

ARTICLE IV. RELEVANCE AND ITS LIMITS

Rule 401. TEST FOR RELEVANT EVIDENCE

Evidence is relevant if:

(a) it has any tendency to make a fact more or less probable than it would be without the evidence; and

(b) the fact is of consequence in determining the action.

(Enacted Jan. 2, 1975; as restyled Apr. 26, 2011, eff. Dec. 1, 2011.)

NOTE BY FEDERAL JUDICIAL CENTER

The rule enacted by the Congress is the rule prescribed by the Supreme Court without change.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE'S NOTE

Problems of relevancy call for an answer to the question whether an item of evidence, when tested by the processes of legal reasoning, possesses sufficient probative value to justify receiving it in evidence. Thus, assessment of the probative value of evidence that a person purchased a revolver shortly prior to a fatal shooting with which he is charged is a matter of analysis and reasoning.

The variety of relevancy problems is coextensive with the ingenuity of counsel in using circumstantial evidence as a means of proof. An enormous number of cases fall in no set pattern, and this rule is designed as a guide for handling them. On the other hand, some situations recur with sufficient frequency to create patterns susceptible of treatment by specific rules. Rule 404 and those following it are of that variety; they also serve as illustrations of the application of the present rule as limited by the exclusionary principles of Rule 403.

Passing mention should be made of so-called "conditional" relevancy. MORGAN, BASIC PROBLEMS OF EVIDENCE 45-46 (1962). In this situation, probative value depends not only upon satisfying the basic requirement of relevancy as described above but also upon the existence of some matter of fact. For example, if evidence of a spoken statement is relied upon to prove notice, probative value is lacking unless the person sought to be charged heard the statement.

The problem is one of fact, and the only rules needed are for the purpose of determining the respective functions of judge and jury. See Rules 104(b) and 901. The discussion which follows in the present note is concerned with relevancy generally, not with any particular problem of conditional relevancy.

Relevancy is not an inherent characteristic of any item of evidence but exists only as a relation between an item of evidence and a matter properly provable in the case. Does the item of evidence tend to prove the matter sought to be proved? Whether the relationship exists depends upon principles evolved by experience or science, applied logically to the situation at hand. James, *Relevancy, Probability and the Law*, 29 CALIF. L. REV. 689, 696 n.15 (1941), in *SELECTED WRITINGS ON EVIDENCE AND TRIAL* 610, 615 n.15 (Fryer ed., 1957). The rule summarizes this relationship as a "tendency to make the existence" of the fact to be proved "more probable or less probable." Compare Uniform Rule 1(2) which states the crux of relevancy as "a tendency in reason," thus perhaps emphasizing unduly the logical process and ignoring the need to draw upon experience or science to validate the general principle upon which relevancy in a particular situation depends.

The standard of probability under the rule is "more . . . probable than it would be without the evidence." Any more stringent requirement is unworkable and unrealistic. As MCCORMICK § 152, at 317, says, "A brick is not a wall," or, as Falknor, *Extrinsic Policies Affecting Admissibility*, 10 RUTGERS L. REV. 574, 576 (1956), quotes Professor McBaine, "[I]t is not to be supposed that every witness can make a home run." Dealing with probability in the language of the rule has the added virtue of avoiding confusion between questions of admissibility and questions of the sufficiency of the evidence.

The rule uses the phrase "fact that is of consequence to the determination of the action" to describe the kind of fact to which proof may properly be directed. The language is that of California Evidence Code § 210; it has the advantage of avoiding the loosely used and ambiguous word "material." *Tentative Recommendation and a Study Relating to the Uniform Rules of Evidence* (Article I, General Provisions), in CAL. LAW REVISION COMM'N, REP., REC. & STUDIES 10-11 (1964). The fact to be proved may be ultimate, intermediate, or evidentiary; it matters not, so long as it is of consequence in the determination of the action. Compare Uniform Rule 1(2) which requires that the evidence relate to a "material" fact.

The fact to which the evidence is directed need not be in dispute. While situations will arise which call for the exclusion of

evidence offered to prove a point conceded by the opponent, the ruling should be made on the basis of such considerations as waste of time and undue prejudice (see Rule 403), rather than under any general requirement that evidence is admissible only if directed to matters in dispute. Evidence which is essentially background in nature can scarcely be said to involve disputed matter, yet it is universally offered and admitted as an aid to understanding. Charts, photographs, views of real estate, murder weapons, and many other items of evidence fall in this category. A rule limiting admissibility to evidence directed to a controversial point would invite the exclusion of this helpful evidence, or at least the raising of endless questions over its admission. *Cf.* CAL. EVID. CODE § 210 (defining relevant evidence in terms of tendency to prove a disputed fact).

