Understanding legal citations and abbreviations

What are legal citations?
Legal citations are the accepted way of referring to primary sources of law. Knowing how to decipher these citations makes locating case reports and journal articles easier.

Abbreviations are used within case citations to indicate the law report series in which a case was reported. For example:

- Howard-Jones v Tate [2012] 2 All ER 369
  - All ER = All England Law Reports

A case can have several citations and be reported in more than one law report series.

Legal journals are also often known by their abbreviated title. For example:

  - MLR = Modern Law Review

Legal abbreviations
The Cardiff Index to Legal Abbreviations allows searching by abbreviation to determine the full title of a publication or by law report/journal title to discover the correct abbreviation. The Index is very easy to use and is available online at http://www.legalabbrevs.cardiff.ac.uk/.

More than one law report or journal may have the same abbreviation; look closely at the subject of the law report series or the jurisdiction to identify the most likely title.

Alternatively, consult the tables of the most commonly used abbreviations which are on notice boards throughout the Law Collection in the Sydney Jones Library. Textbooks often include lists of abbreviations relevant to the subject of the book.
Case citations
A case citation usually contains a date or year, a volume number, an abbreviation for the title of the law report series and a page number. For example:

- McDonald v Fernandez [2004] 1 WLR 1027
  - *McDonald v Fernandez* are the parties involved
  - [2004] the year the case was heard or date it was reported
  - 1 volume number (note that, in some series of law reports, there is more than one volume per year)
  - WLR The abbreviated title for the law report series, in this case the Weekly Law Reports
  - 1027 page number on which the report begins

As a general rule, a number before the abbreviation refers to a volume; a number after the abbreviation refers to a page number.

Brackets
The type of brackets used around the date in a citation indicates the importance of the date when finding the case. Square brackets show that the date is essential to finding the case report. Some law report series publish more than one volume per year. For example:

- [1968] 2 All ER 541
  - Volume 2 of the 1968 All England Law Reports, page 541

As there is a volume 2 of the All England Law Reports each year, you need the date in order to find the correct volume 2.

Round brackets indicate that the date is less important when tracking down the case and that the volume is required to locate the case report. For example:

- (1976) 62 Cr App R 262
  - Volume 62 of the Criminal Appeal Reports, page 262

The Criminal Appeal Reports publish one volume each year, numbered consecutively, so the year is less crucial when locating the case report as the correct volume can be identified from the volume number.
Neutral citations
Neutral citations were introduced in the UK in 2001 for judgments from all divisions of the High Court and are independent of any printed series of law reports. Instead, the abbreviation indicates the court in which the case was heard and the number indicates the judgment number. For example:

- Brown v Davies [2006] EWCA Civ 166 [9]
  - Brown v Davies are the parties involved
  - [2006] the date of the judgment
  - EWCA Civ The court in which the case was heard, in this case, Court of Appeal of England and Wales Civil Division
  - 166 the case number
  - [9] specifically referring to paragraph 9. A paragraph number is not always included.

Neutral citations make it easier to find a judgment online, either from subscription services like Lexis Library and Westlaw UK or from free sources such as BAILLI. The UK Supreme Court also uses the neutral citation system.

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