

EVIDENCE FIRST. NARRATIVES SECOND.

A CLUTCH JUSTICE FIELD GUIDE

Follow the Record

A Clutch Guide to Finding the Evidence Behind the
Story

*"Find the source. Build the timeline. Know what the evidence proves
before you decide what you believe."*

clutch.

COURTS! CRIME! CROCHET!

Start With the Record

Most people meet a story backward.

A headline arrives first. Then an interpretation of the headline. Then someone's version of what the interpretation means. The underlying record, if anyone gets to it at all, shows up last, if it shows up at all.

HEADLINE → INTERPRETATION → SOMEONE'S VERSION → MAYBE THE UNDERLYING RECORD

Clutch works in the other direction.

RECORD → TIMELINE → CONTEXT → CONCLUSION

The order matters more than it looks like it should.

A headline can be accurate and still leave out the fact that changes everything. A news story can quote a filing correctly and still misstate what the filing represents. A documentary can use authentic records and arrange them to support one version of events. A court filing can contain a serious allegation that was never proven. An official record can document what an institution said happened without proving that the institution was right.

None of that means every source is unreliable. It means every source has a specific job, and the first question is what that job actually is.

FIVE WORDS THAT DO NOT MEAN THE SAME THING

ALLEGATION: Something someone claims happened.

EVIDENCE: Information offered to support or refute a claim.

FINDING: A determination made by a court, agency, jury, or investigator.

RULING: A formal decision resolving a legal or procedural question.

COMMENTARY: Someone's explanation of what the evidence means.

THE CLUTCH RULE

Before you decide what you believe, find out what the record can prove.

Find the Case

Every story that touches a court, an agency, or a public record started somewhere, with a name and a filing. Finding the case means turning a headline, a documentary, or a social post into something you can actually verify.

WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

FULL NAME

Common names collide, nicknames get printed instead of legal names, and a documentary that never uses a full legal name has already made your search harder than it needs to be.

JURISDICTION AND COURT

State or federal. Circuit, district, county, or appellate. Each system keeps its own records in its own place, under its own rules.

CASE NUMBER

This is the cleanest anchor available. One person can have multiple civil, criminal, appellate, and federal matters running at once, sometimes about the same underlying facts. The case number keeps your research attached to the correct proceeding.

FILING DATE AND CURRENT STATUS

Whether a case is open, closed, on appeal, dismissed, or sealed changes what you can access and what conclusions are even possible to draw yet.

RELATED PROCEEDINGS

A criminal case, a civil suit, a licensing complaint, and an appeal can all exist around the same set of facts. Missing one of them means working from a partial record without knowing it.

WHAT A DOCKET ACTUALLY IS

The docket is the chronological index of what happened in a case. It is not the case itself. It is the table of contents.

START HERE

- ☐ Full name
- ☐ Court / jurisdiction
- ☐ Case number
- ☐ Filing date
- ☐ Current status
- ☐ Related proceedings

Where to look depends on the jurisdiction: state court systems, county court portals, PACER for federal matters, appellate databases, and other official sources each hold a piece of the record. Access varies. Some counties post everything online; some require an in-person request.

Read the Docket Like a Timeline

A docket can tell you the shape of a case before you have read a single filing in it. Look for the pattern before you look for the details.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Complaint or charging document. Amended complaints or amended charges. Motions, responses, and replies. Hearing notices and adjournments. Transcripts and exhibits. Orders and judgments. Sentencing documents. Appeals, remands, and dismissals. Unusual gaps in activity. Clusters of filings around a single event.

Gaps and clusters are often more informative than any single document. A case that goes quiet for eight months and then produces eleven filings in a week is telling you something happened that the docket entries alone will not explain. Go find out what.

A document means more once you know what came immediately before and after it. Read filings out of order and you will misread most of them.

The Clutch Timeline

DATE	·	EVENT	·	SOURCE	·	WHAT IT ACTUALLY ESTABLISHES
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That last column is the one that keeps you honest.

A complaint establishes that someone made a formal allegation. It does not establish that the allegation was true.

