

Checklists and Workflows for AI-Assisted Legal Research

A Practical Quick Reference

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Decision and Evaluation Checklist Examples

Evaluating a New AI Tool

When a new AI tool appears, ask:

1. Which sources can this tool reach?
2. Does it pull up existing documents, write new text, or do both?
3. Does it link out to the actual legal authority?
4. Does it tell binding authority apart from persuasive authority?
5. Does it pin down the jurisdiction?
6. Does it account for changes in the law?
7. Is it tied to a citator?
8. Does it flag when it is unsure?
9. Does it safeguard confidential information?
10. Can I confirm its output somewhere other than the tool itself?
11. Can I record how I used it?

Evaluating a Tool for a Task

When weighing any AI tool, ask:

1. Which model or system sits behind it?
2. What data can it draw on?
3. Does it search current law, or is it limited to what it was trained on?
4. Does it supply citations?
5. Do those citations point to real, locatable sources?
6. Can you open and inspect the underlying authority?
7. Is the tool summarizing, extracting, generating, classifying, recommending, or retrieving?
8. Which settings, permissions, or limits shape what it returns?

Protecting Confidential Information

Before feeding information into an AI tool, ask:

1. Does any policy, client instruction, court order, protective order, or supervising attorney clear this tool for this kind of information?
2. Will the tool keep, log, or use what you enter to train or improve itself?
3. Could the vendor's staff, contractors, or any third party see the input or output?
4. Is there an enterprise, institutional, or self-hosted version with stronger safeguards?

Controlling an Agentic Tool

When you use an agentic tool, ask:

1. What goal did the agent receive?
2. Which instructions and limits govern its work?
3. What tools, data, and sources can it reach?
4. What can it do without checking back, such as sending messages, changing files, or exposing confidential material?
5. Can you watch each step it takes?
6. Is there an audit trail?
7. At what points must a person approve, fix, or halt the process?

The All-Purpose Research Pass

When you put AI to work on legal research, ask:

1. Is any information in this task confidential, privileged, sealed, proprietary, personally identifying, or otherwise sensitive, and is this tool cleared and appropriate for that kind of information?
2. What sort of AI tool is this, and is it right for the task? Will the answer be generated, extracted, retrieved, summarized, classified, or recommended?
3. Is the prompt specific enough to yield a reliable result? Does it name the jurisdiction, the legal issue, the relevant facts, the procedural posture, and the sources you expect?
4. Which sources did the tool rely on? Are the cited authorities real, and are they binding or persuasive in the controlling jurisdiction? Are they current?
5. Has the cited authority been amended, superseded, distinguished, limited, criticized, or overruled, and does it actually support the stated point?
6. Does the answer leave room for limits and exceptions? Does it skip adverse authority? Does it fit the procedural posture and the facts in front of you?
7. Can the result be reproduced or confirmed elsewhere, and how exactly will you verify it independently?

Deciding Whether AI Belongs in the Task

1. Fit: Is AI right for this task, or does it call for human judgment from the start?
2. Confidentiality: Does the prompt carry client, privileged, sealed, proprietary, or sensitive information?
3. Grounding: Is the output anchored to identifiable, reliable, current authority?
4. Verification: Can every proposition, quotation, citation, and procedural statement be checked?
5. Jurisdiction: Is the tool using the right jurisdiction and the right level of authority?
6. Disclosure: Do court rules, standing orders, client instructions, firm policy, or ethics guidance call for disclosure or limit use?
7. Billing: Is any time saved, or work handed to AI, billed fairly and openly?

The Core Method: Plan, Prompt, Verify, Document

Plan, Prompt, Verify, Document

Step 1: Plan

Before you prompt, work through these questions:

1. What is the legal issue? State it as precisely as you can; a fuzzy question yields a fuzzy answer.
2. Which jurisdiction governs? Federal or state, and which circuit, district, or state? If that is unclear, it is itself something to research.
3. What are the key facts? Pick out the ones that carry legal weight. The tool cannot know which facts matter unless you say so.
4. What kind of authority do you need? Statutes, cases, regulations, secondary sources, court rules? That choice drives both the prompt and the verification.
5. What is the scope? A full survey of the law, or a narrow procedural question?
6. What do you already know? Use existing knowledge to judge the output; if you have none, plan to verify more.

