



# CITIZEN ADVOCACY CENTER

## **Basic Legal Research:** Finding Federal, State and Municipal Laws

### LESSON PLAN AND ACTIVITIES

All rights reserved. No part of this lesson plan may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems without permission in writing from the Citizen Advocacy Center.

Citizen Advocacy Center ▪ Elmhurst, IL ▪ 630-833-4080 ▪ [www.citizenadvocacycenter.org](http://www.citizenadvocacycenter.org)

Funding for lesson plans was provided to the Citizen Advocacy Center by the McCormick Foundation.

## **Basic Legal Research: Finding Federal, State and Municipal Laws** Lesson Plan and Activities

---

**Grade Level:** 9,10,11,12

**Subject(s):**

- Social Studies: United States Government, State Government, Local Government; and
- Language Arts: Reading, Writing, Research.

**Duration:** 1 class session

**Description:** This lesson informs students how to obtain information on specific bills and how to influence the legislative process. This lesson should be taught after “Legislative Process - How a Bill Becomes a Law,” So that students are familiar with how bills are passed before they begin this lesson.

**Goals:**

Illinois Learning Standards

**A. Social Science:** 14A, 14B, 4D; and

**B. English/Language Arts:** 1B, 1C, 3A, 3B, 3C, 4A, 4B, 5A.

**Objectives:**

1. Understand how to track a bill through Congress and the Illinois General Assembly.
2. Understand how a local ordinance is passed.
3. Be able to research an existing statute or law.

**Materials:**

1. Paper
2. Pens
3. Handout: “Legal Research”

**Starter Questions for the class:**

1. What is a government meeting? What kinds of meetings have you heard of?
2. Should the public be allowed to observe government officials deliberate government decisions? What types of things does the government decide?
3. Why might it be important for the public to be able to attend the meetings and be able to speak at them? For example, if the school board were meeting to decide whether or not you had to wear uniforms, would you want to be heard at that meeting? Why?
4. When would there be times that it would be OK for government officials to talk about issues?

**Lecture:**

- A. Do a quick review of how a bill becomes a law in Congress and the state legislature. What are the basic steps? (First reading, committee/public hearings, second reading, amendments, third reading, vote in first house and repeat in second house, then to the executive.)
- B. Why would it be helpful for citizens to know what a law says?
- C. Why would it be helpful for citizens to know what a proposed amendment to a law says?
- D. Have students complete the worksheet for legal research. Most of the information may be found online, with the exception of some local laws. For official versions of the Illinois Code, look to [www.ilga.gov](http://www.ilga.gov) which is the Illinois General Assembly website. Click “Legislation & Laws,” and then “Compiled Statutes.”

## LEGAL RESEARCH WORKSHEET

### A. Researching Proposed Bills/Ordinances:

#### 1. Research a Federal Bill

- Go to the Library of Congress' website at <http://thomas.loc.gov> and find a bill related to e.g. gun control by typing in the word "gun" in the "Word/Phrase" box and clicking on "Search." You will see a list of various bills and resolutions related to guns. Choose one to research and answer the following questions about the proposed legislation by navigating through the website.

What is the title of the bill?

What type of bill is it?

How many representatives are sponsoring the bill?

Where was the bill introduced?

What is the main purpose of the bill?

What is the bill's current status? What actions have been taken on the bill thus far?

Have amendments been added to the bill? If yes, what are they?

How many times has the bill been referenced in the Congressional record?

Citizen Advocacy Center ▪ Elmhurst, IL ▪ 630-833-4080 ▪ [www.citizenadvocacycenter.org](http://www.citizenadvocacycenter.org)

## 2. Researching a State Bill

- Go to the Illinois General Assembly website at [www.ilga.gov](http://www.ilga.gov) and enter a bill number or key word in the search fields in the left column on the screen to find a bill related to education. You can also find bills related to education by clicking “committees” under both/either “Senate” or “House.” A list of committees appears and you can choose “Education” to see the committee members and then click on “Bills” to see a list of bills considered by the committee.
- Answer the following questions:

What is the title of the bill/bill number?

Who introduced the bill? Where did the bill originate?

What is the main purpose of the bill?

What is the bill’s status? To find this out look at “Last Action” or the last item under “Actions” after clicking on the specific bill you are researching.

Have amendments been made to the bill? If yes, what are they?

## 3. Researching a proposed ordinance for your municipality:

- You can check your municipality’s regular business meeting agendas and written minutes to see if any ordinances are currently being considered. City council meeting agendas or written minutes may or may not be available online. If your municipality has meeting minutes posted online, check the most recent ones to see if any ordinances are being considered. If not, you can obtain proposed ordinances by contacting your city clerk’s office, contacting your local council member, or by checking the local paper.

## B. Researching Existing Laws

### 1. General Information:

- To start researching you need to identify the issue you want to learn about. Think of all the words and/or phrases that describe what you want to research. For example, if you want to find laws (called “statutes” or “codes”) on air pollution, you might think of words like “air,” “environment,” “transportation,” “chemicals,” or “emissions.”
- Once you have brainstormed some words, look up those words in the index of the statutes or codes and see if there are any laws dealing with your topic.
- The index will provide a statute number. Statutes are found in the Illinois Compiled Statutes either online or in book form. The number will look something like 65 ILCS 1234.5 (a). The 65 is the volume number of the book. The actual statutes are in numerical order. You will find 1234.5(a) by flipping through volume 65 in numerical order. For official versions of the Illinois Code, look to [www.ilga.gov](http://www.ilga.gov) which is the Illinois General Assembly website. Click “Legislation & Laws,” and then “Compiled Statutes.”
- You can also look at the history of a statute and related case law by looking at an annotated version of the Compiled Statutes (ICLS). At the end of each statute you will find the history (any amendments, changes, etc.) and related case law.
- If you are looking at the books, be sure to also search the pocket part in the back of the book. The books are only printed every few years, so the publisher puts out a “pocket part” to update the books annually with any new case law or amendments to the statutes.

2. Federal law may be found at [www.findlaw.com](http://www.findlaw.com)

3. State law is also available at [www.ilga.gov](http://www.ilga.gov)