An order establishes what the court decided. It does not necessarily establish that every factual claim elsewhere in the case file was accepted as fact.

Fill in the first three columns from the record. Fill in the fourth column only with what the source itself can support, not with what you assume it means.

Go to the Primary Source

Not every source carries the same weight, and treating them as interchangeable is where most bad conclusions start.

START HERE WHEN POSSIBLE

Court orders. Transcripts. Filed exhibits. Judgments. Sentencing records. Government records. Public-record responses. Official datasets. Original correspondence, when authenticated.

USEFUL WITH CONTEXT

News reporting. Interviews. Attorney statements. Government press releases. Documentaries. Podcasts. Academic or organizational analysis.

LEADS, NOT PROOF

Social media posts. Anonymous claims. Screenshots without provenance. Viral summaries. Secondhand descriptions of documents. AI-generated summaries without source verification.

Primary does not mean infallible. Official records can contain errors, disputed statements, omissions, institutional assumptions, or claims supplied by an interested party. What they establish is narrower and more useful than "the truth." They establish what was recorded, filed, represented, decided, or maintained by an institution at a specific point in time.

ASK

What is this source actually capable of proving?

A police report can prove what the police documented. It does not automatically prove that every statement in it is true. A transcript can establish what was said in court. It cannot tell you whether the speaker was being honest. A docket entry can establish that a motion was filed. The motion existing does not establish that its allegations are correct.

This is the distinction the entire guide runs on. Learn to ask it reflexively, and most bad reporting, most viral claims, and most persuasive documentaries lose most of their power over you.

The Follow the Record Method

Six questions. Ask them in order, every time.

1 WHAT IS THE ORIGINAL SOURCE?

Can you get closer to the actual document, recording, dataset, transcript, or filing this claim is based on? Not someone's summary of it. It.

2 WHAT DOES IT ACTUALLY ESTABLISH?

Not what someone says it means. What the source itself establishes, and nothing more.

3 WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE AND AFTER?

What does the timeline add, remove, or complicate?

4 WHAT IS MISSING?

Is there another filing, response, transcript, exhibit, or perspective you would need to understand this fairly?

5 WHAT WOULD CHANGE YOUR INTERPRETATION?

What evidence would make you reconsider the conclusion you are currently leaning toward? If nothing would, you are no longer evaluating the record. You are defending a position.

6 WHAT SHOULD EXIST IF THIS IS TRUE?

Events leave paper trails. A prosecution generates filings. A government decision generates correspondence, minutes, policies, contracts, or records. An employment action generates personnel records, notices, and administrative documents. A public expenditure generates contracts, invoices, approvals, and accounting records. The absence of an expected record is not proof that something did not happen, but knowing what should exist tells you exactly what to go look for next.

ON INCENTIVE

It is fair to ask who built a narrative, what information they had access to, and what interests might shape how they presented it. Incentive is context. It is not proof of dishonesty, and treating it as proof is its own kind of sloppy thinking.

My Mini Case File

STORY / CASE:

THE CLAIM:

ORIGINAL SOURCE:

COURT / JURISDICTION:

CASE NO. / RECORD ID:

WHAT THE RECORD ESTABLISHES:

WHAT THE RECORD DOES NOT ESTABLISH:

IMPORTANT DATES:

MISSING RECORDS:

CONFLICTING INFORMATION:

QUESTIONS STILL OPEN:

WHAT SHOULD EXIST IF THE CLAIM IS TRUE?

NEXT RECORD TO FIND:

SOURCE LINKS / NOTES:

UNKNOWN IS A VALID ANSWER.

The goal is not to force the evidence into a conclusion. The goal is to know exactly where the evidence ends, and where your own interpretation begins.

Keep Following the Record

This changes how you read the next headline. It changes how you watch the next documentary, listen to the next podcast episode, and scroll past the next viral claim about a case you will never personally investigate.

You start asking what a source can prove before you decide what to think of it. That is the whole method. Everything else in this guide is just how to do it.

CLUTCH JUSTICE

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COURTS! CRIME! CROCHET!

"Anyone can tell you what happened. The record is the only one who has to prove it."