Finding the Law: Legal Research for Non-Lawyers

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Administrative Law Judge Mary D. Long (PA Public Utility Commission)

Checklist for Developing a Legal Research Plan

1. Analyze the problem or question presented: Spot the issues
    a. Acts
    b. Persons
    c. Places
    d. Dates
2. Use secondary sources to find an overview of the legal issue, terms and sources of primary law and develop a list of key terms
3. Review the primary law and search databases for additional law.
4. Update the primary law and make sure it is current.

Other Tips

1. Google can be a very useful place to start to generate key words.
2. Use terms that specifically describe the administrative agency's allegations or sanctions.
3. Avoid broad terms that may result in too many search results – to narrow your search combine these terms with more specific words.
4. Search for references to the important statute or regulation can result in case law or agency opinions which cite or interpret that statute or regulation.
5. Learn what the "seminal" decisions are in your area