CHAPTER 990

CONSTRUCTION OF STATUTES

990.001 Construction of laws; rules for. In construing Wisconsin laws the following rules shall be observed unless construction in accordance with a rule would produce a result inconsistent with the manifest intent of the legislature:

(1) SINGULAR AND PLURAL. The singular includes the plural, and the plural includes the singular.

(2) GENDER. Words importing one gender extend and may be applied to any gender. Any person who by statute, rule or ordinance is designated a chairman, alderman or other similar title may use another equivalent title such as, in the case of a chairman, “chair”, “chairperson”, “chairwoman” or other such appropriate title.

(3) TENSES. The present tense of a verb includes the future when applicable. The future perfect tense includes past and future tenses.

(4) TIME, HOW COMPUTED. (a) The time within which an act is to be done or proceeding had or taken shall be computed by excluding the first day and including the last; and when any such time is expressed in hours the whole of Sunday and of any legal holiday, from midnight to midnight, shall be excluded.

(b) When a decimal–numbered statute of this state contains a reference to another decimal–numbered statute of this state, the reference is to the current text of the statute referenced, and includes any change that has been inserted into and any interpretation or construction that has been adopted with respect to the referenced statute since the reference was first incorporated into the statute, whether or not the referenced statute is a general, specific, substantive or procedural statute. When a decimal–numbered statute refers to another decimal–numbered statute in a specific prior edition of the Wisconsin statutes, the reference does not include subsequent changes to the statute referenced.

(5) STATUTORY REFERENCES. (a) If a statute refers, by number, to a group of chapters, sections, subsections or paragraphs of the statutes, the reference includes both the first and the last numbers mentioned.

(b) When a decimal–numbered statute of this state contains a reference to another decimal–numbered statute of this state, the reference is to the current text of the statute referenced, and includes any change that has been inserted into and any interpretation or construction that has been adopted with respect to the referenced statute since the reference was first incorporated into the statute, whether or not the referenced statute is a general, specific, substantive or procedural statute. When a decimal–numbered statute refers to another decimal–numbered statute in a specific prior edition of the Wisconsin statutes, the reference does not include subsequent changes to the statute referenced.
(16) **DEGREES OF KINSHIP**  The degree of kinship is computed according to the rules of the civil law, as follows: [See Figure 990.001 (16) following]
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32.02(1)(c) An unconstitutional clause was severable under sub. (11). Wis. Wine & Spirit Institute v. Levy, 141 Wis. 2d 958, 416 N.W.2d 914 (Ct. App. 1987).

Generally, legislation is presumptively prospective unless statutory language requires a different rule of construction. Basic rule of construction is that unless the statute applies retroactively, procedural or results-oriented arbitrariness is fatal. The language of the statute must be clear and unambiguous. If it is clear and unambiguous, there is no need to determine the legislative intent or look to extrinsic evidence. If the language is unclear or ambiguous, the court must determine the legislative intent.

The language of the statute is to be read against the background of the subject matter to which it relates. The words of a statute are to be read in context, and the statute is to be construed so as to give effect to all its provisions. The construction of a statute is in general a question of law to be determined by the court. The court should look to the entire statute and read it with a view toward giving effect to all of its provisions.

Legislation has a history and is subject to being read against the background of the subject matter to which it relates. The words of a statute are to be read in context, and the statute is to be construed in the light of the circumstances surrounding its enactment, as well as of its language and of its object and policy.

Generally, a legislative enactment is to be presumed to have been intended to have a constitutionally valid effect, and legislation is to be construed to give effect to all its provisions. The words of a statute are to be read in context, and the statute is to be construed so as to give effect to all its provisions.

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(5) CHIROPRACTOR. “Chiropractor” means a person holding a license issued by the chiropractic examination board.

(5g) COMMUNICABLE DISEASE. “Communicable disease” means any disease that the department of health services determines, by rule, to be communicable in fact.

(5r) CONTROLLED ACCESS HIGHWAY. “Controlled access highway” means a highway on which abutting property owners have no right or only a limited right of direct access and on which the type and location of all access connections are determined and controlled by the highway authorities.

(6) COUNTY BOARD. “County board” means the county board of supervisors.

