

How to Read a Docket

Version 1.0 (July 29, 2021)

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Law school is often focused on teaching law students how to read orders and opinions (a judge's decisions and the accompanying explanations) and occasionally motions, memoranda, and briefs (the requests and arguments that a lawyer submits to the judge). However, law schools rarely teach a more fundamental skill - how to read a docket.

Reading a docket can tell you information that you won't always find in a case, including how the facts and claims evolved over time, what happened in between opinions, and why things resolved the way that they did. Knowing how to read a docket is essential if you're directly involved in a case, usually as a lawyer for one of the parties or for amici. It's also helpful if you want to compare (or distinguish) your own case and a prior action on the facts or procedural history, which might not be evident from the reported opinion.

WHAT IS A DOCKET?

A docket is a list of all the official information about a case. This includes details about when the case was filed, who the parties and attorneys on each side are, and which judge the case was assigned to. A docket also contains a list of case events - every filing by a party, every action by the judge, every notice generated by a clerk - in chronological order.

One basic thing to note about dockets before we dive in: each court has its own docket system. If a case is appealed from a district court to a circuit court, removed to federal court from state court, or transferred to a different jurisdiction, that event will (usually) be the last entry on the original docket. In order to find out what happened next, you'll have to go find the docket on the new court's system for the subsequent procedural history.

FINDING A DOCKET

Federal Court Dockets - PACER

All U.S. Federal district, appellate, and bankruptcy courts use an online docket system called [PACER](#) (Public Access to Court Electronic Records). PACER is the official source for up-to-date docket information in federal cases. However, PACER has some features that can make finding cases difficult:

- Each federal court has its own PACER instance.¹ For example, here's the instance for the [Central District of California](#). You can use a search engine to find the PACER instance for the court you are looking for or you can use the PACER [Court Lookup](#) page to select it directly.

¹ Each court also has a related, but distinct, system for filing documents in cases, called CM/ECF ("Case Management/Electronic Case Filing"). PACER and CM/ECF use the same databases, but PACER allows any use to search for and view a case, while CM/ECF allows users to file papers but is only available to attorneys.

- While all federal courts use PACER, some courts use the new “NextGen” PACER while others still use the older “CurrentGen” PACER. While NextGen instances all use a central login, CurrentGen requires a different login for each court.
- When you use PACER, searching for a docket is free, but viewing it costs money. It's not a lot (10 cents a page), but it can add up, especially if you're trying to view a case with extensive filings.

We generally recommend using an alternative docket search (see below) instead of PACER unless your law school pays for PACER access or you absolutely need to have the most up-to-date and authoritative version. If these situations, there are two ways to find a docket using PACER:

- The easiest way is to use the [PACER Case Locator](#), a service that lets you search for cases and parties across all PACER instances. This is a great tool if you want to see if a particular party is involved in litigation in any federal court. However, the Case Locator can lag behind the official docket by 24-48 hours.
- The most exact way is to log in to the PACER instance for a specific court, go to Reports → Docket Sheet in the menu bar, and put in the case number of the docket you're looking for.
- PACER also allows you search case status, filing date, cause of action, and party name—but be careful, as you can quickly rack up charges with broad searches!

Federal Court Dockets - Alternatives

Because PACER can be both difficult and expensive, we recommend using an alternative interface to search federal dockets. There are multiple services that query PACER on the backend, but provide a better interface and (in some cases) free access:

- [Bloomberg Law](#) is our general recommendation at the Cyberlaw Clinic. Bloomberg provides [free docket access](#) for law students, so you can pull dockets and documents to your heart's content (so long as you're under the total cost per semester). Bloomberg's interface allows you to search by keyword, party, judge, topic – all helpful resources! You can also set email alerts for new cases (or new filings in a specific case). Bloomberg works by caching PACER queries, so the first thing you'll want to do when reading a docket is make sure it's current – if not, you can manually update it with the “Update Docket” button.
- [CourtListener](#) is a free online legal search engine that caches PACER results whenever a [RECAP](#) user accesses a docket. If you don't have Bloomberg Law access and want to avoid paying money, Court Listener is your best bet, but it's worth noting that isn't always up to date and you can't force an update like you can with Bloomberg.
- [Justia Dockets & Filings](#) is a free option if you only need to see the procedural history of the case, not the individual filings. However, like CourtListener, it is often several months out of date.

