

HOW TO READ A JUDGMENT


Step-by-Step Checklist for Beginners

Use this checklist every time you read a court judgment. Tick each box as you go.

STEP 1 — Identify the Basics

STEP 1 Get Oriented Before You Read

- Note the name of the court (e.g. Supreme Court, High Court, District Court)
- Identify the case name / title (Petitioner vs. Respondent)
- Write down the case number and year
- Note the date the judgment was pronounced
- Identify the judge(s) who decided the case

 **TIP** The case name tells you who filed the case. The name on the left is usually the party who appealed or filed first.

STEP 2 — Understand the Parties

STEP 2 Who Is Involved?

- Identify the Petitioner / Appellant (the party who brought the case)
- Identify the Respondent / Defendant (the party defending)
- Note if there are any third parties or intervenors
- Understand the relationship between the parties (employer-employee, landlord-tenant, etc.)

 **TIP** In criminal cases, the State or Government is usually the Complainant. In civil cases, it is a private party.

STEP 3 — Read the Background / Facts

STEP 3 What Happened?

- Read the 'Facts of the Case' or 'Brief Facts' section carefully
- Make a short timeline of events in your own words
- Note what the dispute or complaint is actually about
- Identify which court heard the case before this one (if it is an appeal)
- Note what the lower court had decided (if applicable)

 **TIP** Do not skip the facts section — understanding the background is the key to understanding the decision.

STEP 4 — Identify the Legal Issues

STEP 4 What Questions Did the Court Answer?


- Look for a section titled 'Issues', 'Questions of Law', or 'Points for Determination'
- List each legal question the court had to decide
- Note whether the issues are questions of fact, law, or both
- Understand why each issue matters to the final outcome

 **TIP** Courts often number the issues. Keep this list handy as you read — everything else in the judgment flows from these questions.

STEP 5 — Follow the Court's Reasoning

STEP 5 How Did the Court Think Through It?


- Read the 'Analysis', 'Discussion', or 'Reasoning' section
- Note which laws, sections, or articles the court referred to
- Note which earlier cases (precedents) the court cited
- Understand how the court applied the law to the facts
- Look for any arguments the court rejected — and why

 **TIP** The reasoning section is the heart of the judgment. This is where the judge explains their thinking step by step.

STEP 6 — Read the Final Decision (Operative Part)

STEP 6 What Was Actually Decided?


- Find the 'Order', 'Operative Part', or 'Held' section at the end
- Note whether the petition/appeal was allowed, dismissed, or partly allowed
- Write down any specific directions or reliefs granted
- Note any conditions, timelines, or compliance requirements ordered
- Check if costs were awarded to any party

 **TIP** In some judgments the final order is separate from the main text. Always look for the word 'ORDER' or 'ORDERED ACCORDINGLY'.

STEP 7 — Check for Dissenting or Concurring Opinions

STEP 7 Did All Judges Agree?

- Check if this was a bench of more than one judge
- Look for any 'Dissenting Opinion' (a judge who disagreed with the majority)
- Look for any 'Concurring Opinion' (a judge who agreed but for different reasons)
- Note the reasoning in the dissent — it is often legally important

 **TIP** *Dissenting opinions are not binding law but are often cited in future cases and show evolving legal thought.*

STEP 8 — Note Key Takeaways

STEP 8 Summarise What You Have Learned

- Write the ratio decidendi — the core legal principle the case decided
- Note any obiter dicta — remarks made by the judge that are not binding but are persuasive
- Record the full citation of the case for future reference
- Note if this judgment was later upheld, reversed, or overruled by a higher court

 **TIP** *The ratio decidendi is the binding part of a judgment. Everything else is obiter and is persuasive only, not binding.*

QUICK REFERENCE — Judgment Vocabulary

Term	What It Means
Ratio Decidendi	The binding legal reason for the decision — the rule of law the case stands for
Obiter Dicta	Side remarks by the judge — not binding but persuasive in future cases
Per Incuriam	A decision made by ignoring a relevant law or precedent — can be disregarded
Sub Judice	A matter currently under consideration by a court — cannot be discussed publicly
Locus Standi	The legal right of a party to bring a case before the court
Ex Parte	A hearing where only one party is present, without notice to the other side
Interlocutory Order	A temporary order passed during the case, before the final judgment
Remand	Sending the case back to a lower court for fresh consideration

Continue Your Legal Journey with LawMento

Scan any QR code below to explore courses, free resources and our community



Explore Our Courses

Practical expert-led legal courses designed for students and professionals.



Explore Our Bundles

Curated course bundles—more learning, better value for your career.



Explore Masterclasses

Deep-dive sessions by industry experts on high-demand legal topics.



Explore E-books

In-depth e-books on career paths, law practice areas and more.



Free Resources

Templates, guides and PDFs — completely free for our community.



Free Checklists

Ready-to-use legal checklists covering key practice areas.



Career Guide

Step-by-step career roadmaps for law students and young lawyers.



Follow on Instagram

Daily legal updates, tips, and career content — follow @lawmento.official



Connect on LinkedIn

Legal insights and professional updates — follow LawMento.



Join WhatsApp Community

Get daily legal insights for FREE.