(7a) EXPRESS HIGHWAY OR EXPRESSWAY. An express highway or expressway is a divided arterial highway for through traffic with “full” or “partial” control of access and generally with grade separations at intersections. “Full” control of access means that the authority to control access is exercised to give preference to through traffic by providing access connections with selected public roads only and by prohibiting crossings at grade or direct private driveway connections. “Partial” control of access means that the authority to control access is exercised to give preference to through traffic to a degree that, in addition to access connections with selected public roads, there may be some crossings at grade and some private driveway connections.

(7g) FIRE CHIEF. “Fire chief” or “chief of a fire department” includes the chief of a department under s. 60.553, 61.66, or 62.13 (2e).

(7m) FIRE DEPARTMENT. “Fire department” includes a department under s. 60.553, 61.66, or 62.13 (2e).

(7r) FIRE FIGHTER. “Fire fighter” includes a person serving under s. 60.553, 61.66, or 62.13 (2e).

(8) FOLIO. “Folio” means 100 words or figures. Any fraction of a folio shall be paid for as a full folio.

(9) FOLLOWING. “Following,” when used by way of reference to any statute section, means the section next following that in which the reference is made.

(9a) FREEWAY. “Freeway” means a highway with full control of access and with all crossroads separated in grade from the pavesments for through traffic.

(10) GRANTOR AND GRANTEE. “Grantor” includes every person from or by whom any freehold estate or interest passes in or by any devise; “grantee” includes every person to whom any such estate or interest passes in like manner.

(11) HERETOFORE AND HEREAFTER. “Heretofore” means any time previous to the day on which the statute containing it takes effect; “hereafter” means the time after the statute containing such word takes effect.

(12) HIGHWAY. “Highway” includes all public ways and thoroughfares and all bridges upon the same.

(13) HOMESTEAD. (a) The word “homestead” means the dwelling and so much of the land surrounding it as is reasonably necessary for use of the dwelling as a home, but not less than one-fourth acre, if available, and not exceeding 40 acres.

(b) Any amendment of a homestead statute shall not affect liens of creditors attaching nor rights of devisees or heirs of persons dying before the effective date of the amendment.

(14) HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION. “Exempt homestead” means the dwelling, including a building, condominium, mobile home, manufactured home, house trailer or cooperative or an unincorporated cooperative association, and so much of the land surrounding it as is reasonably necessary for its use as a home, but not less than 0.25 acre, if available, and not exceeding 40 acres, within the limitation as to value under s. 815.20, except as to liens attaching or rights of devisees or heirs of persons dying before the effective date of any increase of that limitation as to value.

(15) INHABITANT. “Inhabitant” means a resident.

(17) ISSUE. “Issue,” as applied to descent of estate, includes all the lawful descendants of the ancestor.

(17m) JUDGE. “Judge” does not include a municipal judge, except as provided in ch. 755.

(18) LAND. “Land” includes lands, tenements and hereditaments and all rights thereto and interests therein.

(19) LEGACY, LEGATEE. “Legacy” includes a devise; “legatee” includes a devisee.

(19g) LICENSED PRACTICAL NURSE. “Licensed practical nurse” includes a licensed practical/vocational nurse who holds a multistate license, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (h), issued in a party state, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (k).

(19l) LIVE BIRTH. (a) In this subsection, “breathe” means draws air into and expels it out of the lungs one or more times.

(b) “Live birth” means the complete expulsion or extraction from his or her mother, of a human being, at any stage of development, who, after the expulsion or extraction, breathes or has a beating heart, pulsation of the umbilical cord, or definite movement of voluntary muscles, regardless of whether the umbilical cord has been cut, and regardless of whether the expulsion or extraction occurs as a result of natural or induced labor, a cesarean section, or an abortion, as defined in s. 253.10 (2) (a).

(19m) MARITAL CHILD. “Marital child” means either of the following:

(a) A child who is conceived or born while his or her parents are lawfully intermarried.

(b) A nonmarital child who is adopted or whose parents subsequently intermarry under s. 767.803.

(20) MINOR. “Minor” means a person who has not attained the age of 18 years, except that for purposes of investigating or prosecuting a person who is alleged to have violated a state or federal criminal law or any civil law or municipal ordinance, “minor” does not include a person who has attained the age of 17 years.