- Westlaw and Lexis both have docket search features. They aren't as robust as Bloomberg Law, but if you have paid-for access to one of these databases anyway you might want to give it a try.

State Court Dockets

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No, but seriously, state court docket systems vary widely enough that any advice we could offer here would be misguided. Some state dockets are accessible through Bloomberg Law and/or CourtListener, but not all of them. Some states have multiple docket search systems (like Massachusetts, which has separate [trial](#) and [appellate](#) docket databases). Some provide different levels of access depending on whether you're admitted to practice in the state. We recommend consulting your law school library (if you're in law school) or reviewing a law school library website with public resources in the relevant state.

READING A DOCKET

Okay, now that you've found the case you're looking for, let's talk about how to read a docket. Regardless of which search tool you use, all federal dockets provide basically the same information. Many state courts use a similar structure as well, but your mileage may (significantly) vary.

A docket usually has four main sections: the caption, general case information, party information, and a list of docket entries.

Caption Information

At the top of a docket sheet you'll find the caption: the name of the court, the official title of the case, and the case number. If you found this case by searching, noting the case number will help you find it more quickly in the future.

General Information

The next section of the docket sheet is some basic information. For a trial court case this includes the date the initiating document was filed, the judge to whom the case was assigned, and (for closed cases) the date the case was terminated.

- If this is a civil case, you'll also see the basis for federal jurisdiction, whether a jury demand was made, and the nature of the suit^[OB] and cause of action. The nature of the suit and the cause of action are related, but not always identical:
- The nature of the suit is usually broad, like "Antitrust", although some statutes are so frequently litigated that they have their own category, like the Freedom of Information Act. The options for nature of suit are consistent across federal courts.
- Cause of action is more specific and may refer to a specific act or section of an act. The list of potential causes of action varies from court to court.

The docket sheet also lists any other relevant cases. In an appellate case, the shows the original case from which the appeal was taken. Other types of relevant cases include cases that have been consolidated (including the designation of one case as the lead case) or cases that the plaintiff marked as related on the civil cover sheet.

Party Information

After the general information you'll find a list of all the parties involved in the case (as well as non-party intervenors). This is helpful if you want to see, for example, who submitted amicus briefs.

Perhaps more importantly, this section also lists the name and contact information for the attorneys for each party. If you're representing a party or amici, you'll need to contact counsel about things like unopposed motions, consent for specific filings, and joint schedules. Even if you're not involved in litigation, this information can be useful if you want to get a general sense of which attorneys, firms, and organizations are frequently representing specific parties or positions.

Docket Entries

The final (and usually most significant) part of a docket is the list of docket entries. Each entry represents an event that took place during litigation. By default, the earliest events are at the top of the list and proceed in chronological order.

Every docket entry has a date and a description that says what type of event it represents and who entered it on the docket. Some entries also have a number next to them. An entry with a number is a filing, that is, an event with one or more associated documents, typically in PDF format. These numbers are also used for internal cross-references. Entries without numbers are usually administrative events like notices of appearance, hearing schedules, or orders granting unopposed motions. Entries with numbers are usually more significant events like pleadings, motions, and court orders on substantive disputes. Figure 1 shows some examples from a Clinic case in the D.C. District Court.

COMMON DOCKET EVENTS AND WHAT THEY MEAN

Initiating Documents

The first docket entry on a docket sheet is usually the filing that initiated the case. The document to look for depends on the type of case:

