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) STATUTE TITLES AND HISTORY NOTES. The titles to subchapters, sections, subsections, paragraphs and subdivisions of the statutes and history notes are not part of the statutes.

(6) CONSTRUCTION OF REVISED STATUTES. A revised statute is to be understood in the same sense as the original unless the change in language indicates a different meaning so clearly as to preclude judicial construction. If the revision bill contains a note which says that the meaning of the statute to which the note relates is to be understood in the same sense as the original unless the revision bill contains a note which says that the meaning of the statute to which the note relates is not changed by the revision, the note is indicative of the legislative intent.

(7) JOINT AUTHORITY, HOW EXERCISED. All words purporting to give a joint authority to 3 or more public officers or other persons shall be construed as giving such authority to a majority of such officers or other persons.

(8) LIABILITY. (a) If a statute requires an act to be done which may legally be done by an agent, such requirement includes all such acts when done by an authorized agent.

(b) When an act is permitted to be done by the use of the postal service, and the last day within the time prescribed by law for performing such act falls on a legal public holiday under federal law, or other holiday designated by the president such that the postal service does not receive registered mail or make regular deliveries on that day, the day shall be considered a legal holiday for purposes of this section.

(c) “Legal holiday” as used in this section means any statewide legal holiday provided in s. 995.20. When an act is permitted to be done by the use of the postal service, and the last day within the time prescribed by law for performing such act falls on a legal public holiday under federal law, or other holiday designated by the president such that the postal service does not receive registered mail or make regular deliveries on that day, the day shall be considered a legal holiday for purposes of this section.

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(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.

(12) Time. When time is referred to, the standard of time as provided by s. 175.09 or 175.095, whichever is applicable, is meant.

(13) REGISTERED AND CERTIFIED MAIL. Except in s. 345.09, whenever the statutes authorize or require the use of registered mail, and do not require a return receipt of the addressee only, certified mail may be used if a sender’s receipt is obtained from the postal authorities and return receipt is requested. If a return receipt signed by addressee only is required, registered mail must be used.

(14) STATUTORY REFERENCE TO NUMERICAL SERIES. If a statute refers to a numerical series such as 1 to 10, the reference includes both the first and last number mentioned.

(15) STATUTORY REFERENCE TO A CLASS OF CITY. If a statute refers to a class of city specified under s. 62.05 (1), such reference
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A statute or rule refers to a live birth or to the circumstance in which an individual is born alive, the statute or rule shall be construed so that who ever undergoes a live birth as the result of an abortion, as defined in s. 253.10 (2) (a), has the same legal status and legal rights as a human being at any point after the human being undergoes a live birth as the result of natural or induced labor or a cesarean section.

(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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**Figure: 990.001 (16)**

Diagram showing degrees of kinship:

- Person Deceased
- Grandchildren
- Great Grandchildren
- Nieces, Nephews, Nieces
- Grand Nieces, Nephews
- Great-Grand Nieces, Nephews
- First Cousins Once Removed
- First Cousins Twice Removed
- First Cousins Thrice Removed
- Parents
- Brothers, Sisters
- Children
- Each Succeeding Generation Adds One Degree

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(17) **LIVE BIRTH OR CIRCUMSTANCE OF BEING BORN ALIVE.** (a) An individual who undergoes a live birth is born alive.

(b) If a statute or rule refers to a live birth or to the circumstance in which an individual is born alive, the statute or rule shall be construed so that whoever undergoes a live birth as the result of an abortion, as defined in s. 253.10 (2) (a), has the same legal status and legal rights as a human being at any point after the human being undergoes a live birth as the result of natural or induced labor or a cesarean section.

(c) Paragraphs (a) and (b) may not be construed to affirm, deny, expand, or contract a legal status or legal right that is applicable to a human being at any point before the human being undergoes a live birth.


**NOTE:** Chapter 89, laws of 1979, which created sub. (5) (b), contains a prefatory note by the legislative council that includes a discussion on cross-references.

**Cross-reference:** As to sub. (4), see s. 801.15 for exception as to computation of time. Also see s. 985.09 (2).

Unless a statute is so vague and uncertain that it is impossible to execute it or to ascertain the legislative intent with reasonable certainty, it is valid. Forest Home Dodge, Inc. v. Karm's, 29 Wis. 2d 78, 138 N.W.2d 214 (1965).

When the legislature enacts a statute, which through clerical error, refers to, and by its terms amends, a preexisting statute that had earlier in the same legislative session been renumbered, and there is no issue as to the legislative intent and no doubt that correcting the clerical error in numbering is the only means of having the statute serve the purpose intended, a court is duty bound to rectify the error and substitute the right number for the wrong number used in the statute. State ex rel. Gutbrod v. Wolke, 49 Wis. 2d 736, 183 N.W.2d 161 (1971).