Rule 402. GENERAL ADMISSIBILITY OF RELEVANT EVIDENCE

Relevant evidence is admissible unless any of the following provides otherwise:

- the United States Constitution;
- a federal statute;
- these rules; or
- other rules prescribed by the Supreme Court.

Irrelevant evidence is not admissible.

(Enacted Jan. 2, 1975; as restyled Apr. 26, 2011, eff. Dec. 1, 2011.)

NOTE BY FEDERAL JUDICIAL CENTER

The rule enacted by the Congress is the rule prescribed by the Supreme Court, with the first sentence amended by substituting "prescribed" in place of "adopted," and by adding at the end thereof the phrase "pursuant to statutory authority."

ADVISORY COMMITTEE'S NOTE

The provisions that all relevant evidence is admissible, with certain exceptions, and that evidence which is not relevant is not admissible are "a presupposition involved in the very conception of

a rational system of evidence." THAYER, PRELIMINARY TREATISE ON EVIDENCE 264 (1898). They constitute the foundation upon which the structure of admission and exclusion rests. For similar provisions see California Evidence Code §§ 350, 351. Provisions that all relevant evidence is admissible are found in Uniform Rule 7(f); Kansas Statutes Annotated § 60-407(f); and New Jersey Evidence Rule 7(f) (repealed and replaced by New Jersey Rule of Evidence 402 (1993)); but the exclusion of evidence which is not relevant is left to implication.

Not all relevant evidence is admissible. The exclusion of relevant evidence occurs in a variety of situations and may be called for by these rules, by the Rules of Civil and Criminal Procedure, by Bankruptcy Rules, by Act of Congress, or by constitutional considerations.

Succeeding rules in the present article, in response to the demands of particular policies, require the exclusion of evidence despite its relevancy. In addition, Article V recognizes a number of privileges; Article VI imposes limitations upon witnesses and the manner of dealing with them; Article VII specifies requirements with respect to opinions and expert testimony; Article VIII excludes hearsay not falling within an exception; Article IX spells out the handling of authentication and identification; and Article X restricts the manner of proving the contents of writings and recordings.

The Rules of Civil and Criminal Procedure in some instances require the exclusion of relevant evidence. For example, Rules 30(b) and [32(a)(4)] of the Rules of Civil Procedure, by imposing requirements of notice and unavailability of the deponent, place limits on the use of relevant depositions. Similarly, Rule 15 of the Rules of Criminal Procedure restricts the use of depositions in criminal cases, even though relevant. And the effective enforcement of the command, originally statutory and now found in Rule 5(a) of the Rules of Criminal Procedure, that an arrested person be taken without unnecessary delay before a commissioner or other similar officer is held to require the exclusion of statements elicited during detention in violation thereof. *Mallory v. United States*, 354 U.S. 449 (1957); 18 U.S.C. § 3501(c).

While congressional enactments in the field of evidence have generally tended to expand admissibility beyond the scope of the common law rules, in some particular situations they have restricted the admissibility of relevant evidence. Most of this legislation has consisted of the formulation of a privilege or of a prohibition against disclosure. 8 U.S.C. § 1202(f) (records of refusal of visas or permits to enter United States confidential, subject to discretion of Secretary of State to make available to court upon

certification of need); 10 U.S.C. § [1041] (replacement certificate of honorable discharge from Army not admissible in evidence); [*id.*] (same as to Air Force); 11 U.S.C. § 25(a)(10) (repealed 1978) (testimony given by bankrupt on his examination not admissible in criminal proceedings against him, except that given in hearing upon objection to discharge); 11 U.S.C. § 205(a) (railroad reorganization petition, if dismissed, not admissible in evidence); 11 U.S.C. § 403(a) (list of creditors filed with municipal composition plan not an admission); 13 U.S.C. § 9(a) (census information confidential, retained copies of reports privileged); 47 U.S.C. § 605 (interception and divulgence of wire or radio communications prohibited unless authorized by sender). These statutory provisions would remain undisturbed by the rules.

The rule recognizes but makes no attempt to spell out the constitutional considerations which impose basic limitations upon the admissibility of relevant evidence. Examples are evidence obtained by unlawful search and seizure, *Weeks v. United States*, 232 U.S. 383 (1914); *Katz v. United States*, 389 U.S. 347 (1967); incriminating statement elicited from an accused in violation of right to counsel, *Massiah v. United States*, 377 U.S. 201 (1964).