Event Date	03/08/2021	8	MOTION for Summary Judgment by UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY. (Attachments: # 1 Statement of Facts, # 2 Memorandum in Support, # 3 Declaration of Delilah M. Perez, # 4 Exhibit A to E, # 5 Exhibit F to J, # 6 Exhibit K to O, # 7 Exhibit P to T, # 8 Exhibit U, # 9 Exhibit V, # 10 Exhibit W)(Truong, John) (Entered: 03/08/2021)	Filing Attorney
Filing (Link)	04/02/2021	9	Consent MOTION for Extension of Time to File Response/Reply as to 8 MOTION for Summary Judgment (Amendment of Briefing Schedule) by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Attachments: # 1 Text of Proposed Order)(Sobel, David) (Entered: 04/02/2021)	Filing Party
Event Type	04/07/2021		MINUTE ORDER. Upon consideration of the plaintiff's 9 Consent Motion to Amend Briefing Schedule, and for good cause shown, it is hereby ORDERED that the motion is GRANTED. It is further ORDERED that the plaintiff shall file its combined opposition to the defendant's motion for summary judgment and cross-motion for summary judgment on or before April 22, 2021. It is further ORDERED that the defendant shall file its combined opposition to the plaintiff's cross-motion for summary judgment and reply in support of its motion for summary judgment on or before May 24, 2021. It is further ORDERED that the plaintiff shall file its reply in support of its cross-motion for summary judgment on or before June 7, 2021. Signed by Judge Reggie B. Walton on April 7, 2021. (lcrbw2) (Entered: 04/07/2021)	Filing Date
Internal Reference (Link)	04/08/2021		Set/Reset Deadlines: Cross Motions due by 4/22/2021. Response to Cross Motions due by 5/24/2021. Reply to Cross Motions due by 6/7/2021. Response to Motion for Summary Judgment due by 4/22/2021. Reply to Motion for Summary Judgment due by 5/24/2021. (hs) (Entered: 04/08/2021)	
	04/22/2021	10	Memorandum in opposition to re 8 MOTION for Summary Judgment filed by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Attachments: # 1 Statement of Facts, # 2 Declaration of Mason Kortz, # 3 Exhibit A, # 4 Exhibit B, # 5 Exhibit C, # 6 Exhibit D, # 7 Exhibit E, # 8 Text of Proposed Order) (Sobel, David) (Entered: 04/22/2021)	Attachment (Link)

Figure 1: Annotated Docket Entries

- Civil cases start when the plaintiff files a complaint, so this is usually the first docket entry. If the case originated in state court and was removed to federal court, though, the first entry will be a notice of removal and the original Complaint will be filed as an attachment. If the case originated in a different federal court and was transferred, the docket should show the filings from the originating court (although it never hurts to double check!).
 - You may also see a bunch of materials around service on the early part of the docket – that’s generally boilerplate stuff around how the defendant gets notice that they’re being sued. We discuss this below, under “other event types.”
- Criminal cases generally start when a prosecutor files one of three documents: an indictment, an information, or a complaint (this may be filed under seal until the defendant is arrested).
- Appeals start when a notice of appeal is docketed in the original case. The first document on an appellate docket is usually this notice. Sometimes the notice is docketed together with the lower court judgment being appealed; sometimes the lower court opinion is docketed separately (usually as one of the first few entries).

Pleadings

Pleadings are usually near the top of the docket. However, pleadings can also be amended during a case. If you're coming in to a case already in progress, it's good practice to search for the word "amend" in the list of docket entries to make sure you're working off the latest pleadings. Again, the specifics depend on the type of case:

- In civil cases, parties may (or may be ordered to) file responsive pleadings at the beginning of a case or whenever a pleading is amended. The pleadings allowed in federal civil cases are listed in [Fed. R. Civ. P. \(7\)\(a\)](#).
 - The most common pleadings are complaints and answers.
- In criminal cases, the prosecutor files the indictment, information, or complaint. Then, the defendant enters a plea (guilty, not guilty, or nolo contendere), usually in open court. There will be docket entry recording this plea.
- Appeals don't have pleadings; parties proceed directly to motions and/or briefing.

Motions and Memoranda

Any time a party asks to the court to do something – from entering a judgment to changing the date for a hearing – the party must file a motion. Motions are easy to spot on the docket because the entries say "MOTION" in all caps. However, it's often the memorandum in support of the motion, which lays out the party's argument in favor of the relief sought, that's the interesting part. Depending on the local rules of the court, the memorandum may be filed as an attachment to the motion or as a separate docket entry. Other documents of potential interest include exhibits and sworn statements of fact.

After a motion has been filed, the non-moving party is entitled to file an opposition, which may have its own attachments. The moving party then gets to file a reply to the opposition. The reply is usually the last word, but the non-moving party can file a motion asking the court for permission to file one last argument, called a sur-reply. This can get a bit complicated, especially if both parties are making motions. Figure 2 shows an example of back-and-forth briefing on cross-motions for summary judgment.

