Lesson 4 — Reading a Case: How Lawyers Learn from Judgments

A judgment is read in order: the facts as found, the procedural history, the issues, the reasoning, and the order. From the reasoning the reader extracts the ratio decidendi — the proposition of law necessary to the decision — in one sentence, no wider than the material facts require.

Everything beyond the ratio is obiter dictum: persuasive by its quality, binding on no one. The skill of distinguishing — showing a material difference that takes a new case outside an old ratio — is how precedent is honoured and escaped lawfully at once.

Practise: brief one case on one page — facts in five lines, the issue, the holding, the ratio in one sentence, and your own verdict in one line. A shelf of such briefs is a revision course already written.

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