How to unpack regs

(U.S. EDITION)



Take a holistic view

Read everything! You might be tempted to gloss over a section or two, but every word has a purpose.

Familiarize yourself with defined terms and apply the common law meaning to the rest.

Look at the footnotes, cross-references, and annotations.

Note how punctuation and formatting help convey meaning.

For revisions, confirm how changes are shown (brackets, underlines, italics, bold—everyone does it differently).

Regulations are part of a set (a.k.a. a "code"), so check surrounding code sections for context.

Clarify questions by looking at the regulation in its entirety.

Small words. Big impact.

Regulations can be wordy, but the shortest matter most. Read them carefully—they shape the meaning of each section.

And
including, all conditions are required

Or
choice, alternative, either or both

Shall (shall not)
obligation, compulsory (or lack thereof)

Must
mandatory, antithesis to "may"

May (may not)
permission, ability but not required (or lack thereof)

Except
but for, only for, not including

Unless
if not, supposing not

If
condition precedent

Each
every cited item, separately considered

Every
each one of all, regarded one-by-one

Only
solely, merely, of or by itself

Any
one of many, indefinite number

All
collectively, entire quantity, each one of

Don't overthink it!

Take the rule at face value
Don't make assumptions about what a rule might mean or fill in any gaps you think might be there.

Followers decide the meaning
How a rule is understood by the people it affects is what matters. Interpret it from their perspective.

Consider common, everyday definitions
Unless terms are explicitly defined, think about how you'd use the word in a normal conversation.

Unclear rules favor you
If it's confusing, the interpretation that benefits the person being regulated is usually what is used.

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