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## Government Documents for All

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## Government Documents for All

By *Tim Dodge*, History & Political Science Librarians, Professor, Auburn University  
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Whether one is a lawyer, a concerned citizen, or simply a curious member of the general public, there are times when one wants a quick and easy way to see the text of a U.S. Supreme Court opinion. Throughout American history the Supreme Court has issued many important opinions and many of them have been controversial and consequential, for example, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that declared “separate but equal” racial segregation in public facilities was legal; *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that declared racial segregation of public education was not legal; or *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) that, essentially, equated money with free speech thus allowing corporations (but also associations like labor unions) to contribute to political campaigns without any financial limitations.

I would like to draw your attention to an authoritative freely available online source for locating the full text of U.S. Supreme Court opinions covering the period 1991 to the present. This would be the “Opinions” link found on the U.S. Supreme Court’s official website at <https://www.supremecourt.gov/>.

The first type of documents that show up are known as slip opinions. This is a reference to the physical format, literally, a slip of paper (if a brief opinion) or a document consisting of several or many slips (pages) if a longer opinion. These are usually brief summaries that provide the Court majority opinion plus concurring or dissenting opinions of individual justices. The Supreme Court runs on a term lasting from October through October of the following year. Thus, as of this writing, the Court is still in the October 2022 Term. These slip opinions appear in reverse chronological order. To see the text, simply click on the party names (for example, 303 Creative LLC v. Elenis) decided on June 30, 2023, a controversial case concerning the conflict between a state, Colorado in this case, having anti-discrimination laws requiring that designer businesses create designs that might conflict with the business owner’s personal viewpoints concerning same-sex marriage. The case was decided in favor of the business (a website designer). This slip opinion is a bit longer than is typical with 26 pages for the opinion plus an additional 38 pages providing the dissent of Justice Sonia Sotomayor. You will find slip opinions and Preliminary Prints (described below) here dating back through the 2016 Term.

You will find the final form of opinions in what are known as Bound Volumes which are available here for the terms covering 1991 through 2016 (yes, the site for now is making the 2016 Term available as Slip Opinions, Bound Volumes, and some Preliminary Prints).

A quick note about the publication of U.S. Supreme Court opinions. They appear as temporary printed publications starting with Bench Opinions, usually printed on the day of the ruling by the Court. These are followed by the Slip Opinions, described above. In turn, Slip Opinions are followed by Preliminary Prints. These are soft-cover volumes that contain the opinions plus announcements, indexes, tables, and other associated materials to provide a more complete record. Finally, these are followed by the Bound Volumes which are a more formal compilation of the material found in the Preliminary Prints and are intended as a permanent, official record. The U.S. Supreme Court web site described here provides access to primarily the Slip Opinions and the Bound Volumes, but there are some Preliminary Prints available for the years 2016-2023 as well.

This website is an excellent and convenient access point to the full text of U.S. Supreme Court opinions of nearly the past thirty years. The website has many other features and additional important legal information as well. Perhaps I will cover some of these in a future Government Documents for All column.