The general rule is that a specific penalty prescribed by a special statute for a particular offense takes precedence over a general provision in a penal code. State ex rel. Gutbrod v. Wolke, 49 Wis. 2d 736, 183 N.W.2d 161 (1971).

If a statute imposes a punishment for the commission of an act, that is sufficient to make the act a crime. State ex rel. Gutbrod v. Wolke, 49 Wis. 2d 736, 183 N.W.2d 161 (1971).

Statutory construction requires that a law be construed so that no word or clause is surplusage. Johnson v. State, 76 Wis. 2d 672, 251 N.W.2d 834 (1977).

When a limitation period would otherwise expire on a legal holiday, s. 990.001 (4) (b) permits commencement of the action on the next secular day. Cusimone v. Sattler, 88 Wis. 2d 654, 277 N.W.2d 776 (1979).

When a statute is written in objective terms not susceptible to more than one meaning, the subjective intent of lawmakers is not controlling. State v. Derenne, 102 Wis. 2d 38, 306 N.W.2d 12 (1981).

A sender's receipt need not be postmarked. Trojan v. Board of Regents, 104 Wis. 2d 277, 311 N.W.2d 586 (1981).

Registered mail serves the purpose of certified mail to an even greater degree. Patterson v. Board of Regents, 103 Wis. 2d 538, 309 N.W.2d 3 (Ct. App. 1981).

A court may consider titles of statutes to resolve doubt as to statutory meaning. In Interest of C.D.M. 125 Wis. 2d 170, 370 N.W.2d 287 (Ct. App. 1985).

A reference to a general federal law as amended necessarily references current federal law when the act named in the state statute had been repealed and the law rewritten in another act. When a reference is stated as part of a contingency, it does not constitute unlawful delegation of legislative authority to the U.S. Congress. Dane County Hospital & Home v. LIRC, 125 Wis. 2d 308, 371 N.W.2d 815 (Ct. App. 1985).
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990.01 Construction of laws; words and phrases.

In the construction of Wisconsin laws the words and phrases follow shall be construed as indicated unless such construction would produce a result inconsistent with the manifest intent of the legislature:

(1) GENERAL RULE. All words and phrases shall be construed according to common and approved usage; but technical words and phrases and others that have a peculiar meaning in the law shall be construed accordingly to such meaning.

(2) ACQUIRE. “Acquire,” when used in connection with a grant or other conveyance, means “to take title to; to acquire by purchase.”
(3) **ADULT.** “Adult” means a person who has attained the age of 18 years, except that for purposes of investigating or prosecuting a person who is alleged to have violated any state or federal criminal law or any civil law or municipal ordinance, “adult” means a person who has attained the age of 17 years.

(4) **BEQUEST AND BEQUEATH.** “Bequest” includes a devise; “bequeath” includes devise.

(5) **CHIROPRACTOR.** “Chiropractor” means a person holding a license issued by the chiropractic examining 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 pavements 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 deed; and “grantee” includes every person to whom any such estate or interest passes in like manner.

(11) **HEREFORTH AND HEREFOR.** “Herefory” means any time previous to the day on which the statute containing it takes effect; “hereforth” means the time after the statute containing such words 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 prior to 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 multi−state license, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (h), issued in a party state, as defined in s. 441.51 (2) (k).

(19f) **LIVE BIRTH.** (a) In this subsection, “breathes” 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 married.

(b) A nonmarital child who is adopted or whose parents subsequently marry 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 any 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 towns.

(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 tenth 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 married, who is not adopted and whose parents do not subsequently marry under s. 767.803.

(23g) **NURSE.** “Nurse,” “nurse licensed under ch. 441,” and any reference to an individual who is licensed under ch. 441 includes 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.

(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).

(28r) Police officer. “Police officer” includes a person serving 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; rename; 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 each in 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. This subsection does not affect any law relating to signatures.

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


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 the subject matter of such chapter.

(3) If conflicting provisions are found in different sections of the same chapter of the statutes of 1898 the provisions 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 repealed 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.
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(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 wherefore 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 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. Truedale 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’s right to appeal under the statute accrued prior to its repeal. Jackson County Iron Co. v. Musolf, 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, 05−2837.

Citing Waddell v. Mamin, 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.

990.06 Repeal or change of law limiting time for bringing actions. In any case where 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. Beithauser 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, 01−1014.


990.07 Evidence. The Wisconsin statutes as prepared under s. 51.18 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.