INTRODUCTION TO THE U.S. COURT SYSTEM

Introduction: This handout is designed to help you capture important information about the U.S. court system that we will discuss during this session. Please work on filling out the answers during the session; at the end of the session, you should have a completed document that will serve as a useful guide to our court system. You can confirm this information and/or fill in any missing information by referring to your assigned reading for the first week of your Communication and Legal Reasoning or Common Law Reasoning course.

I. Parallel Court Systems
   1. How many court systems are there within the United States legal system?
   2. What is the overall nature of the structure of these U.S. Court systems?
   3. How many levels of courts are in the federal court system?
   4. How many levels of courts are there in a typical state court system?
   5. Very generally, how does a case proceed through a court system?
   6. What is the jurisdiction of the state and federal courts? What types of cases do they hear?

JURISDICTION:

FEDERAL COURTS (2 TYPES):

STATE COURTS:
7. What are the names of the parties to a lawsuit?

TRIAL COURTS:

Civil:

Criminal:

APPELLATE COURTS:

II. **Hierarchy of Courts and Stare Decisis**

1. What is *stare decisis*?

2. How is the concept of *stare decisis* important in the U.S. common law legal system?

3. What is the difference between binding precedent and persuasive precedent?

4. How does *stare decisis* bind courts – which decisions of other courts must a court follow?

5. Do decisions of the courts of one state bind the courts of another state?

6. Do decisions of federal courts bind state courts?

7. Do decisions of state courts bind federal courts?
III. **Graphical Organization**

Fill in this chart of the U.S. Court System.

* **A case would only rise to this level if what kind of issue?**
  
  __________

---

Northwestern University School of Law
1L Orientation – Fall 2015 - Practice Rotations – Introduction to the U.S. Court System
Professors Inglehart and Silbernagel