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Best Legal Research Tools in 2021 for Your Law Firm

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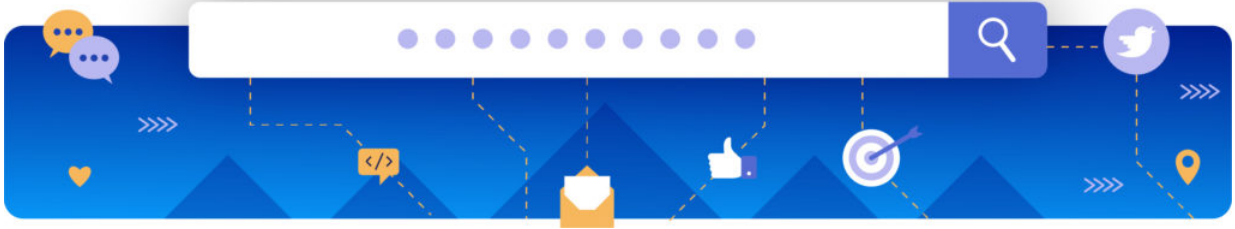
When it comes to legal research tools, the internet is the most widespread resource everyone uses, almost without question. Having the savviness to find and use the best free and/or budget-friendly tools gives attorneys an edge – especially at smaller or mid-size practicing firms. As we've seen, these tools continue to evolve, providing legal researchers (no matter their role) the agility to find the right information needed for the case. Complete with alerts and filters that prevent endless scrolling and frustrating hours lost sifting through everything but the statute you're looking for, it's clear legal research has made life easier – if you know how to access the right tools, that is.

Having hands-on resources for your law firm's needs will undoubtedly create more meaningful research that drives cases forward. This has been a game-changer for smaller firms who once had to shell out huge expenses for legal research software. Gone are those days; and good riddance, too. Simplifying research will also open up more time for other things, such as organized calendaring and day-to-day operations.

We'll be covering the following questions:

- What are the top legal research tools?
- What are some major obstacles and difficult aspects of legal research?
- Name some additional tips to make the most of these tools?

What Are Some Online Legal Research Tools?



Although nothing can quite replace a powerful paid tool depending on your needs and area of law, there are some free and more affordable tools available that make top-level research quite easy:

Google Scholar

- **Why we like it:** Instant search information around legal journals and publications
- **Why it works:** A convenient tool for quick searches around legal and scholarly literature, [Google Scholar](#) lets you browse legal patents and related articles. The best part? It's free to use. Under the search bar, simply select the bubble that says "Case law" and you're well on your way to finding legal opinions and relevant data for your case in no time.

FindLaw

- **Why we like it:** Free case summaries, statutes, and Supreme Court decisions dating back to the 1760s.
- **Why it works:** FindLaw's [practice management database](#) lets you search for cases, contracts, and articles in an effort to make legal information easily accessible. Perfect for smaller firms, it's a great tool for free research – especially if you're just starting out and needing to be conscientious about financials. You can easily refine your searches to include codes by state, and it provides relative terms so you can easily go from one topic to another.

Fastcase

- **Why we like it:** Many local bar associations provide Fastcase as a fee subscription, plus you can search state statutes and case law with a Boolean search like other more expensive options such as Lexis. You can [check here if you're in an area and qualify!](#) There's also a free mobile app available so you can browse whenever, wherever.
- **Why it works:** With a convenient ability to save documents to a "library" of sorts, [Fastcase](#) makes it really easy to keep track of documents. There's also an option to look at your recent

search history and search keywords within publications. Just go in with what area you're looking for – and don't count on it to keep track of expired or inapplicable laws. In terms of raw data, it's quite useful and is one of the largest legal libraries available.

Casetext

- **Why we like it:** Crowdsourced by the legal community, this tool only costs \$65 a year per license, and has a powerful case analysis research assistant, or CARA A.I. research ability to save time on searching for related cases. For legal research and writing, it's a useful tool to pool relevant case law together in a shorter amount of time.
- **Why it works:** Modeling itself as an all-inclusive research tool, Casetext's A.I. is able to extrapolate information from uploading documents directly that relate to your matter, rather than using filters or advanced search queries. Able to gather this information for you automatically can save considerable time and be well worth the yearly fee for Casetext when comparing it to other bigger research tools such as Lexis.

Read more on how to avoid getting a Practice Management “Lite” Software not catered to your firm's needs

What are the Most Difficult Aspects of Doing Legal Research?

Even the best attorney doesn't always have all the answers. The best offense in any matter is having a good defense – including knowledge on opposing counsel, and the relevant authorities and cases they'll be relying on. It can be difficult to navigate strategy when you're too busy trying to search for the opposite counsel's angle as well. These obstacles can mount, especially when you're fighting or are getting blocked and limited on your research attempts. If the research comes easy, so, too, will the brainstorming.

As a smaller firm, the cost analysis could also prove problematic if you're billing clients for extensive research conducted. It's important to weigh these options before going into a case that you anticipate will require ample research time, especially for newer attorneys not as well-versed or equipped with as many resources at a smaller firm or solo practice. This is all part of mapping out features that will be user-friendly for you, this time and the next – so clients stay happy, too.

Here Are Some Useful Tips for Improving Your Legal Research

- **Always diversify resources:** There's no one leader when it comes to legal research databases – it's important that you diversify your approach, and find multiple avenues to find the necessary information you need based on the area of law and matter with your client. Otherwise, you'll get stuck doing things the same way, without adapting to new opportunities and research channels.
- **Organize, organize, organize:** For hearings, mediations, trials, and any other discussions for your matter should be compiled digitally and in paper form. Use tabs, the highlight – anything to keep your necessary talking points top-of-mind. This will help make the most of your research and streamline everything going in.
- **Group related cases together:** Although many tools lack the ability to group related cases that are labeled undercurrent “good law,” over time you'll inevitably start to create your own reference points for cases that have certain outcomes, including negative and positive treatment to related matters. With your many legal research tools in your arsenal now, you can search those cases and find relative case law by date, type, and citations. You can then compare based on authority and clout in reference to the current case.
- **Ask a peer:** Having a mentor to go to for help is so important during the entirety of an attorney's career. Many have had to navigate much more manual waters and can provide shortcuts they've learned over the years to you. If you're hitting a wall, walking away, and simply sending a note to chat with someone for a few minutes about why you're feeling blocked could be just the thing to help you think differently about a case. Never underestimate the power of collaborative thinking.
- **Stay up-to-date on federal appellate courts and 50 state Supreme Courts:** There are many law firm digests ([Justia being a good one](#)) that can help send you updates, summaries, and relevant opinions that can be customized by practice area. Like many jobs requiring ongoing knowledge, it's important to stay abreast on recent decisions in your area of law so you'll know if you should research something else further that affects current matters.

Practice Management to Help Online Legal Research

As we mentioned before, organization begets organization – so adding these online legal research sites and databases to your toolkit is only going to further empower your firm to drive business and spend time brainstorming rather than doing mindless research. The very same can be said about your [case management software](#) that's used day-to-day.

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