

How to Brief a Case Using the “IRAC” Method

When briefing a case, your goal is to reduce the information from the case into a format that will provide you with a helpful reference in class and for review. Most importantly, by “briefing” a case, you will grasp the problem the court faced (the issue); the relevant law the court used to solve it (the rule); how the court applied the rule to the facts (the application or “analysis”); and the outcome (the conclusion). You will then be ready to not only discuss the case, but to compare and contrast it to other cases involving a similar issue.

Before attempting to “brief” a case, read the case at least once.

Follow the “IRAC” method in briefing cases:

*Facts**

Write a brief summary of the facts as the court found them to be. Eliminate facts that are not relevant to the court’s analysis. For example, a business’s street address is probably not relevant to the court’s decision of the issue of whether the business that sold a defective product is liable for the resulting injuries to the plaintiff. However, suppose a customer who was assaulted as she left its store is suing the business. The customer claims that her injuries were the reasonably foreseeable result of the business’s failure to provide security patrols. If the business is located in an upscale neighborhood, then perhaps it could argue that its failure to provide security patrols is reasonable. If the business is located in a crime-ridden area, then perhaps the customer is right. Instead of including the street address in the case brief, you may want to simply describe the type of neighborhood in which it is located. (Note: the time of day would be another relevant factor in this case, among others).

Procedural History

What court authored the opinion: The United States Supreme Court? The California Court of Appeal? The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals? (Hint: Check under the title of the case: The Court and year of the decision will be given). If a trial court issued the decision, is it based on a trial, or motion for summary judgment, etc.? If an appellate court issued the decision, how did the lower courts decide the case?

Issue

What is the question presented to the court? Usually, only one issue will be discussed, but sometimes there will be more. What are the parties fighting about, and what are they asking the court to decide? For example, in the case of the assaulted customer, the issue for a trial court to decide might be whether the business had a duty to the customer to provide security patrols. The answer to the question will help to

decide whether the business is liable for *negligently* failing to provide security patrols: whether the defendant owed plaintiff a duty of care, and what that duty of care is, are key issues in negligence claims.

Rule(s):

Determine what the relevant rules of law are that the court uses to make its decision. These rules will be identified and discussed by the court. For example, in the case of the assaulted customer, the relevant rule of law is that a property owner's duty to prevent harm to invitees is determined by balancing the foreseeability of the harm against the burden of preventive measures. There may be more than one relevant rule of law to a case: for example, in a negligence case in which the defendant argues that the plaintiff assumed the risk of harm, the relevant rules of law could be the elements of negligence, and the definition of "assumption of risk" as a defense. Don't just simply list the cause of action, such as "negligence" as a rule of law: What rule must the court apply to the facts to determine the outcome?

Application/Analysis:

This may be the most important portion of the brief. The court will have examined the facts in light of the rule, and probably considered all "sides" and arguments presented to it. How courts apply the rule to the facts and analyze the case must be understood in order to properly predict outcomes in future cases involving the same issue. What does the court consider to be a relevant fact given the rule of law? How does the court interpret the rule: for example, does the court consider monetary costs of providing security patrols in weighing the burden of preventive measures? Does the court imply that if a business is in a dangerous area, then it should be willing to bear a higher cost for security? Resist the temptation to merely repeat what the court said in analyzing the facts: what does it mean to you? Summarize the court's rationale in your own words. If you encounter a word that you do not know, use a dictionary to find its meaning.

Conclusion

What was the final outcome of the case? In one or two sentences, state the court's ultimate finding. This is more than "plaintiff won." It is the key principle. For example, in the case of the assault, the conclusion might be: "The court ruled that the business did not owe the assaulted customer a duty to provide security patrols."

Note: "Case briefing" helps understand a court opinion and is a skill that is honed with practice. This exercise gives you an opportunity to practice and enhance your understanding of reading and using court cases in your coursework and in business.