

IRAC Case Briefing

Issue · Rule · Application · Conclusion

A Research-Backed Strategy for Reading and Analyzing Supreme Court Decisions

What is IRAC — and why does it matter? Supreme Court opinions are among the most complex and consequential texts in American civic life. They are also among the most misread. IRAC is the same analytical framework that law students, attorneys, and federal clerks use to read and brief court opinions — breaking any legal decision into four manageable, logical components. When you know how to apply IRAC to a Supreme Court case, you can extract the constitutional question, identify the legal rule, trace the Court's reasoning, and evaluate the outcome — the same skills required on AP exams, in college political science courses, and in informed civic participation.

Think Like a Lawyer

IRAC is the foundational framework of legal reasoning. Using it trains you to approach civic questions the way judges, attorneys, and constitutional scholars do — with discipline, precision, and evidence.

Navigate Complex Texts

Supreme Court opinions can run dozens of pages. IRAC gives you a map. You always know what you are looking for, where to find it, and what it means — even in the most technically dense passages.

Build Writing Literacy

Every component of IRAC directly builds the writing skills you need: identifying an issue sharpens your claim, tracing the rule develops evidence literacy, analyzing application deepens reasoning, and forming a conclusion strengthens your ability to answer questions fully and directly.

The Four Components of IRAC

Every Supreme Court opinion can be analyzed through these four lenses. Learn them once — apply them to every case you read.

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Issue — What is the constitutional question the Court must answer?

The Issue is the specific legal question the case presents. In a Supreme Court opinion, the justices frame this question explicitly — look for language like 'the question before the Court is,' 'whether,' or 'we consider.' The issue is never simply 'who won.' It is the constitutional question whose answer will set precedent for the nation. For example, in *Tinker v. Des Moines* (1969), the issue is not 'Did the

students get in trouble?' but rather: 'Does a school have the authority to prohibit students from wearing armbands as a form of political protest without violating the First Amendment?' State the issue as a specific legal question in one to two sentences.

Rule — What legal principle, constitutional provision, or precedent governs this case?

The Rule is the legal standard the Court applies to decide the issue. In constitutional cases, the Rule is almost always a clause of the Constitution — the First Amendment's Free Speech Clause, the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause, the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable searches — combined with the legal tests and prior precedents the Court has developed to interpret that clause. For example, in First Amendment cases, the Court often applies the 'clear and present danger' test, the 'compelling government interest' standard, or the 'Lemon test,' depending on the type of speech. Your job is to identify which constitutional provision applies AND what interpretive standard the Court uses to apply it. Do not just name the amendment — identify the rule the Court extracts from it.

Application — How does the Court apply the rule to the specific facts of this case?

Application — sometimes called Analysis — is the most important and the most often rushed section. This is where the Court's reasoning actually lives. The justices take the Rule and apply it to the facts to determine which side wins and why. In your brief, you are not summarizing the Court's conclusion — you are tracing its logic. What facts did the Court consider most important? How did those facts interact with the Rule? What arguments from each side did the Court accept or reject, and why? Watch for the majority opinion's reasoning AND the dissent's challenge to it — the tension between them reveals the most contested aspects of the constitutional question. If you can explain the reasoning in your own words, you understand the case.

Conclusion — What did the Court decide — and what does it mean going forward?

The Conclusion is the Court's holding: the final ruling on the specific legal question raised in the Issue. Courts signal their conclusion with phrases like 'we hold,' 'we affirm,' 'we reverse,' or 'we conclude.' Your conclusion does two things: it states the outcome clearly, and it captures the precedent the decision establishes — the rule of law that lower courts and future cases must now follow. For example, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the conclusion is not merely that the plaintiffs won — it is that racially segregated public schools violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, thereby overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Always connect the holding to its broader constitutional significance.

Optional Extended Version: FIRAC + Opinions

When briefing a full Supreme Court opinion, add Facts and Opinion Analysis before and after the IRAC structure.

