COURT DOCUMENT RESEARCH CHECKLIST

A Step-by-Step Guide to
True Crime Primary Source Research

From

TRUE CRIME CASES YOU HAVEN'T HEARD
TrueCrimeUnheard.com

Free Resource — Share with fellow researchers

THE 6-STEP RESEARCH PROCESS

■ Step 1: Case Selection

- Identify case through news, court watching, or tips
- Search PACER for case file availability
- Review primary documents before committing

■ Step 2: Document Collection

- Register at pacer.uscourts.gov (free, takes 2-3 days)
- Check RECAP first for free archived documents
- Download complete case file:
  - ■ Indictment
  - ■ Plea agreement (if applicable)
  - ■ Sentencing memoranda (both sides)
  - ■ Victim impact statements
  - ■ Judgment and commitment order

■ Step 3: Deep Reading

- Read full documents, not summaries
- Take notes as you read
- Highlight key facts, quotes, dates
- Note document page numbers for citation

■ Step 4: Timeline Construction

- Build chronology BEFORE writing
- When did criminal activity begin?
- Key events and turning points?
- When was it discovered?
- When were charges filed?
- How did case resolve?

■ Step 5: Cross-Verification

- Check facts across multiple documents
- Does plea match indictment allegations?
- Do victim statements corroborate prosecution?
- Note any inconsistencies

■ Step 6: Attribution

- Cite specific documents for each fact
- Use: "According to the sentencing memorandum..."
- Use: "Prosecutors alleged in the indictment..."
- Use: "The defendant admitted in the plea agreement..."

DOCUMENT TYPES QUICK REFERENCE

Document	What It Contains	Best For
Criminal Complaint	Initial charges, probable cause	How case started
Indictment	Grand jury charges, statutes	Allegations, overt acts timeline
Plea Agreement	What defendant admits	Proven facts (not allegations)
Factual Basis	Narrative defendant agrees to	Clearest summary
Gov't Sentencing Memo	Prosecution's case	Harm, aggravating factors
Defense Sentencing Memo	Defense's case	Mitigating factors, background
Victim Impact Statements	How crime affected victims	Human cost, context
Judgment Order	Official sentence	Final outcome

PRO TIP: Start with the Factual Basis. The factual basis (attached to the plea agreement) is often the clearest summary of what actually happened — because the defendant admits these facts are true.

KEY TERMS GLOSSARY

INDICTMENT

A formal written accusation of a crime, issued by a grand jury. Contains **allegations**, not proven facts.

PLEA AGREEMENT

A negotiated agreement where defendant pleads guilty in exchange for concessions. **~97% of federal cases** end this way.

PACER

Public Access to Court Electronic Records. Federal system for accessing court documents. **$0.10/page**, $3 cap per document, $30 quarterly waiver.

FACTUAL BASIS

The facts the defendant admits are true when entering a guilty plea. Often the **most reliable summary** of what happened.

SENTENCING MEMORANDUM

Documents arguing for specific sentences. **Read both** prosecution AND defense memos for the complete picture.

RECAP

Free browser extension that archives PACER documents. **Check here first** before paying — free.law/recap

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

✗ MISTAKE: Treating allegations as proven facts
✓ FIX: Use "alleged" until guilt established by plea or verdict

✗ MISTAKE: Ignoring the defense perspective
✓ FIX: Always read BOTH sentencing memoranda

✗ MISTAKE: Assuming sealed = nonexistent
✓ FIX: Acknowledge gaps, don't speculate about sealed content

✗ MISTAKE: Only researching primary defendant
✓ FIX: Check co-defendant cases for additional information

✗ MISTAKE: Confusing case types (cr vs cv)
✓ FIX: Search both criminal and civil records

✗ MISTAKE: Taking guilty pleas at face value
✓ FIX: Note what was specifically admitted vs. merely alleged

VERIFICATION CHECKLIST

Before You Publish

Content Verification

- ■ Every factual claim has a source document cited
- ■ "Alleged" used for unproven claims
- ■ Both prosecution and defense perspectives represented
- ■ Sealed/unknown information acknowledged as gaps

Ethical Standards

- ■ Victim names/details handled with appropriate sensitivity
- ■ No exploitation of trauma for entertainment
- ■ Families' dignity respected

Research Completeness

- ■ Related cases checked for additional context
- ■ Timeline verified across multiple documents
- ■ Co-defendant cases reviewed

Final Check

- ■ No speculation presented as fact
- ■ All document citations include page numbers
- ■ Sources can be independently verified

If you can check every box above, your research meets documentary standards.

Welcome to primary source true crime.