Briefing A Case

Writing a short synopsis of a case as part of the process of learning about it and understanding it is called "briefing a case." In law school, students do this in order to fully understand all aspects of a case. However, they focus on the rules of law derived from each case. In this course, while you will learn some "rules of law," our focus is on larger issues relating to the development of the Constitution and the ways of interpreting it. The form set out below will assist you in analyzing and thinking about aspects of a case which are relevant to this course. Some of the items in this brief are the same ones law students would put in their briefs. Many are not. Depending on a variety of factors, you may not have the information to be able to fill in all the items on every case. However, attempt to put something down for as many as you can even if it is just a few phrases

Your first briefs most likely will take a long time and be too long and too detailed. As you progress through the semester, you will greatly expand the quality of your briefs and reduce your preparation time.

Warning: Write out your briefs! Do not depend on your recall or your marginal notes. An important way to improve and grow in the brief writing process-and in understanding the cases is to write them out. In addition if you take notes in the margins of your briefs, you will be way ahead on your preparation for the exams. Finally, when you are called upon in class, you will feel more confident and you will enhance your contribution to the class discussion if you have something written in front of you. Since being prepared when called upon affects your course grade, you must write out your briefs. A major part of the success of the class depends on the quality of your briefs!  
  
**Parts of a brief for this class**A. FactsB. Procedural HistoryC. IssuesD. HoldingE. JudgmentF. Legal Reasoning for majority, concurrence and dissentG. Relation To Other Cases, PrecedentH. Source of LawI. System Operations  
J. Impact

Note: You will find that in each case some of these items will be more important than others. Also some items may not be applicable to the case you are currently briefing. Prepare your brief with this in mind, giving the appropriate amount of attention to each part. Some parts may require a few words and others a few sentences. You will also find that you may have more trouble with some parts of the brief than others, particularly those parts that deal with "legalese" or "technical" terms like certiorari, demurrer and so on. Keep a dictionary handy and use it! Freely ask questions in class about any terms that you do not understand or fully comprehend after consulting a dictionary. For more detail consult Black's Dictionary, the legal bible. Briefing will get easier and faster as times goes on as long as you do full briefs at the beginning.

II. Topic Descriptions

A. What are the facts?

Who are the parties and what are their roles. What did the party being sued do to cause the start of the lawsuit? What is the claim of each side. Do not retell the story in detail. Use just enough information to describe who allegedly did what to whom? Sometimes just a word or two of description of the parties adequately describes them. Sometimes, you will have to intuit facts that may not be readily apparent from the opinion or may not be part of the opinion writer's conscious description of what happened. Other times, an important or relevant fact may be purposely left out.

B. Procedural History: What path has this case taken to get to this court?

What has happened between the time the lawsuit or the dispute giving rise to the lawsuit started and the time the case gets to the court now deciding it. What is the mechanism used to get it to this court? Generally there will be many possible paths: (1) Writ of Certiorari from a lower court or state supreme court: (2) Appeal from a lower court or state court; (3) Direct appeal from a 3 judge federal court; (4) Appeal from a trial court (5) Writ of habeas corpus via 1 or 2 (6) None of the above because case was decided by a federal or state trial court. In addition, if there was trial, note the outcome of the trial in this part.

C. What are the legally relevant issues of fact and law?

What is the legal controversy in this case or this court. Often, one party or the other will raise many issues. In Epstein and Walker, the arguments of the parties raising the various issues are set out prior to the full opinion. While the court will focus on one or two or a small number of issues that it views as determinative, you should also have a sense of the issues raised by the parties that the Court does not rule on or think relevant enough to even mention. State issues so you can give a yes or no answer in the holdings section. e.g., does such a stop at a roadblock by police violate s/s of 4th Am?

D. What is the court's holding with regard to these issues?

How did the court resolve the issue or controversy between the parties. This is a yes or no answer to the issues question plus a very short reason. What was the operative rule of law or the legally correct facts to apply to an agreed upon rule of law, e.g. Yes. Need warrant for this type of search.

E. What is the actual judgment of this court? What does this court tell the parties or other courts to do with this case? This should take no more than 1 to 5 words to answer.

Appellate courts can make 4 general kinds of judgments. (1) They can say the lower court is correct for either the reasons given by the lower court or other reasons not raised in the lower court and thus, affirm the judgment; (2) They can reverse the judgment of the lower court for either being wrong about the reasons given for the lower court's decision or for reasons not raised in the lower court. (3) They can issue a combination opinion of (1) and (2) and weigh one side as more important than the other, that is affirm in part and reverse in part.(4) They can vacate and remand which means saying the lower court must now consider new rules of law or other facts now laid out by the Supreme Court that they did not consider in their previous decision, This may or may not be a reversal depending on context. In some kinds of cases, the court's ruling will only be determinative of one part of a case, e.g. what the defendant's punishment will be or what evidence can be used at trial or whether plaintiff must produce certain documents prior to trial. Sometimes, these rulings are totally determinative of the outcome. In some cases, further proceedings in accordance with the court's decision will lead to an outcome that goes against the side that prevailed in this part of the proceeding.

If the case we are studying was a decision in a trial court, then the judgment may be that plaintiff, prosecution or defendant wins.

F. What are the reasons or what is the reasoning used to justify the holding and judgment in this case? Include concurring and dissenting opinions Many of the common law cases in this class have no dissenting or concurring opinions. **(remember be brief)**

Be clear that judges decide first and write opinions afterward. While sometimes they change their position after the opinion is written, it is relatively rare. Often several reasons are given for an opinion. But we are looking for the "sufficient" reason or reasons, the one or ones that cause the outcome. There are also "necessary" reasons, without which this outcome would not have taken place. What alternative rules did the judge consider? What alternative rules did the judge not consider? As we go through the semester, we will discuss various approaches to understanding judicial reasoning in this area. In giving the legal reasoning include what parts of our Constitution or laws or case precedents support the outcome. Also cover the concurring and dissenting opinions. On the basis of what issues or facts, did a Justice disagree with the majority or feel the need to separate themselves from the majority was saying.

G. Relation to other cases, precedent  
Which 1, 2 or 3 prior cases were cited as precedent for this case. We will be reading a considerable number of common law cases in which the major source of law will be precedent.

H. Source of Law  
Was the outcome of this case based on precedent, statute or the Constitution or some combination of any of the above?

I. Impact of the case  
What if anything did this case change or directly affect at the various levels of society and government, Do you think the various audiences, judges, government officials, interest groups, citizens and so on changed their behavior in some way because of this case. Why or why not? For instance, if a court said a certain behavior was negligent did people stop engaging in that behavior to avoid being charged with negligence in this kind of situation. If they did, what affects, direct and indirect, did this decision have.

J. System Operations  
What does the case tell you more generally about the way the judicial and legal process operate. For instance, if the defendant’s conviction is reversed because of an illegal search does the case tell you how hard it is for police to collect evidence.

K. What values was the judge balancing or what basic societal values were conflicting in this case. This will require some thought about the broader implications of the case.