Briefs

A brief means any written argument asking the court to apply the law in a specific way.² On a docket, though, the "BRIEF" entry type is usually reserved for arguments that aren't related to a specific motion. The most common briefs are appellate briefs. As with motion practice, the appellant files an opening brief, the appellee responds with their respondent brief, and then the appellant gets the last word with a reply brief. Another type of common brief is an *amicus curiae* brief – filed by a non-party. Responses to *amicus* briefs are unusual and only allowed with permission from the court.

² Under this definition, arguments in support or opposition to motions are also briefs. However, they are docketed using the "MEMORANDUM" type (even though lawyers often refer to such filings as briefs and courts often describe the schedule for motion practice as a "briefing schedule").

03/08/2021	8	MOTION for Summary Judgment by UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY. (Attachments: # 1 Statement of Facts, # 2 Memorandum in Support, # 3 Declaration of Delilah M. Perez, # 4 Exhibit A to E, # 5 Exhibit F to J, # 6 Exhibit K to O, # 7 Exhibit P to T, # 8 Exhibit U, # 9 Exhibit V, # 10 Exhibit W)(Truong, John) (Entered: 03/08/2021)	05/24/2021	12	Consent MOTION for Extension of Time to File Response/Reply by UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY. (Truong, John) (Entered: 05/24/2021)
04/02/2021	9	Consent MOTION for Extension of Time to File Response/Reply as to 8 MOTION for Summary Judgment (<i>Amendment of Briefing Schedule</i>) by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Attachments: # 1 Text of Proposed Order)(Sobel, David) (Entered: 04/02/2021)	05/25/2021		MINUTE ORDER. Upon consideration of the defendant's 12 Consent Motion for an Extension of Time, and for good cause shown, it is hereby ORDERED that the motion is GRANTED. It is further ORDERED that, on or before May 26, 2021, the defendant shall file its combined opposition to the plaintiff's cross-motion for summary judgment and reply in support of its motion for summary judgment. Signed by Judge Reggie B. Walton on May 25, 2021. (lcrbw2) (Entered: 05/25/2021)
04/07/2021		MINUTE ORDER. Upon consideration of the plaintiff's 9 Consent Motion to Amend Briefing Schedule, and for good cause shown, it is hereby ORDERED that the motion is GRANTED. It is further ORDERED that the plaintiff shall file its combined opposition to the defendant's motion for summary judgment and cross-motion for summary judgment on or before April 22, 2021. It is further ORDERED that the defendant shall file its combined opposition to the plaintiff's cross-motion for summary judgment and reply in support of its motion for summary judgment on or before May 24, 2021. It is further ORDERED that the plaintiff shall file its reply in support of its cross-motion for summary judgment on or before June 7, 2021. Signed by Judge Reggie B. Walton on April 7, 2021. (lcrbw2) (Entered: 04/07/2021)	05/26/2021	13	REPLY to opposition to motion re 8 MOTION for Summary Judgment filed by UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY. (Attachments: # 1 Statement of Facts)(Truong, John) (Entered: 05/26/2021)
04/08/2021		Set/Reset Deadlines: Cross Motions due by 4/22/2021. Response to Cross Motions due by 5/24/2021. Reply to Cross Motions due by 6/7/2021. Response to Motion for Summary Judgment due by 4/22/2021. Reply to Motion for Summary Judgment due by 5/24/2021. (hs) (Entered: 04/08/2021)	05/26/2021	14	Memorandum in opposition to re 11 Cross MOTION for Summary Judgment filed by UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY. (Attachments: # 1 Statement of Facts)(Truong, John) (Entered: 05/26/2021)
04/22/2021	10	Memorandum in opposition to re 8 MOTION for Summary Judgment filed by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Attachments: # 1 Statement of Facts, # 2 Declaration of Mason Kortz, # 3 Exhibit A, # 4 Exhibit B, # 5 Exhibit C, # 6 Exhibit D, # 7 Exhibit E, # 8 Text of Proposed Order)(Sobel, David) (Entered: 04/22/2021)	06/03/2021	15	Consent MOTION for Extension of Time to File Response/Reply as to 11 Cross MOTION for Summary Judgment by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Attachments: # 1 Text of Proposed Order)(Sobel, David) (Entered: 06/03/2021)
04/22/2021	11	Cross MOTION for Summary Judgment by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Attachments: # 1 Memorandum in Support, # 2 Statement of Facts, # 3 Declaration of Mason Kortz, # 4 Exhibit A, # 5 Exhibit B, # 6 Exhibit C, # 7 Exhibit D, # 8 Exhibit E, # 9 Text of Proposed Order)(Sobel, David) (Entered: 04/22/2021)	06/08/2021		MINUTE ORDER. Upon consideration of the plaintiff's 15 Consent Motion to Amend Briefing Schedule, and for good cause shown, it is hereby ORDERED that the motion is GRANTED. It is further ORDERED that, on or before June 11, 2021, the plaintiff shall file its reply in support of its cross-motion for summary judgment. Signed by Judge Reggie B. Walton on June 8, 2021. (lcrbw2) (Entered: 06/08/2021)
			06/08/2021		Set/Reset Deadlines: Reply in support of Cross Motions due by 6/11/2021. (hs) (Entered: 06/08/2021)
			06/11/2021	16	REPLY to opposition to motion re 11 Cross MOTION for Summary Judgment filed by MARTIN PFEIFFER. (Sobel, David) (Entered: 06/11/2021)

