1980's to current, while the 3rd series covers 1975 to mid-1980's.

Special features?

Digests also contain Table of Cases volumes that allow you to look up case names and then list the corresponding citation as well as the Topic & Key Numbers that have been assigned to headnotes from that case. There is also a separate

volume called *Words & Phrases* that is organized alphabetically and gives citations to case opinions that have judicially defined certain terms.

How does this work online?

The Topic & Key Number system was developed by West Publishing Company and can also be used as a search term on Westlaw. You'll learn more about using KeySearch in your advanced Westlaw training classes next semester.