For complex or unfamiliar problems, make three lists:

1. Facts you know.
2. Facts that are missing or unclear.
3. Questions you need research to answer.

Let AI orient you and help shape the plan; do not let it produce the final answer.

Step 2: Prompt

Strong legal research prompts have five parts:

1. Role: Set the perspective. For example, “You are a legal research assistant helping a litigation attorney.”
2. Facts: Supply the relevant facts. The sharper the facts, the sharper the output.
3. Jurisdiction: Name the controlling jurisdiction. Without it, the tool drifts toward general or majority-rule answers.
4. Task: Say exactly what you want. “Find relevant cases” is vague; “Identify the leading Ninth Circuit cases applying the economic loss doctrine to construction defect claims” is not.
5. Limits: Spell out what not to do, such as “Do not invent citations,” “Say so if you are unsure,” or “Stick to federal appellate decisions from the past ten years.”

Prompting is a loop. Read the output, sharpen the prompt, and ask again. Treat every response as a draft to test, not an answer to accept, and keep a log of prompts and results.

Step 3: Verify

Verification has three parts:

1. Source: Confirm each cited source actually exists by finding it in an official reporter or an authenticated database.
2. Proposition: Confirm the source says what the tool claims by reading it yourself.
3. Treatment: Confirm the source is still good law by running a citator for reversal, overruling, distinguishing, limiting, criticism, or supersession.

Verification also means looking for what the tool left out, including contrary authority, recent amendments, pending legislation, and controlling authority it never mentioned.

Step 4: Document

At a minimum, record:

1. The tool and version, if you know it.
2. The prompts you submitted.
3. The key output you received.
4. Which sources you verified and how.
5. Which sources you did not verify and why.
6. The date of the research.
7. The databases, citators, or other traditional tools you used to verify.
8. Any disclosure, confidentiality, or supervision questions you weighed along the way.

Research Planning Worksheet

Use this when turning a raw fact pattern into a plan:

1. Known facts:
2. Missing, unclear, or assumed facts:
3. Legal questions to research:
4. Likely jurisdiction or jurisdictions:
5. Possible issues:
6. Priority issues:
7. Source types for each issue:
8. Search terms and alternative vocabulary:
9. AI tools used in planning:
10. AI suggestions kept, changed, or dropped:
11. Verification plan:
12. Documentation notes:
13. Deadlines, assignment limits, or proportionality constraints:

Workflow + Worked Example

Procedural Research Workflow

Procedural research works in layers:

1. Begin with the broadest rules of procedure that apply.
2. Move to the relevant local rules.
3. Check standing orders and any judge-specific practices.
4. Confirm filing requirements, formatting, and deadlines.
5. Verify every requirement against the court's current official sources.

At each layer, check against the court's official sources.

Worked Example: Filing a Summary Judgment Motion

Facts: You are preparing a motion for summary judgment in the United States District Court for the District of Arizona. The case involves a trademark infringement claim and has been assigned to a specific judge. You need to identify every procedural requirement that applies.

1. Use AI to draft a checklist of procedural questions to answer, including deadlines, page limits, formatting, statement-of-facts requirements, and any certificates or notices to file.
2. Research the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure that govern summary judgment.
3. Find the District of Arizona's current local rules on the court's official site and identify each one that touches summary judgment.
4. Locate the assigned judge's standing orders and practice guidelines on the court's site and note any added requirements.
5. Determine the CM/ECF filing requirements in this district, including formatting for electronically filed documents.
6. Confirm every deadline by calculating it under the applicable rules, including any changes from local rules or standing orders.
7. Write up the full set of requirements, note the source for each, and confirm everything is current as of the filing date.