Component	What to Record
Facts(Before IRAC)	What happened? Who are the parties? What is the procedural history — how did the case travel from trial court to the Supreme Court? What did the lower courts decide? Summarize only the facts the Court considers relevant to its analysis.
Issue	The constitutional question the Court must answer. State it as a specific question.
Rule	The constitutional provision(s) and legal standard(s) the Court applies. Name the clause AND the test.
Application	The Court's reasoning — how the Rule is applied to the Facts. Trace the logic, not just the outcome. Include what the Court accepted, what it rejected, and why.
Conclusion	The holding: the specific answer to the Issue, stated as precedent. What rule of law does this case now establish?
Opinion Analysis(After IRAC)	Who wrote the majority opinion? Were there concurring opinions? Dissents? What did the dissent argue, and why does it matter? Understanding the dissent often reveals the constitutional tension the case created.

Why the dissent matters: Supreme Court dissents are not just losing arguments — they are often the seeds of future majorities. Justice Harlan's lone dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) became the constitutional foundation for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) fifty-eight years later. Reading the dissent alongside the majority opinion shows you where the constitutional debate is still live.

How to Read a Supreme Court Opinion Using IRAC: Step by Step

Follow these steps in order every time you read a case. Do not skip Step 1.

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Before You Read — Activate Background Knowledge

Before reading the opinion, write down what you already know: What constitutional provision is likely at stake? What were the historical or political circumstances that produced this case? What does the case name tell you? If you do not know, take two minutes to read a brief summary so you know what question to look for. A student who knows what to look for reads far more efficiently than one who is encountering the case cold.

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Read the Full Opinion Once — Without Stopping to Brief

Read the majority opinion completely before you start filling in your brief. Do not stop to take detailed notes yet. On your first read, your only job is to understand the overall shape of the case: what happened, what was decided, and why. Mark passages that seem important with a bracket or a question mark. Resist the urge to annotate line by line — that will come in Step 3.

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Identify the Issue

Go back through the opinion and find where the Court frames the constitutional question. Look for signal words: 'whether,' 'the question before us,' 'we consider,' 'the issue is.' Some cases present multiple issues — identify the primary one first. Write the issue as a precise legal question, not a vague topic. 'First Amendment rights' is a topic. 'Whether a public school may prohibit student speech that school officials reasonably forecast will cause substantial disruption' is an issue.

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Identify the Rule

Find the constitutional provision the Court relies on and the specific legal standard it applies. Look for phrases like 'Under [Amendment], the test is...' or 'As we held in [prior case]...' or 'The government must show...' Write down the constitutional clause AND the test or standard the Court applies to interpret it. These are not the same thing — the First Amendment is the provision; 'clear and present danger' or 'substantial disruption' is the standard the Court uses to apply it.

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Trace the Application — This Is the Hard Part

The Application section requires you to slow down and follow the Court's logic, step by step. Ask: What key facts did the majority emphasize? Why did those facts matter under the Rule? What arguments did the Court accept? What arguments did it reject? How does the majority's reasoning differ from the dissent? Do not summarize — analyze. The difference between a weak brief and a strong one is almost always in this section. A weak brief says 'The Court said the action was unconstitutional.' A strong brief explains exactly why — what facts, under what standard, in light of what precedent.

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State the Conclusion and Its Precedential Significance

Write the holding clearly. Then push one step further: what does this decision mean for the future? What are lower courts now required to do? What constitutional principle is now established? What rights were recognized, limited, or redefined? A student who can state the precedent of a case — not just the outcome — has genuinely understood it. Practice ending every brief with: 'This decision established that...'

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Read and Brief the Dissent

Read the dissenting opinion with the same analytical attention you gave the majority. Identify the dissent's Issue framing (did they define the question differently?), the Rule they would apply, and why they believe the majority's Application was wrong. Write a one-paragraph dissent summary. This is not extra credit — understanding the dissent is essential to understanding why the constitutional question the case raised is still contested and why it matters.

Signal Words: How to Navigate a Court Opinion

Supreme Court justices use predictable language patterns. Learning these signals helps you find each IRAC component quickly.