Figure 2: Cross-Motions for Summary Judgment

Orders and Opinions

When a court issues an order, it will be added to the docket as a new entry. Some orders are short enough to be put right in the docket text. These can be listed as “MINUTE ORDER” or “ELECTRONIC ORDER” or just “ORDER” depending on the court. Longer orders have a brief description in the docket text and the full opinion attached as a filing. Again, these can be docketed under different names – “OPINION,” “OPINION AND ORDER” and “MEMORANDUM AND ORDER” are common variations.

If an order or opinion is dispositive (for example, granting a motion to dismiss or deciding a case on appeal), it’ll be followed by a “JUDGMENT” entry. This is when the clock starts running for the time to file an appeal, request for reconsideration, or other form of post-judgment relief.

Other Event Types

Many entries on a docket won’t fall into any of the categories above. These usually have to do with the administration of the courts rather than the substance of the case. That doesn’t make them less important, though! These entries provide information about everything from deadlines to paper filing requirements to the judge’s personal rules. Here are a few common administrative docket entries:

- **Summons and return of service** entries appear at the beginning of a civil case, indicating that the summons has been issued and served. This is useful for calculating deadlines for responsive pleadings.

- **Set deadlines or hearings** entries mean the court has set or changed the date for a filing or hearing. You can also search for “schedule” (used when a date is set) or “continue” (used when a date is changed, especially a hearing date).
- **Statement or report** entries are filed when the court requires parties to say what is happening in a case. This is common when parties are interacting with each other directly, instead of through the court (e.g., during settlement negotiations). These filings may be docketed as “STATUS REPORT,” “STATEMENT OF COUNSEL,” or “JOINT SUBMISSION” entries.
- **Clerk’s notes and transcript** entries are filed after a hearing. First, the docket clerk will enter notes—a short description of what was discussed and decided. Later, the clerk may also docket a transcript of the hearing, although this can take several days or weeks. Both are very helpful for understanding how a case evolved.
- **Notice** is a generic entry type used when the court needs to notify the parties of an occurrence in the case (or vice versa). This can be anything from the appearance of an attorney to filing a document under seal. It’s very common to see a notice when a judge is assigned, linking to their standing orders.

Other Key Terms

In federal courts and many state courts, docket entries are generated by the electronic filing system. When creating docket entries, attorneys can add qualifiers to provide more context to the filing (courts can also do this, but they can also edit the docket text directly, meaning there is much more variation). Here are some key terms to know:

- **Joint** or **agreed** means that the parties agreed on the content of the filing and co-signed it (although only one party’s attorney has to submit it). A joint filing sometimes means that the parties were actively negotiating. Other times joint filings are required by the court. For example, it’s common at the start of a case for the court to require a joint proposed schedule.
- **Consent** or **unopposed** means that one party is making the filing, but the other party has agreed not to oppose it. This is common with administrative motions.
- **Supplemental** means the filing relates back to an earlier filing. For example, a party might file a supplemental authority to bolster a prior argument.

One last note: This list of docket entries isn’t even close to exhaustive! There are dozens of events that attorneys and courts can enter (here’s the [event list for the District of Massachusetts](#)) and on top of that, terminology changes from court to court and even judge to judge. Many docket entries are self-explanatory, but if you’re looking for a specific entry and can’t find it, always consider that it may have been filed under an unexpected event type.