



CITIZEN MEDIA
LAW PROJECT

LEGAL RESOURCES FOR CITIZEN MEDIA

SEARCH

Project hosted by: Berkman Center for Internet & Society

Access to Courts and Court Records

If you're hunting for information, consider a visit to the courthouse, where you can sift through source-rich court records or attend (sometimes colorful) court proceedings.

Courts are centers for dispute resolution. They are [public forums](#) in which societal norms and values, as reflected in laws, are used to address and correct wrongs. While a number of laws govern the court system, none is so deeply-ingrained as the presumption that court proceedings should be open to the public.

If you are wondering how attending court proceedings or combing through court records might be valuable to you, here are several great reasons to consider acquiring -- and publishing -- information available from the courts:

If you're interested in reporting on justice or the functioning of the court system

Some believe that courts dispense justice; others believe that the law is divorced from justice. One good way to explore this issue is by attending a trial. Non-traditional journalists have already had highly visible success in covering court proceedings, as seen in the 2007 trial of Lewis "Scooter" Libby. A blogger from [Firedoglake.com](#) gained press credentials, live-blogged the trial, and provided the public with what the [New York Times](#) described as the "fullest, fastest public report" that traditional reporters led to fact check their stories. [Salon](#) applauded Firedoglake for producing "insightful" and "superb" coverage "that simply never is, and perhaps cannot be, matched by even our largest national media outlets." In this case press credentials were necessary due to the intense public interest, but usually they're not needed for courtroom access.

If you are interested in reporting on justice or the functioning of the court system, you should review the sections on access to [federal court](#) and [state court](#) proceedings for guidance on how to attend court proceedings. You may want to consult court records to get a better understanding of what is happening in court. For details, see [State Court Records](#) and [Federal Court Records](#).

If you enjoy publishing a good story

Attorneys engage in storytelling to win the case for their clients. Conflicts are inherently interesting, and the stories presented at trial tend to offer different interpretations of the truth. Tensions run high, and you may find yourself caring deeply about a previously unknown issue. As a result, courtroom dramas can make compelling subjects for blog posts and other website content. You need merely look at the [Citizen Media Law Project Blog](#) for evidence of this and the many fascinating "stories" we cover in the [Legal Threats Database](#).

If you enjoy publishing a good story, you should visit the page on [Access to the Jury and Trial Participants](#) to find out how to properly contact court participants such as judges, lawyers, parties, witnesses, and jurors to get the juicy details that will bring your story to life.

If you have a pre-existing interest in one of the parties in a court proceeding

If a certain person or institution interests you, following their footprints in court often yields a wealth of information. For example, as part of their coverage of the 1972 election, the Washington Post sent a young journalist on a low level assignment to attend the arraignment of five men who had been arrested for breaking into the Democratic National Committee's headquarters. As the journalist paid close attention to the proceedings, he quickly realized that there were more questions that needed investigating. If Bob Woodward hadn't attended that seemingly minor court proceeding, the Watergate story might never have been broken.

Besides the obvious value of attending court proceedings, there is a wealth of information available in court records about individuals, corporations, and other organizations that can further aid your investigations. See the sections on access to [federal](#) and [state](#) court records for guidance on how to access this information.

If you enjoy historical research

Legal Guide Navigation

- [Legal Guide Home Page](#)
- [Browse Guide Sections](#)
- [Search the Guide](#)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- ▶ [Forming a Business and Getting Online](#)
- ▶ [Dealing with Legal Threats and Risks](#)
- ▶ [Newsgathering and Privacy](#)
- ▼ [Access to Government Information](#)
 - ▶ [Access to Government Records](#)
 - ▶ [Access to Government Meetings](#)
 - [Identifying Federal, State, and Local Government Bodies](#)
 - ▶ [Access to Congress and the President](#)
- ▼ [Access to Courts and Court Records](#)
 - ▶ [Access to State and Federal Courts](#)
 - [Access to Jury and Trial Participants](#)
 - [Remedies if You Are Denied Access to Court Proceedings](#)
 - [Practical Tips for Accessing Courts and Court Records](#)
- ▶ [Intellectual Property](#)
- ▶ [Risks Associated With Publication](#)
- [Unique Content: Special Risks](#)
- [Guides and Resources](#)

Citizen Media Law Briefs

Signup for our monthly newsletter:

E-mail: *

☒ Subscribe

☐ Unsubscribe

[Previous issues](#)

Did you find what you are looking for?