Component	Signal Words and Phrases to Look For	Example from an Actual Opinion
Issue (I)	<i>"The question before the Court is..." "We consider whether..." "Whether..." "We granted certiorari to resolve..." "The issue presented is..."</i>	"We consider whether a public school's prohibition of a student's non-disruptive, passive political expression violates the First Amendment." — Tinker v. Des Moines (1969)
Rule (R)	<i>"Under [Amendment], the test is..." "As we held in [prior case]..." "The government must demonstrate..." "The standard we apply is..." "[Clause] requires that..."</i>	"Under the First Amendment, a regulation of speech is permissible only if the government can demonstrate a compelling interest..."
Application (A)	<i>"Here, the facts show..." "In this case..." "Turning to the present controversy..." "Applying this standard to the facts..." "The record reveals..." "We find that..." "Respondent argues... however..."</i>	"Turning to this case, the record does not demonstrate that the school authorities had reason to anticipate that the wearing of armbands would substantially interfere with school work..."
Conclusion (C)	<i>"We hold that..." "We conclude that..." "We affirm/reverse the judgment of..." "The judgment is affirmed/reversed." "For these reasons, we..."</i>	"We hold that students do not 'shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate.'" — Tinker v. Des Moines
Dissent	<i>"I dissent." "I respectfully dissent." "The majority errs in..." "I would hold instead that..." "The Court's reasoning is flawed because..." "I cannot join the majority..."</i>	"I dissent from this holding... The Court should have recognized that school officials are given wide discretion and responsibility..." — Justice Black, Tinker dissent

How IRAC Builds Writing Literacy

Writing Readiness Skill	How IRAC Develops It
Writing a clear claim	Stating the Issue precisely — as a specific legal question — is the same skill as writing a thesis. Both require you to identify the exact question your argument answers and state it unambiguously.
Supporting that claim with evidence	Identifying the Rule requires you to locate the specific constitutional text and legal standard that supports a position — the same skill as selecting relevant, credible evidence for a written argument.
Explaining how evidence proves the point	The Application section exists entirely to make this connection explicit. Students who practice writing

	Application learn that evidence without explanation is incomplete — a habit that transfers directly to essay and short-response writing.
Paraphrasing rather than copying	Briefing requires you to restate the Court's reasoning in your own words throughout. A brief that copies the opinion verbatim has not been understood — it has been transcribed. Paraphrase is the only evidence of comprehension.
Quoting briefly and correctly when needed	Learning to identify the single most important sentence in a holding — the words that constitute the actual precedent — teaches disciplined quotation: one phrase, properly attributed, that carries maximum meaning.
Organizing a short response logically	IRAC is an organizational structure for legal analysis. Students who internalize the four-component sequence learn to produce organized analytical responses in any format, because they have a logical sequence to follow.
Answering the question directly and fully	The Issue-then-Conclusion structure of IRAC directly mirrors what every teacher and professor wants in a written response: state the question, then answer it completely. Students who practice IRAC stop avoiding direct answers.
Revising for clarity	Briefing a case requires you to revise your first-read impressions against the text. When your Application does not match the Court's actual reasoning, you have to go back and re-read. This is revision — checking your interpretation against evidence — performed on every case.

Common Mistakes — And How to Fix Them

 What Looks Like an IRAC Brief But Isn't	 What Actually Works
Stating the Issue as a topic rather than a question: 'First Amendment' or 'Free Speech'	State the Issue as a precise legal question: 'Whether the government may prohibit flag burning as a form of political protest without violating the First Amendment's Free Speech Clause.'

