Government Documents for All: U.S. Supreme Court Opinions

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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.

The first type of document that shows up is what 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 2023 Term. These slip opinions appear in reverse chronological order. To see the text, simply click on the party names, for example, Muldrow v. City of St. Louis decided on April 17, 2024. This case concerned a female police officer suing her transfer from one police department job to another so she could be replaced by a male officer. Despite poorer working conditions, the court "vacated" the decision of the lower court since the officer had not lost pay or rank and "remanded" (sent back) the case to the lower court for further possible adjudication.

You will find the final form of opinions in what is known as Bound Volumes which are available here for the terms covering 1991 through 2015. Opinions for 2016-2022 are in the form of Preliminary Prints (see below for more detail).

A quick note about the publication of U.S. Supreme Court opinions. They appear as temporary printed publications starting with Bench Opinions, usually printed 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 website described here provides access to only the Slip Opinions, Preliminary Prints, and the Bound Volumes. Somewhat confusingly, all of these published opinions except for the Preliminary Prints and the Slip Opinions are commonly known as the *United States Reports*.

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

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