

PRESENTED AT

2023 Robert O. Dawson
Conference on Criminal Appeals

May 1-3, 2024
Austin, Texas

**Findings of Fact:
Critical, Underused Advocacy Tool**

Catherine Greene Burnett

Catherine Greene Burnett
South Texas College of Law
Houston, Texas

cburnett@stcl.edu

712.646.1831

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| I. Introduction | 4 |
| A. Words of Thanks | 4 |
| B. Paper’s Goals | 4 |
| II. STANDARDS OF REVIEW | 4 |
| A. The Standards of Review / Deference Continuum | 5 |
| B. Why Differing Standards Exist | 5 |
| C. De Novo Review | 5 |
| 1. Examples – Purely Legal Questions | 5 |
| 2. The “Mixed Question” Muddle | 6 |
| D. Reasonableness Review | 8 |
| E. Abuse of Discretion Review | 8 |
| III. STRUCTURAL AND HARMLESS ERROR ANALYSIS | 9 |
| A. Structural Error | 9 |
| B. TRAP 44.2: The Critical Framework | 9 |
| 1. Constitutional Error Required for Reversal: Tex. R. App. Pro. 44.2 provides: | 9 |
| 2. Harm Analysis | 10 |
| 3. Non-Constitutional Error Under TRAP 44.2(b) | 10 |
| IV. FINDINGS OF FACT -- IN THE TRIAL COURT | 11 |
| A. Appellate Review in Absence of Findings of Fact | 12 |
| B. Contrast with Civil Trial and Appellate Litigation | 12 |
| C. When Required in Criminal Trial and Appellate Litigation | 12 |
| 1. Confessions | 12 |
| 2. Motions to Suppress | 12 |
| V. FINDINGS OF FACT – IN WRIT PRACTICE | 13 |
| A. Resolving Fact-Based Allegations: Some Foundational Considerations | 13 |
| B. Process Considerations: Introducing Facts on Collateral Review | 13 |
| a. Methods for Fact Gathering at the Trial Court | 13 |
| b. Article 11.07 Variations | 14 |
| c. Article 11.072 Variations | 14 |
| C. Strategic Considerations | 15 |
| a. Short Term, Mid-Range and Long Term Uses for Findings of Fact in Article 11.07 Litigation | 15 |

| | | |
|-------|---|----|
| b. | When Findings of Fact Are Mission Critical in Habeas Litigation | 15 |
| D. | When Findings of Fact May Not Be Necessary | 16 |
| E. | How to Create “Space” For Their Consideration | 17 |
| 1. | Within 180-day window | 17 |
| 2. | Beyond the 180-day window | 18 |
| VI. | CHAPTER 64 MOTIONS | 18 |
| VII. | TECHNIQUES FOR DRAFTING PROPOSED FINDINGS OF FACT | 18 |
| A. | When to Begin Drafting | 19 |
| 1. | Trial and Direct Appeal | 19 |
| 2. | Post-Conviction Habeas | 20 |
| a. | Relationship to ODI [Order Designating Issues] | 20 |
| B. | Objecting to Unfavorable Findings | 20 |
| 1. | Possible Grounds | 20 |
| 2. | Procedure in Habeas Litigation | 20 |
| a. | Article 11.07 | 20 |
| b. | Article 11.072 | 21 |
| C. | Writing Tips, Techniques, and Suggestions | 21 |
| 1. | Create Checklist..... | 21 |
| 2. | Use Headings | 23 |
| 3. | Number Each Proposed Fact | 23 |
| 4. | Follow the “One Fact per Number” Rule | 23 |
| 5. | Support Each Fact with Cite | 24 |
| 6. | Write Persuasively..... | 24 |
| VIII. | CONCLUSIONS OF LAW | 25 |
| A. | Pre-trial Motions to Suppress..... | 25 |
| B. | Article 11.07 Habeas..... | 25 |
| C. | Article 11.072 Habeas..... | 25 |

I. Introduction

So much of what we do derives from the work of others and so this paper must begin with an acknowledgement of their work and our appreciation for those contributions to our understanding. This paper is not designed to be an academic treatise. It's goal is to serve as a guide -- a skills-focused paper addressing "why" and "how to" when approaching findings of fact as a criminal law practitioner. It is not lengthy. Findings of Fact occupy a niche in the larger topics of (1) pretrial motion practice and (2) appellate/habeas litigation and effective advocacy. However, its concepts are no less important due to that niche designation or this paper's brevity.

