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Secondary sources of law

A good place to start most research projects is with a secondary source. A secondary source is not the law. It's a commentary on the law. A secondary source can be used for three different purposes: it might educate you about the law, it might direct you to the primary law, or it might serve as persuasive authority. Few sources do all three jobs well. The important classes of legal secondary sources include: treatises, periodical articles, legal encyclopedias, ALR Annotations, Restatements, and Looseleaf services

**Treatises**

In this context, legal treatises are single or multi-volume works dedicated to the examination of an area of law. Treatises tend to be very good at describing the law, they're good law finders, and many of the classic treatises are persuasive. Treatises tend to provide an in-depth discussion of a particular area of law and will provide the researcher with references to a few cases and statutes.

**Legal periodicals**

Legal periodical articles are in-depth discussions of narrow areas of the law and legal issues. Articles in academic journals tend to revolve around very theoretical and cutting-edge legal issues. Articles in practitioner-oriented journals tend to be more practical. Periodical articles can be very good law finders; they tend to have a great many footnotes with a lot of legal citations. Some articles by eminent scholars can be persuasive. Occasionally, legal periodical articles can be useful for explaining the law, but often they are too theoretical for that.

**Legal encyclopedias**

Legal encyclopedias are immense sets of books that briefly describe all of the main legal issues for a particular jurisdiction. An encyclopedia can provide a basic introduction to an area of law and will provide the user with some case and statutory citations.

**ALR**

ALR provides topical annotations that focus on relatively narrow areas of the law, but discuss it in some depth. They provide a good basic grounding in law, as well as serve as good case finding tools.

**Restatements**

The restatements were developed by legal scholars initially to restate the law, and currently to describe what the law should be. In either case, Restatements are very persuasive although they are not very good at describing the law. They can serve as adequate law finders. There are restatements for many areas of law: but not all.

**Looseleaf Services**

Looseleaf services bring together all of the law on a particular topic. Looseleaf services don't exist for all areas of law, but when they do exist, they can be an invaluable resource.