REPORT OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

Rule 402 as submitted to the Congress contained the phrase “or by other rules adopted by the Supreme Court.” To accommodate the view that the Congress should not appear to acquiesce in the Court’s judgment that it has authority under the existing Rules Enabling Acts to promulgate Rules of Evidence, the Committee amended the above phrase to read “or by other rules prescribed by the Supreme Court pursuant to statutory authority” in this and other rules where the reference appears.¹

Rule 403. EXCLUDING RELEVANT EVIDENCE FOR PREJUDICE, CONFUSION, WASTE OF TIME, OR OTHER REASONS

The court may exclude relevant evidence if its probative value is substantially outweighed by a danger of one or more of the following: unfair prejudice, confusing the issues, misleading the jury, undue delay, wasting time, or needlessly presenting cumulative evidence.

(Enacted Jan. 2, 1975; as restyled Apr. 26, 2011, eff. Dec. 1, 2011.)

¹ [The 2011 restyling project undid this change without explanation. See pages 392 to 393 below.—GF]

NOTE BY FEDERAL JUDICIAL CENTER

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ADVISORY COMMITTEE'S NOTE

The case law recognizes that certain circumstances call for the exclusion of evidence which is of unquestioned relevance. These circumstances entail risks which range all the way from inducing decision on a purely emotional basis, at one extreme, to nothing more harmful than merely wasting time, at the other extreme. Situations in this area call for balancing the probative value of and need for the evidence against the harm likely to result from its admission. Slough, *Relevancy Unraveled*, 5 U. KAN. L. REV. 1, 12–15 (1956); Trautman, *Logical or Legal Relevancy—A Conflict in Theory*, 5 VAND. L. REV. 385, 392 (1952); MCCORMICK § 152, at 319–21. The rules which follow in this Article are concrete applications evolved for particular situations. However, they reflect the policies underlying the present rule, which is designed as a guide for the handling of situations for which no specific rules have been formulated.

Exclusion for risk of unfair prejudice, confusion of issues, misleading the jury, or waste of time all find ample support in the authorities. "Unfair prejudice" within its context means an undue tendency to suggest decision on an improper basis, commonly, though not necessarily, an emotional one.

The rule does not enumerate surprise as a ground for exclusion, in this respect following Wigmore's view of the common law. 6 WIGMORE § 1849; cf. MCCORMICK § 152, at 320 n.29 (listing unfair surprise as a ground for exclusion but stating that it is usually "coupled with the danger of prejudice and confusion of issues."). While Uniform Rule 45 incorporates surprise as a ground and is followed in Kansas Statutes Annotated § 60-445, surprise is not included in California Evidence Code § 352 or New Jersey Evidence Rule 4 (repealed and replaced by New Jersey Rule of Evidence 403 (1993)), though both the latter otherwise substantially embody Uniform Rule 45. While it can scarcely be doubted that claims of unfair surprise may still be justified despite procedural requirements of notice and instrumentalities of discovery, the granting of a continuance is a more appropriate remedy than exclusion of the evidence. *Tentative Recommendation and a Study Relating to the Uniform Rules of Evidence (Article VI, Extrinsic Policies Affecting Admissibility)*, in CAL. LAW REVISION COMM'N, REP., REC. & STUDIES 612 (1964). Moreover, the impact of a rule excluding evidence on the ground of surprise would be difficult to estimate.

In reaching a decision whether to exclude on grounds of unfair prejudice, consideration should be given to the probable effectiveness or lack of effectiveness of a limiting instruction. See Rule [105] and Advisory Committee's Note thereunder. The availability of other means of proof may also be an appropriate factor.

Rule 404. CHARACTER EVIDENCE; CRIMES OR OTHER ACTS

(a) Character Evidence.

(1) *Prohibited Uses.* Evidence of a person's character or character trait is not admissible to prove that on a particular occasion the person acted in accordance with the character or trait.

(2) *Exceptions for a Defendant or Victim in a Criminal Case.* The following exceptions apply in a criminal case:

(A) a defendant may offer evidence of the defendant's pertinent trait, and if the evidence is admitted, the prosecutor may offer evidence to rebut it;

(B) subject to the limitations in Rule 412, a defendant may offer evidence of an alleged victim's pertinent trait, and if the evidence is admitted, the prosecutor may:

(i) offer evidence to rebut it; and

(ii) offer evidence of the defendant's same trait;
and

(C) in a homicide case, the prosecutor may offer evidence of the alleged victim's trait of peacefulness to rebut evidence that the victim was the first aggressor.

(3) *Exceptions for a Witness.* Evidence of a witness's character may be admitted under Rules 607, 608, and 609.