A. Words of Thanks

In the practice of law, we stand on the shoulders of those coming before us. We attempt to build on their work. We labor to expand on the concepts and theories with which they inspired and intrigued us. This is no less true in the CLE world. So this short paper must start with thanks to Georgetown University Law Center's Writing Center, the Office of the State Prosecuting Attorney, past staff attorneys at the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals Michael Stauffacher and Michael Falkenberg, Baldwin Chin, Andrea Jacobs, David Keltner, Robert Dubose, and Laurie Ratliff (for tips from the civil side).

B. Paper's Goals

The underlying premise of this paper: attorney-drafted findings of fact are an undervalued and underused tool in appellate and habeas advocacy.

This paper is designed as a persuasive piece set against a backdrop of applicable statutes and relevant case law. It is intended for use equally by defenders and state's attorneys. By its end, the user should be able to answer two foundational questions:

- **Why should the advocate bother with drafting findings of fact**
 - Short term, mid-range and long term uses for findings of fact
 - When findings of fact are mission critical in direct appeals and in habeas litigation
 - How to create "space" for their consideration
- **What are the best techniques for drafting findings of fact**
 - When to begin the drafting process
 - Relationship to underlying pretrial motions on direct appeal and ODI [Order Designating Issues] on collateral attack
 - Adapting and amending fact findings
 - Objecting to Unfavorable Findings
 - Writing tips

II. STANDARDS OF REVIEW

"How will the reviewing court consider and adjudicate our claim?" This is a foundational issue in pretrial motion practice and also for appellate review and post-conviction challenges. Despite its critical nature, careful consideration of the standard of review that appellate courts will use is often skipped over in the rush to reach case specific considerations.

The skillful advocate should take a hard pause and undertake a decision analysis that asks:

- 1) What is the viable legal issue for appeal or collateral attack
- 2) How does it need to be supported **factually**
- 3) Is there a need for specific fact findings to be made at the trial court level
- 4) If so, who should draft them and when

At its most basic level, the standard of review defines how much deference will be given to the proceedings below. Standards of review exist on a continuum. While often left unstated by appellate players, identifying the correct standard of review can be *the* determinate for success.

A. The Standards of Review / Deference Continuum

| Degree of Deference | No Deference | Deference | More Deference | Great Deference | Total Deference |
|---|------------------|---------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Standard of Review | De Novo | Reasonableness [Substantial Evidence] | Abuse of Discretion | Clearly Erroneous | No Review |
| Application Example in Criminal Cases Generally | Questions of Law | Jury's Verdict | Credibility Determination; Many Evidentiary Rulings | Questions of Fact [Supported] | Decision not to Prosecute |

B. Why Differing Standards Exist

In a multi-tiered judicial system, appellate courts have a somewhat limited function. They primarily serve to correct legal errors and develop the jurisprudence of an area of law. Even that description is an oversimplification, for the higher the court, the less emphasis is placed on individual case error correction. In contrast, trial court judges resolve contested factual disputes and make credibility determinations regarding the witnesses appearing before them. Consider the standards of review as a general summary of these discrete institutional roles and the relationship between the courts at each level.

C. De Novo Review

Questions of law are reviewed de novo; the trial court's assessment of purely legal questions is given **no deference** by the appellate court.

1. Examples – Purely Legal Questions

- *Question of constitutional interpretation:*

Find the full text of this and thousands of other resources from leading experts in dozens of legal practice areas in the [UT Law CLE eLibrary \(utcle.org/elibrary\)](https://utcle.org/elibrary)

Title search: Findings of Fact: Critical, Underused Advocacy Tool

Also available as part of the eCourse

[2024 Robert O. Dawson eConference on Criminal Appeals](#)

First appeared as part of the conference materials for the
2024 Robert O. Dawson Conference on Criminal Appeals session
"Drafting Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law"