Court records can be immensely helpful to historians in two major ways: specific court cases can illuminate a certain aspect of history, and court records in aggregate can show statistical trends that highlight social, cultural, or structural changes. For genealogists, court records can also reveal family relationships, places of residence, occupations, physical or personality descriptions, or naturalization dates. Refer to Genealogy.com and Ancestry.com for more information on how mine court records for information on your family.

If you enjoy historical research, you will find a wealth of information in court files, a growing percentage of which are now available electronically. The sections on access to [federal](#) and [state](#) court records could help you find the right place to look for the information you need.

Where to Begin

Now that we've whetted your interest in court proceedings and records, it's time to do some research so that you will be able to get access to what you need. Before you jump into the materials in this guide, however, you should first determine whether the documents and/or proceedings you are interested in are associated with the federal court system or a state court system. The page on [Identifying Federal, State, and Local Government Bodies](#) should help, as will a preliminary visit to the courthouse.

Once you've figured out what information you want and where it is located, you should browse the following sections to get a full understanding of your right to access court records and court proceedings:

- [Access to Federal and State Courts](#): Describes your right to attend court proceedings and access court records.
- [Access to Jury and Trial Participants](#): Explains how to properly contact court participants such as judges, lawyers, parties, witnesses, and jurors.
- [Remedies if You Are Denied Access to Court Proceedings](#): Outlines the procedures you should follow if a judge closes a court proceeding you wish to attend.
- [Practical Tips for Accessing Courts and Court Records](#): While we can't guarantee that you will get every court record or attend every court proceeding you desire, the tips listed on this page will help ensure that you take full advantage of the wealth of information available through state and federal courts.

- ▶ [Access to State and Federal Courts](#)
- [Access to Jury and Trial Participants](#)
- [Remedies if You Are Denied Access to Court Proceedings](#)
- [Practical Tips for Accessing Courts and Court Records](#)

[Access to Presidential Records](#)

[up](#)

[Access to State and Federal Courts >](#)

Related Resources:

[FireDogLake's Libby reporting forces a reevaluation of blogs](#) - an article from Salon on the central place of FireDogLake's blog for reporting on the Libby trial.

[For Bloggers, Libby Trial Is Fun and Fodder](#) - More on the importance FireDogLake's reporting and analysis from the New York Times.

[Benefits of Accessing Court Records](#) - an article detailing the reasons to use court records.

[What are Advantages of Accessing Public Court Records?](#) - another article explaining what types of information are found in court records.

[Benefits of Accessing Probate Court Records](#) - an article concentrating on the information found in probate court records.

[What You Need to Know About Bankruptcy Records](#) - an article focused on the information found in bankruptcy court records.

 [Print Me!](#)  [Send via Email](#)

 [Delicious](#)  [Digg](#)  [StumbleUpon](#)  [Reddit](#)  [Newsvine](#)  [Technorati](#)

Aggregated with [Access to Courts](#) [Access to Gov't Information](#) [Newsgathering](#)

Please leave us

[Feedback!](#)

Username: *

Password: *

[Log in](#)

- [Create new account](#)
- [Request new password](#)



[Subscribe to our content!](#)



[Follow us on Twitter](#)

Need legal help?



Disclaimer

Information in this guide is based on general principles of law and is intended for information purposes only; we make no claim as to the comprehensiveness or accuracy of the information. It is not offered for the purpose of providing individualized legal advice. Use of this guide does not create an attorney-client or any other relationship between the user and the Citizen Media Law Project or the Berkman Center for Internet & Society.

Navigation

- ▶ [Create content](#)
- [Legal Guide](#)
- [Threats Database](#)
- [Interactive Guide to the IRS Decision-Making Process](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions](#)

Last updated on September 2nd, 2008



[HOME](#) [LEGAL GUIDE](#) [THREATS DATABASE](#) [LEGAL ASSISTANCE](#) [RESEARCH](#)
[RESPONSE](#) [BLOG](#) [ABOUT](#)

Copyright 2007-11 Citizen Media Law Project and respective authors. Except where otherwise noted, content on this site is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 License: [Details](#).
Use of this site is pursuant to our [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Notice](#).