(21) MONTH. “Month” means a calendar month unless otherwise expressed.

(22) MUNICIPALITY. “Municipality” includes cities and villages; it may be construed to include townships.

(23) NIGHTTIME. “Nighttime,” used in any statute, ordinance, indictment or information, means the time between one hour after sunset on one day and one hour before sunrise on the following day; and the time of sunset and sunrise shall be ascertained according to the mean solar time of the fourtieth meridian west from Greenwich, commonly known as central time, as given in any almanac.

(23m) NONMARITAL CHILD. “Nonmarital child” means a child who is neither conceived nor born while his or her parents are lawfully intermarried, who is not adopted and whose parents do not subsequently intermarry under s. 767.803.

(23q) NURSE. “Nurse,” “nurse licensed under ch. 441,” and any reference to an individual who is licensed under ch. 441 include a registered nurse or licensed practical/vocational nurse who holds a multistate license, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (h), issued in a party state, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (k).

(24) OATH. “Oath” includes affirmation in all cases where by law an affirmation may be substituted for an oath. If any oath or affirmation is required to be taken such oath or affirmation shall be taken before and administered by some officer authorized by the laws of this state to administer oaths, at the place where the same is required to be taken or administered, unless otherwise expressly directed, and, when necessary, duly certified by such officer. If an oath is administered it shall end with the words “so help me God”. In actions and proceedings in the courts, a person may take an oath or affirmation in communication with the administering officer by telephone or audiovisual means.

(25) OFFICERS. “Officers” when applied to corporations include directors and trustees.

(25g) OPTICAL DISC. “Optical disc” means a rotating circular plate on which information or images are placed in storage, and which is recorded and read by laser beams focused on the plate.
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(25r) Optical imaging. “Optical imaging” means transferring to a format employing an optical disc.

(26) Person. “Person” includes all partnerships, associations and bodies politic or corporate.

(27) Personal property. “Personal property” includes money, goods, chattels, things in action, evidences of debt and energy.

(27m) Personal representative. “Personal representative” means a person, however denominated, who is authorized to administer a decedent’s estate.

(28) Physician, surgeon or osteopath. “Physician,” “surgeon” or “osteopath” means a person holding a license or certificate of registration from the medical examining board.

(28g) Police chief. “Police chief” or “chief of a police department” includes the chief of a department under s. 60.553, 61.66, or 62.13 (2e).

(28m) Police department. “Police department” includes a department under s. 60.553, 61.66, or 62.13 (2e).

(29) Population. “Population” means that shown by the most recent regular or special federal census.

(30) Preceding. “Preceding,” when used by way of reference to any statute section, means the section next preceding that in which the reference is made.

(30m) Promulgate. “Promulgate,” when used in connection with a rule, as defined under s. 227.01 (13), means to repeal; renumber; consolidate, renumber and amend; renumber and amend; repeal and recreate; or create.

(31) Property. “Property” includes real and personal property.

(32) Publication. “Publication” in a newspaper of any notice or other matter indicated to be for a stated number of weeks means one insertion each week, unless specifically stated to be for more than one day in each week.

(33) Qualified. “Qualified”, when applied to any person elected or appointed to office, means that such person has done those things which the person was by law required to do before entering upon the duties of the person’s office.

(34) Railroad corporation. “Railroad corporation” and “railroad company” include any person managing, maintaining, operating or in possession of a railroad, whether as owner, contractor, lessee, mortgagee, trustee, assignee or receiver.

(35) Real estate or real property. “Real estate” or “real property” includes lands, tenements and hereditaments and all rights thereto and interests therein.

(36) Recorded. If any instrument is required to be recorded by any officer or in any office it must be recorded in a suitable book kept for that purpose unless otherwise expressly directed.

(36m) Registered nurse. “Registered nurse” includes a registered nurse who holds a multistate license, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (h), issued in a party state, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (k).

