

Legal encyclopaedias

What are legal encyclopaedias?

Legal encyclopaedias provide a comprehensive but succinct overview of all major legal subject areas. They include:

- a detailed description of legal principles
- references to legislation, key cases, and other useful material

Why use legal encyclopaedias?

Legal encyclopaedias are extremely useful as the **first step** in legal research, especially if you do not know the subject area well. You will:

- get a quick understanding of the legal principles involved in an area of law
- learn of the major Acts and cases to follow up on
- learn of new terminology - this is really useful when you search for further information (e.g. journal articles on AGIS, judgments on CaseBase, etc.)

Which legal encyclopaedia should I use? Laws of Australia or Halsbury's?

There are two legal encyclopaedias for Australia and while they have similar names, they differ in:

- the content they provide
- when they were last updated - ie how current the information is

As such, it is often a good idea to **quickly consult both** and pick the resource that provides the depth of information you need.

Should I search or browse legal encyclopaedias?

Legal encyclopaedias have the option to either search or browse. Both can be useful - both can be frustrating. If you get stuck, try one way, then the other - if you're still stuck, contact the Law Liaison Librarian.

Searching

- PRO - searching is useful when you don't know how the legal principle would be categorised
- CON - you might get a lot of irrelevant results if the concept is quite broad (e.g. negligence)
- CON - you might get no results if you use the wrong terminology (e.g. murder instead of homicide)

Browsing (like flipping through chapters of a book, or looking up a word in an index)

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- PRO - good if you don't know the exact terminology, or get no results when searching. Even better is if you use the Index in Halsbury's - this tells you of related terms you could look up
 - PRO - useful if you want to look at a broad area of law to see what specific legal principles are involved (e.g. if you want to look at negligence to see what elements need to be established)
 - CON - can be tricky if you don't know how the legal principle would be classified (e.g. does trespass to land come under criminal law, property law, or torts?) Again, the Index in Halsbury's gets around this problem

Team:	Learning & Teaching Library Services
Subject:	Law
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Last Updated:	1 April 2021