Naming the Rule as just an amendment: 'The Fourth Amendment applies'	Identify the specific standard the Court uses to apply that amendment: 'Under the Fourth Amendment, a search is unreasonable unless supported by probable cause and a warrant, subject to established exceptions.'
Writing Application that only restates the outcome: 'The Court said the search was unconstitutional'	Write Application that traces the reasoning: 'The Court held the search unconstitutional because officers lacked probable cause at the time of entry and no exception — neither consent nor exigency — applied to the facts.'
Writing the Conclusion before completing the Application	Complete Application fully first. The Conclusion should feel like the logical result of your analysis — if it does not follow from your Application, go back and deepen the reasoning.
Skipping the dissent because 'it didn't win'	Brief the dissent. In many landmark cases, the dissent's arguments were later adopted by future Courts. Understanding why reasonable justices disagreed is essential to understanding the constitutional question.
Copying sentences from the opinion into the brief instead of paraphrasing	Paraphrase every component. If you cannot explain the Court's reasoning in your own words, you have not understood it yet. Go back and re-read the passage more slowly.

Quick-Reference Card

Use this checklist every time you read a Supreme Court opinion.

BEFORE YOU READ	AS YOU READ	AFTER YOU READ
☐ ☐ Review what constitutional question is likely at stake ☐ ☐ Note the parties and what they want ☐ ☐ Identify the constitutional amendment(s) involved ☐ ☐ Note how the case reached the Supreme Court ☐ ☐ Read a brief summary if needed for context	☐ ☐ Read the full opinion once without stopping ☐ ☐ Mark Issue signal words (whether, the question is...) ☐ ☐ Mark Rule statements (the test is, we apply...) ☐ ☐ Bracket the Application reasoning passages ☐ ☐ Mark the Conclusion (we hold, we reverse...)	☐ ☐ Brief each IRAC component in your own words ☐ ☐ State the precedent: 'This decision established that...' ☐ ☐ Brief the dissent — what did it argue? ☐ ☐ Note: Is this precedent still good law? ☐ ☐ Connect the holding to the broader constitutional principle

Academic Integrity: Your IRAC brief must reflect your own reading and your own reasoning. Do not use AI tools to generate any part of your Issue, Rule, Application, or Conclusion. The entire purpose of briefing a case is to demonstrate that you read the opinion carefully and can trace its legal reasoning for yourself. An AI-generated brief bypasses that process entirely, defeats the purpose of the assignment, and constitutes an academic integrity violation.

IRAC Case Brief Template

Complete all sections in your own words. Do not copy sentences from the opinion.

Name:

Case Name and Year:

Date:

FACTS — What happened? Who are the parties? How did the case reach the Supreme Court?

I
Issue

State the constitutional question as a specific legal question. Begin with 'Whether...' or 'Does/Did...'

R
Rule

Name the constitutional provision AND the specific legal standard or test the Court applies.

Constitutional provision:

Legal standard / test the Court applies:

A Appl icati on	<i>Trace the Court's reasoning — how did it apply the Rule to the facts? Do not summarize the outcome. Explain the logic.</i> Key facts the majority emphasized:
	How the majority applied the Rule to those facts:
	Arguments the Court accepted / rejected:

C Con clusi on	<i>State the holding clearly. Then complete the sentence: 'This decision established that...'</i> The Court held:
	This decision established that:

OPINION ANALYSIS — Majority · Concurring · Dissent		
Majority Opinion	Concurring Opinion (if any)	Dissenting Opinion
Author:	Author:	Author:
Vote:	Agrees with outcome but not reasoning — why?	Core argument — why the majority is wrong:

Key reasoning:		Why this dissent matters:
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SELF-CHECK BEFORE SUBMITTING	
☐ ☐ Issue is stated as a specific legal question ☐ ☐ Rule names both the constitutional provision AND the legal standard ☐ ☐ Application traces the reasoning, not just the outcome ☐ ☐ I explained which facts the Court found most important and why ☐ ☐ Conclusion states the holding AND its precedential significance	☐ ☐ Every component is written in my own words — no copied sentences ☐ ☐ I briefed the dissent and explained its core argument ☐ ☐ I ended with 'This decision established that...' ☐ ☐ I can explain this case out loud without looking at my brief ☐ ☐ I connected the holding to the broader constitutional principle

The test of a good brief: Close your template and try to explain this case to a classmate in two minutes. If you can state the constitutional question, the rule applied, the Court's reasoning, and the holding in your own words — without reading from your brief — you have genuinely understood the case. That is the goal.