RULE 18: CITATION TO INTERNET AND ELECTRONIC RESOURCES UNDER THE BLUEBOOK

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As a general rule, the Bluebook discourages citation to electronic sources. We all know, however, that the internet contains lots of reliable legal source material, and pulling up HeinOnline from the comfort of home is far easier than trekking to the library and wading through stacks of dusty books. Thankfully, the Nineteenth Edition of the Bluebook recognizes this reality. It has revamped Rule 18 and (somewhat) liberalized citation to non-print sources. This handout focuses on citation to internet resources and will provide you with some guidance on when the Bluebook permits citation to an internet resource and how you should format that citation. It focuses on the use of internet citations in scholarly works. Consult the Blue Pages for information on citing to internet and electronic sources in practitioners’ documents.

WHEN TO CITE DIRECTLY TO THE INTERNET

Essentially, the Bluebook creates three general formats for structuring a citation. These three general formats are (1) citations to the hard-copy print material, (2) citations that combine the print citation with the electronic citation using “available at,” and (3) citations directly to the electronic version.

Print Citation

Although the Nineteenth Edition has liberalized citation to internet resources, it still expresses a preference for print citations. Generally, if a print version of the source exists somewhere (even if the print version is not the material you’re using), you should find and cite to the print version. Some internet sources, however, can be cited simply by using the citation format for the print version of the material. Consequently, you won’t have to track down a hard copy of the print version for a proper cite. The Bluebook permits citation to the print version, even if the actual source you are using for your research is an electronic version, in three circumstances:

1. Authenticated Documents (Rule 18.2.1(a)(i)): These are electronic documents that have a certificate or logo indicating that a government entity has verified that the electronic document is complete, unaltered, and comparable to the print version. When the website or internet document you are using has such a certificate or logo, you can simply cite it as if it were a hard copy print document. Below is an example of the authentication logo used by the Government Printing Office for electronic documents posted to its website, www.gpoaccess.gov:

2. You can view a full explanation of the GPO’s policies regarding authenticated electronic documents at www.gpoaccess.gov/authentication/faq.html.
(2) **Official Versions** (Rule 18.2.1(a)(ii)): Some states now provide that the online version of a particular document is the “official” document. The *Bluebook* prefers authenticated documents, but an official version published only online can still be cited as if it were print material if no authenticated version exists. Massachusetts, for example, only publishes some of its recent versions of documents online as this portion of its website demonstrates:

You could cite to these documents, published “solely in electronic form,” as if they were print material.

(3) **Exact Copies** (Rule 18.2.1(a)(iii)): Finally, if the material posted online is an *exact* copy of the print material, you could cite to that document as if it were a hard copy print source. A PDF of a law review article retrieved through *HeinOnline* or a PDF scan from *Google Books* would fall within this category.

Material from a commercial database (like *Lexis* or *Westlaw*) does not preserve the original pagination and other attributes of the printed material so it cannot be cited using the normal print citation. Rather, it should be cited according to Rule 18.3.4 using the “available at” citation format described in the next section of this handout.

**“Available at” Citations**

Lots of times, electronic versions of sources are more readily accessible than the print version. If a print version does exist, though, the *Bluebook* usually requires citation to the print version. You can assist the reader in finding this material by including a parallel citation to the electronic source. Join these two citations with “available at.” (Rule 18.2.3.) In the citation below, the substantive print citation is red. The appended electronic citation is blue:


A few comments about the structural form of this citation: First, note that a comma follows the full print citation. Second, “available at” is italicized (or underlined). Finally, your word processor will likely create a hyperlink automatically when you type the URL in the electronic citation, turning the words royal blue and underlining them. This is not the proper format for citation to the electronic version under *Bluebook* rules, so you should make sure to eliminate the hyperlink created when you type in the web address.

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3http://www.mass.gov/?pageID=asubtopic&L=5&L0=Home&L1=Research+%26+Technology&L2=Government+%26+Data+%26+Documents&L3=State+Documents+%26+Resources&L4=State+Documents+Online&sid=Eqaf
**Electronic Citations**

You can cite the electronic source directly in two circumstances: First, when the electronic version is the only version of the source. (Rule 18.2.2.) Second, you can cite directly to the electronic version if a print version exists but is practically unavailable. (Rule 18.2.1(b).) Cite directly to the electronic version by simply adding the URL directly to the end of the citation. (As discussed above, be careful to remove the hyperlink that your word processor might automatically generate.) Again, the substantive citation is in red, the electronic citation is blue:


Note the difference in this direct citation to the electronic material when compared to the citation to the Kass article above: when citing directly to the electronic source material, do not join the URL and the citation with “available at.” Simply separate the URL and the citation with a *comma only.*
Summary

