What is a digest?
A digest is a multivolume index to the law. It consists of major topic headings, thousands of subheadings, and short summaries (commonly referred to as headnotes) of legal propositions stated in published court cases. Digests are published for single states, groups of states, single courts or court systems, and topical areas (e.g., Military Justice Digest).

The digest has been an essential case-finding tool since the United States Digest was first published in 1848. Despite the development of computer-assisted legal research services, the digest is no doubt still the most widely used tool for finding cases.

Key Number Digests
When looking for cases published in West's National Reporter System®, you will enjoy the special benefits of West key number digests. Key number digests are encyclopedic volumes divided into more than 400 topics. Each topic begins with an outline of its subheadings (the topic analysis), followed by headnotes arranged under the subheadings.

Unlike subheadings in digests from other publishers, each subheading in West key number digests is assigned a West topic and key number. The topics and key numbers also appear in cases published by West—whether in print or on Westlaw®, West's computer-assisted legal research service. Digests can thus be used to find all other cases with headnotes classified under the same topic and key number.

In addition, you will find West topic and key numbers in West's annotated statutes, West's legal encyclopedia Corpus Juris Secundum® (C.J.S.®), and other West publications.

How do I find cases when I have an issue?
Descriptive-Word Indexes
You will typically begin by brainstorming for factual and legal terms (e.g., aliens, amnesty, or deportation) associated with your issue, as well as synonyms and antonyms for those terms (e.g., permanent resident or waiver). You would then look for those terms in the Descriptive-Word Index, which is composed of one or more digest volumes.
Each entry in the Descriptive-Word Index refers you to the West topic and key number under which case headnotes pertaining to a specific fact or legal issue have been classified. For example, “ADJUSTMENT of Status. Aliens 53.10(2)” tells you that headnotes pertaining to the adjustment of status of aliens can be found under key number 53.10(2) under the topic Aliens.

Remember that key numbers and even entire topics are sometimes reorganized as the law develops. Accordingly, be sure to check the same descriptive words in the pocket part supplement inside the back cover.

After recording all potentially valuable topics and key numbers from the Descriptive-Word Index, look at the main digest volumes. Write down case citations. Look at the topic outline for other subheadings that might yield relevant headnotes. Write down those key numbers and case citations, too. Check for recent cases in the pocket part.

**Topic Analysis**

In addition to checking the Descriptive-Word Index, you can go right to the topic outline and look for relevant subheadings. If necessary, check the Outline of the Law or the alphabetical list of digest topics (both located at the front of the digest volumes) for topic names you may have overlooked. As with any West print publication, you will need to check the pocket part supplement after you find a useful topic.

**Custom Digest on Westlaw**

You can also access the Custom Digest service on Westlaw via lawschool.westlaw.com. Look for West topic and key numbers related to your issue and have the Custom Digest retrieve headnotes classified under them. Then quickly scan the headnotes in your Custom Digest result to identify cases that are useful to you. Hypertext links allow you to retrieve the full text of the cases and related references (such as annotations from American Law Reports and articles from journals and law reviews) without leaving your result.

To access the Custom Digest, sign on to Westlaw and choose **Key Numbers & Digest** from the **More** drop-down list on the toolbar. To browse the subheadings under a topic, click the plus (+) and minus (-) symbols. For more information on Westlaw, contact your West academic account manager or student representative, or consult the print publication Discovering Winning Research Skills.
I found one good case. How do I find similar cases?
Sometimes you will be fortunate to find a relevant case early in
your research. Write down the relevant topics and key numbers
from the case and go directly to them in the digest and pocket
parts. With the West Key Number System®, you can retrieve the
same cases whether you start with a case or with a digest.

What steps should I take to update my result?
To make sure the cases you found are the most current cases
controlling your issue, you will want to update your research using
KeyCite®, the digests, or both.

To update using KeyCite, follow these steps:
1. Sign on to Westlaw and access the appropriate case law
database.
2. Run a topic and key number search using the same topic and
key number, e.g., 24k54.3(4).
3. After the cases are retrieved, access KeyCite to trace their history
and retrieve citing references, including cases and secondary
sources.

To update your results using print digests, follow these steps:
1. In the bound digest volume, check the digest topic and key
number pertaining to your issue.
2. Check the same digest topic and key number in the pocket part.
3. Check the same digest topic and key number in the digest
interim pamphlet if one is available for the set.
4. Check the closing table, located in the first pages of the pocket
part or the interim pamphlet, whichever is more recent. The
closing table will give you the number of the last bound volume
of each case reporter (e.g., Pacific Reporter® 2d) covered in the
digest.
5. Turn to the digest section (back pages) in the next bound case
reporter following the last one listed in the closing table; check
the digest topic and key number. Repeat this step for all reporter
volumes that contain cases after the closing table citation.
6. Turn to the digest section (front pages) in the first advance sheet
issued after the last bound case reporter volume. Check the
digest topic and key number again. Repeat this step with the
remaining advance sheets through the current advance sheet.

Using West digest to find relevant case law