How to Reference Cases in OSCOLA: A Beginner Step by Step Guide With Examples

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Learning how to reference cases in OSCOLA is the first skill that turns a good law essay into a first class one. The rules look fussy at first, but they follow one pattern, and once you see it you'll cite almost any case without checking the guide. This guide walks you through that pattern step by step, with real cases.

You'll want the OSCOLA guide open beside you the first few times, and that's fine. Every law student does the same, and markers expect footnotes to follow the 4th edition, the standard since 2012. If referencing eats your evening and you'd rather focus on the argument, our assignment writing service can take the footnotes off your hands.

1. What OSCOLA Is and Why Your Law School Uses It

OSCOLA stands for the Oxford University Standard for Citation of Legal Authorities. It's the referencing style most UK law schools ask for, and it covers cases, legislation, books, journals and official papers.

The big difference from styles like Harvard is that OSCOLA puts citations in footnotes, not in brackets inside your sentences. Your argument stays clean on the page, and the full detail sits at the foot of the page.

That footnote habit is also why OSCOLA has a Table of Cases at the end of your work, separate from your bibliography. Cases go in the table, books and articles go in the bibliography, and the two lists never mix.

You don't need to memorise the whole guide. Case citations make up most of the footnotes in a law essay, so if you master the case pattern here, you've covered the bulk of the work. The rest is detail you'll look up when you need it.

2. The Pattern for a Reported Case Citation

A reported case citation has four parts. First comes the case name in italics, then the year in brackets, then the volume and report abbreviation, then the first page number.

Take the most famous negligence case in English law. Donoghue v Stevenson [1932] AC 562. Donoghue and Stevenson are the parties, the year is 1932, AC stands for the Law Reports Appeal Cases, and the judgment starts on page 562.

Notice the small things, because markers notice them too. The v between the parties is lower case and stays in normal type while the names are italic. There's no full stop after the v, and there's no comma before the year. The report abbreviation has no full stops either, so it's AC, not A.C.

In a criminal case the Crown is shown as R, so you write R v Brown [1994] 1 AC 212. The R stands for Rex or Regina, depending on the monarch at the time. The same pattern holds for

every reported case, so once you can write one, you can write them all.

3. Square Brackets or Round Brackets: Which Year Goes Where

This is the part that trips up most beginners, but the rule is simple. Use square brackets around the year when the year is the only way to find the volume. Use round brackets when the volume number alone finds it.

Most modern reports use yearly volumes, so square brackets are the usual choice. Donoghue v Stevenson [1932] AC 562 needs the year, because AC starts a fresh volume each year. Carlill v Carbolic Smoke Ball Co [1893] 1 QB 256 and Caparo Industries plc v Dickman [1990] 2 AC 605 follow the same rule.

Round brackets show up in older reports where volumes run in one long numbered series. The classic example is Foakes v Beer (1884) 9 App Cas 605. The 9 tells you the volume, so the year sits in round brackets and only adds context.

If you're not sure which one applies, look at the report series. If the volume number repeats every year, you need square brackets. If the volumes are numbered in one long run, use round brackets. When in doubt, check how the case is cited in your textbook.

4. Neutral Citations: The Format for Modern Judgments

Cases decided since 2001 usually carry a neutral citation, and OSCOLA wants you to use it. A neutral citation names the court and the case number.

The format is simple. Case name, year in square brackets, court abbreviation, then the judgment number. R (Evans) v Attorney General [2015] UKSC 21 is a Supreme Court judgment, the 21st of 2015. R (Miller) v Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union [2017] UKSC 5 is number 5 of 2017.

Learn the court abbreviations and the rest falls into place. UKSC is the UK Supreme Court, UKHL is the House of Lords for cases before 2009, EWCA Civ is the Court of Appeal Civil Division, and EWHC is the High Court, with the division in brackets after it, like EWHC (QB).

When a case has both a neutral citation and a law report citation, give both, with the neutral citation first. If the case has no neutral citation at all, cite the court and the date in round brackets after the case name, and give the report citation if there's one.

5. Your OSCOLA Case Citation Cheat Sheet

The table below puts the patterns side by side. Read down the list and you'll see the same shape repeat: name, year, volume and report or court, first page or number. Copy the shape and change the details.

Keep this table open while you write your first few footnotes. After three or four cases you'll stop looking at it, because your eye will start to spot the shape on its own. That's the point where OSCOLA stops feeling like a chore and starts feeling like a habit.

> Donoghue v Stevenson. [1932] AC 562. Negligence, House of Lords.

Carlill v Carbolic Smoke Ball Co. [1893] 1 QB 256. Contract, Court of Appeal.

Foakes v Beer. (1884) 9 App Cas 605. Round bracket year, contract.

Caparo Industries plc v Dickman. [1990] 2 AC 605. Negligence, House of Lords.

R v Brown. [1994] 1 AC 212. Criminal law, House of Lords.

R (Evans) v Attorney General. [2015] UKSC 21. Neutral citation, Supreme Court.

One warning before you copy anything from this table. Always check the first page number and the year against your own source. A citation with the wrong page sends your marker to the wrong place.

6. Pinpoints, Ibid and Short Forms for Later Footnotes

A citation usually points at the whole judgment, but sometimes you need one page inside it. Add a comma after the first page, then the page you mean. Donoghue v Stevenson [1932] AC 562, 565 sends the reader straight to page 565. OSCOLA puts no word at before the number.

You only give the full citation once. The next time you cite the same case, use a short form with the footnote number of the first citation. If Donoghue first appeared in footnote 1, you'll write Donoghue (n 1) 565. The n points back to footnote 1, and 565 is your pinpoint.

If the very next footnote cites the same case, write ibid instead. It means in the same place, and it saves you repeating the whole citation. Add a pinpoint if you need one, like ibid 566, and start a fresh full citation only if another source comes between the two footnotes.

One trap to avoid is repeating the full citation every time. It looks careless and it wastes words. Full once, short after that, and ibid only for the footnote right after.

7. Mistakes That Cost Law Students Marks

The most common mistake is mixing OSCOLA with Harvard. Don't put case citations in brackets inside your sentences, and don't list cases in your bibliography. OSCOLA uses footnotes and a Table of Cases, and a Harvard style entry in a law essay stands out at once.

The second mistake is italicising the v. The party names are italic, the v is not, and the same goes for the full stop that people add after it. There's no full stop, and there never was one in OSCOLA.

The third mistake is getting the brackets the wrong way round. Square brackets mean the year finds the volume, round brackets mean the volume number does the work. Swap them and a careful marker will spot it, because the citation won't match the report series.

The last mistake is copying a citation from a website without checking it. Websites get brackets wrong, drop pinpoint pages, and mix up court abbreviations. Check every citation against the law report before you submit, and if referencing is the part that always eats your time, our assignment writing service can handle the footnotes.

OSCOLA case citations are a small skill with a big payoff. Learn the four part pattern, pick the right brackets, use neutral citations for modern cases, and keep your later footnotes short with ibid and cross references. If you'd like a hand, our assignment writing service can check your

citations or write the whole assignment, and you can ask for a free quote through the contact page.