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## **The 80/20 Rule for Legal Research**

Olivia R. Smith Schlink

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### The 80/20 Rule for Legal Research

Posted on [October 11, 2023](#) by [Olivia Smith Schlinck](#)

A few semesters ago I was discussing the value of secondary sources with a student when they paused to think, then described secondary sources as “kind of like the 80/20 Rule, but different.” I’d never heard of the [80/20 Rule](#), but I jotted it down onto a Post-It note to look into later. Fast-forward to today and I now introduce my students to what I’ve dubbed “the 80/20 Rule for Legal Research” in all classes about secondary sources.

The 80/20 Rule, also known as “the Pareto Principle,” is a business phrase meaning that 80% of all outcomes come from 20% of causes. In business, the Rule encourages prioritizing the 20% of causes to produce the best possible results (like focusing attention on a small percentage of clients who produce the most revenue for a company).

After learning about the Rule, I meant to clarify with the student their intended meaning but never got the chance. As a reminder, I left the Post-It on my desk for months; every week or so I’d say *oh yeah, I need to circle back to that*, and then would inevitably get distracted by some more pressing project.

By the time I actually sat down to think about it, I forgot which student had the idea in the first place. But I’d also spent months glancing at a sticky note that read *80/20 rule for research!!!* and had developed its own meaning in my brain that is essentially the opposite of the Pareto Principle.

Thus was born the 80/20 Rule for Legal Research: out of all the searches you do and sources you read, only about 20 percent of them will appear directly in—will be cited in—your final work product.

# 80/20 Rule for Research



I use this principle mostly with 1Ls, who can struggle with the concept of using a secondary source as a research tool but not citing to that source. (In my experience, this all gets bound up with a fear of plagiarism that leads 1Ls to over-cite). Novice researchers like 1Ls are also more likely to skip secondary sources as a research strategy, preferring to dive straight into caselaw in an attempt to streamline their research and avoid reading too much “extra” material.

Before the 80/20 Rule for Legal Research, I struggled with explaining how and why secondary sources should be used in a way that connected with first-year students. But this “Rule” seems to help, making click in the 1L brain that *it’s normal to not cite everything you read, and you need to read sources for background information sometimes*.

Perhaps 80/20 is too extreme a ratio, but I’ve decided to roll with it—it’s working, and while students are still practicing and learning good research skills, they seem more likely to turn to a secondary source than in years past.

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