This flow chart summarizes the information above and can help guide you in determining whether or not to cite directly to an electronic source:

- **Does the print version exist?**
  - Yes: **Is the print version practically unavailable?**
    - Yes: Cite directly to the electronic version.
  - No: **Is the electronic version authenticated?**
    - Yes: Cite directly to the print version without obtaining an actual hard copy of the print version.
    - No: **Is the electronic version the official version?**
      - Yes: **Is the electronic version an exact copy that preserves the original pagination and other attributes?**
        - Yes: Obtain a hard copy of the print version and cite to that hard copy.
        - No: Obtain a hard copy of the print version and cite to that hard copy, but include a parallel citation to the internet source using “available at.”
      - No: You should obtain a hard copy of the print. Will access to the electronic version substantially improve access to the source?
        - Yes: Obtain a hard copy of the print version and cite to that hard copy, but include a parallel citation to the internet source using “available at.”
        - No: Cite directly to the electronic version.

Source-Specific Formatting: Web Page Citations

Now that you have a general understanding of the different structural formats for citing to electronic sources, we can dive into the different components of a website citation. Occasionally material will be published on the web in both an HTML version and a PDF version. When this occurs, cite to the PDF version using the “available at” citation structure described above.
A citation to an internet web page generally contains the following information: (1) the author, (2) the title of the web page, (3) the title of the website, (4) the date and time, and (5) the URL. Internet pages, unfortunately, come in a wide array of formats and styles. As a consequence, some of these components might not be present on the page you are citing. The following examples provide more details about each component of the citation.

**Author** (Rule 18.2.2(a))

If the web page denotes an author, list the author's name in ordinary type:


If the web page has no named author, but the website has a clear institutional owner, use the name of the institutional owner in the spot for the author's name (example 1) unless the institutional owner is clear from the title of the website (example 2). When the website lacks a named author or clear institutional author, omit the author section completely:


When citing to a specific comment or posting, list the username of the commenter or poster as the author rather than the author of the original piece:


**Title of Web Page** (Rule 18.2.2(b)(ii)-(iii))

The citation should also include the title of the specific page to which you are citing. You can find the title in the title bar of your web-browser or from a clearly announced heading on the page. Italicize this title, and capitalize it according to Rule 8 (regardless of how the web page or title bar capitalize the title):


When citing to a specific posting or comment within an article, say so in the title section of the citation. Importantly, this annotation should not be italicized:


If the comment or posting has its own title, include that title in addition to the title of the page to which the comment or posting responds. Separate the two titles with a comma and designate the relationship between the two pages with a phrase such as “comment to”:

Finally, when the web page does not have a clear title, you can use a descriptive title. Descriptive titles SHOULD NOT be italicized:


**Title of the Website** (Rule 18.2.2(b)(i))

Following the title of the specific page to which you are citing, you should indicate the title of the main website. This title should be listed in small caps and abbreviated under table T13. Capitalize the title of the website as it appears on the site:


**Date and Time** (Rule 18.2.2(c))

If the web page is dated and the date refers to the specific subject matter to which you are citing, include this date and time in parentheses after the main website title and any pinpoint citations. Abbreviate the date using Table T12:


For comments, blog postings, or other content that can be easily identified by the time of posting, include a timestamp with the date:


If the web page lacks a date for the specific subject matter to which you are citing, indicate the “last modified” or “last updated” date from the website in a parenthetical following the URL:


If the web page lacks any date, indicate the last time you visited the website in a parenthetical placed after the URL:

**The URL Address** (Rule 18.2.2(d))

Always include the URL of the exact web page you visited after either the main website title or the date parenthetical. Generally, include the exact URL that you used to access the website. The *Bluebook* does allow you to cite the root URL (as opposed to the full URL) when:

- The URL is long, unwieldy, or full of nontextual characters; or
- The source can only be obtained by submitting a form or query.

When you do not cite the full URL, include a parenthetical that explains how to navigate to the specific web page to which you are citing:


Importantly, some word processors automatically generate a hyperlink in the document anytime you type an URL. In doing so, the word processor turns the text blue and underlines it. This blue text and underline do not conform to the formatting rules specified in the *Bluebook*. You should remove any hyperlinks that the word processor automatically generates. In Microsoft Word, you can do this by right-clicking on the hyperlink and choosing “Remove Hyperlink” from the menu that pops up.

**Short Form Citations to Internet Sources**

For the short form citation to internet sources, simply use the *supra* form described in Rule 4. You do not need to include the URL in the short-form citation. (Rule 18.8.)


When the original full citation does not have an author, cite to the web page title (footnote 5) or website title (footnote 6) in the short form. Maintain the formatting and font from the full citation:
