Research Tip – West’s Key Number System

1. What Is It

One of the defining features of Westlaw is the Key Number System. The Key Number System is a classification system that organizes cases by topic, allowing legal researchers to quickly find cases related to a particular issue. This system was created in the 19th century, starting with seven categories: persons, property, contracts, torts, crime, remedies, and government. It has since grown to over 400 topics, covering everything from abandoned property to zoning, and nearly 100,000 individual points of law.

The key numbers are categorized topically in a hierarchical structure. Legal issues are first categorized broadly and then subcategorized down to very specific points of law. Key numbers are the same across all West publications, so if you the document you are viewing contains a key number, you can use that same number to find additional cases from any jurisdiction.

2. How to Use

Key numbers are found on the Westlaw homepage and at the beginning of most cases. To use the key numbers, follow the key number links from within a case or search or brows the list of all key numbers from the homepage.

a. From Within a Case

One way to locate relevant cases is to start from the key numbers within a case. Key numbers are found with the headnotes at the beginning of most cases, so you can locate a relevant topic and then find other cases that also examine that particular issue.
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Click ‘Change View’ to see more or less detail.

Once you find a relevant topic, select that key number to be taken to the list of cases. From there you can customize your search by limiting jurisdiction, date, or by searching within the results.

You can also change the hierarchy level to broaden your search by selecting any of the key numbers listed at the top of the page. The higher up the hierarchy you go, the more cases will be included in the results.

A search from any intermediate level will include results from the more specific levels below it.
b. Browse & Search

You can find the full list of topics by selecting ‘Key Numbers’ on the homepage.

Select any topic to browse the list of subtopics and locate your issue.

Or use the search box to find a list of key numbers related to your search terms.

Once you have selected an individual key number, you will be taken to a page listing all the cases that have been assigned that key number. Remember you can narrow your results by limiting the jurisdiction, date, or by searching within your results. You can also change the hierarchy level by using the list of key numbers at the top of the results page.
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c. Global Search

Key numbers also appear as a filter after running a search in the global search box at the top of every page. You will see a link for Key Numbers in the menu on the left side of the page after running your search.

3. In Print

The Key Number System is also available in print in the form of digests. Some digests are available at the law library. Use our catalog to find digests available in your location.

4. For More Information

You can find more information and training resources from Westlaw’s Training & Support page at legal.thomsonreuters.com/en/support/westlaw.

For research assistance, contact library staff at library@akcourts.us or (907) 264-0585.