(37) Seal. Except for the sealing of instruments by persons required to have and use official seals, “seal” includes the word “seal”; the letters “L S” and a scroll or other device intended to represent a seal, if any is affixed in the proper place for a seal, as well as an impression of a seal on the instrument. An instrument executed in the corporate name, by the proper officers of a corporation, under any seal is sealed even though the corporate seal is not used. If the seal of any court or public officer is required to be affixed to any paper issuing from such court or officer “seal” includes an impression of such official seal made upon the paper alone.

(38) Signature. If the signature of any person is required by law it shall always be the handwriting of such person or, if the person is unable to write, the person’s mark or the person’s name written by some other person at the person’s request and in the person’s presence, or, subject to any applicable requirements under subch. II of ch. 137, the electronic signature of the person.

(40) State. “State,” when applied to states of the United States, includes the District of Columbia, the commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the several territories organized by Congress.

(41) Sworn. “Sworn” includes “affirmed” in all cases where by law an affirmation may be substituted for an oath.

(42) Town. “Town” may be construed to include cities, villages, wards or districts.

(43) Town board. “Town board” means the town board of supervisors.

(43m) Type 1 motorcycle. “Type 1 motorcycle” is a motor vehicle as defined in s. 340.01 (32) (a).

(43r) Type 2 motorcycle. “Type 2 motorcycle” is a motor vehicle as defined in s. 340.01 (32) (b).

(44) United States. “United States” includes the District of Columbia, the states, the commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the territories organized by congress.


(46) Week. “Week” means 7 consecutive days.

(47) Will. “Will” includes codicils as well as wills.

(48) Written or in writing. “Written” or “in writing” includes any representation of words, letters, symbols or figures.

(49) Year. “Year” means a calendar year, unless otherwise expressed; “year alone” means “year of our Lord”.


Sub. (38) did not prevent the delegation of authority to sign an annexation petition on the behalf of a property owner. Town of Medary v. City of La Crosse, 88 Wis. 2d 101, 277 N.W.2d 310 (Ct. App. 1979).

A city is a municipal corporation. Under sub. (26), “person” includes all partnerships, associations and bodies politic and corporate. The general term “corporation” comprehensively should be read to include more specific types of corporations. Benson v. City of Madison, 2017 WI 65, 376 Wis. 2d 35, 897 N.W.2d 16, 15–236.

Oaths, affirmations, notaries public, and jurats are discussed. 60 Atty. Gen. 429.

990.02 Construing statutes of 1898. (1) All references to chapters or sections in the statutes of 1898 are to the chapters and sections of those statutes.

(2) If the provisions of different chapters of the statutes of 1898 conflict with or contravene each other the provisions of each chapter shall prevail as to all matters and questions growing out of such statute.

(3) If conflicting provisions are found in different sections of the same chapter of the statutes of 1898 the provision of the section which is last in numerical order shall prevail unless such construction is inconsistent with the meaning of such chapter.

History: 1979 c. 89.

990.03 Effect of repeals. (1) No law made by a subsequent act of the legislature is revived or affected by the repeal of such repealing act.

(2) The repeal of a curative or validating law does not impair or affect any cure or validation previously effected thereby.

(3) No section, subsection or paragraph of Wisconsin Statutes is repealed or affected by the repeal of any session law from which it was in whole or in part derived.

(4) The repeal, express or implied, of any law already repealed, expressly or by implication, does not constitute or supply a declaration or implication that such law was in force or was valid for any purpose at any time subsequent to such prior repeal.

990.04 Actions pending not defeated by repeal of statute. The repeal of a statute hereafter shall not remit, defeat or impair any civil or criminal liability for offenses committed, penalties or forfeitures incurred or rights of action accrued under such...
statute before the repeal thereof, whether or not in course of prosecution or action at the time of such repeal; but all such offenses, penalties, forfeitures and rights of action created by or founded on such statute, liability wherefor shall have been incurred before the time of such repeal thereof, shall be preserved and remain in force notwithstanding such repeal, unless specially and expressly remitted, abrogated or done away with by the repealing statute. And criminal prosecutions and actions at law or in equity founded upon such repealed statute, whether instituted before or after the repeal thereof, shall not be defeated or impaired by such repeal but upon such repealed statute continued in full force to the time of final judgment thereon, unless the offenses, penalties, forfeitures or rights of action on which such prosecutions or actions shall be founded shall be specially and expressly remitted, abrogated or done away with by such repealing statute.

This section also applies to statutes that are amended after the commission of an alleged criminal act although before trial. Truesdale v. State, 60 Wis. 2d 481, 210 N.W.2d 726 (1973).

Absent legislative intent to the contrary, repeal of a statute governing appeals of tax assessments did not affect a taxpayer whose right to appeal under the statute accrued prior to its repeal. Jackson County Iron Co. v. Musoll, 134 Wis. 2d 95, 396 N.W.2d 323 (1986).

This section provides that although the state need not have commenced a prosecution at the time of the repeal, it is necessary that by the time of the repeal, the offender has committed the offense and thereby become subject to the penalty for the offense. A defendant has not committed an offense unless all the elements of that crime have been met. Thus, he or she incurs no penalties until that time. State v. Thums, 2006 WI App 173, 295 Wis. 2d 664, 721 N.W.2d 729, 05–2682.

Citing Waddell v. Mamut, 271 Wis. 176, 181, (1955), the court held that this section applies to a fully accrued right, not to a merely inchoate right that could ripen into a right preserved by the statute only upon the happening of a further event. Trinity Petroleum, Inc. v. Scott Oil Company, Inc. 2006 WI App 219, 296 Wis. 2d 666, 724 N.W. 2d 259, 05–2837.

Reversed on other grounds. (See footnote 35.) 2007 WI 88, 302 Wis. 2d 299, 735 N.W.2d 1, 05–2837.

A law is retroactive if it takes away or impairs vested rights acquired under existing laws or creates a new obligation, imposes a new duty, or attaches a new disability in respect to transactions or considerations already past. A statute does not operate retroactively simply because it is applied in a case arising from conduct antedating the statute’s enactment or upsets expectations based on prior law. The mere expectation of a future benefit or contingent interest does not create a vested right. In this case, because the appellant did not have a vested right to the interest rate that applied in s. 807.01 (4) before that statute was amended, this section was not implicated. Lands’ End, Inc. v. City of Dodgeville, 2016 WI 64, 370 Wis. 2d 500, 881 N.W.2d 702, 15–0179.

990.06 Repeal or change of law limiting time for bringing actions. In any case when a limitation or period of time prescribed in any act which shall be repealed for the acquiring of any right, or barring of any remedy, or for any other purpose shall have begun to run before such repeal and the repealing act shall provide any limitation or period of time for such purpose, such latter limitation or period shall apply only to such rights or remedies as shall accrue subsequently to the time when the repealing act shall take effect, and the act repealed shall be held to continue in force and be operative to determine all such limitations and periods of time which shall have previously begun to run unless such repealing act shall otherwise expressly provide.

Generally, legislation is presumptively prospective unless statutory language reveals an intent that the statute apply retroactively. Procedural or remedial, rather than substantive, statutes are generally given retroactive effect unless contracts would be impaired or vested rights disturbed. Statutes of limitations are substantive. Betthauser v. Medical Protective Co. 172 Wis. 2d 141, 493 N.W.2d 40 (1992).

When a statute of limitations is replaced or amended, a cause of action that has accrued prior to the effective date of the new statute or amendment is governed by the prior statute, unless the legislature specifies otherwise. A cause of action that has not accrued prior to the effective date of the new statute or amendment is governed by the new language, unless otherwise specified. State v. Hamilton, 2002 WI App 89, 253 Wis. 2d 805, 644 N.W.2d 243, 05–1014.


990.07 Evidence. The Wisconsin statutes as prepared under s. 35.18 shall be prima facie evidence in all courts and proceedings as provided by s. 889.01; but they shall not preclude reference to, nor control, in case of any discrepancy, any original act of the legislature; and the certified volumes of the Laws of Wisconsin provided for by s. 35.15 shall also and in the same degree be prima facie evidence in all courts and proceedings.

History: 1981 c. 372 s. 8; Stats. 1981 s. 990.08; 1983 a. 192 s. 287; Stats. 1983 s. 990.07; 1991 a. 39.

990.08 Citation of supreme court rules. When a supreme court rule is cited within the statutes, the reference shall be to the SCR number, such as “words and phrases specified in SCR 99.02”.

History: 1983 a. 192.