Obviousness as Fact: The Issue of Obviousness in Patent Law Should Be a Question of Fact Reviewed with Appropriate Deference

Ted L. Field
South Texas College of Law Houston, tfield@stcl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/iplj

Part of the Intellectual Property Law Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/iplj/vol27/iss3/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FLASH: The Fordham Law Archive of Scholarship and History. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fordham Intellectual Property, Media and Entertainment Law Journal by an authorized editor of FLASH: The Fordham Law Archive of Scholarship and History. For more information, please contact tmelnick@law.fordham.edu.
Obviousness as Fact: The Issue of Obviousness in Patent Law Should Be a Question of Fact Reviewed with Appropriate Deference

Cover Page Footnote
Professor of Law, South Texas College of Law Houston. J.D., summa cum laude, John Marshall Law School, 2002; M.S., Northwestern University, 1990; B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1987. The author thanks Robert Jewett for his research assistance. The author also thanks the faculty of South Texas College of Law Houston for their helpful suggestions at a faculty scholarship workshop. Finally, the author thanks Jessica Y. Field for her encouragement and support. The author welcomes comments via e-mail at tfield@stcl.edu.
Obviousness as Fact: The Issue of Obviousness in Patent Law Should Be a Question of Fact Reviewed with Appropriate Deference

Ted L. Field*

One of the most common defenses that an accused infringer raises in a patent infringement lawsuit is that the patent claims at issue are invalid for obviousness. The question of obviousness is based on several factual determinations, and the U.S. Supreme Court and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit should sensibly review these determinations with deference to the jury’s or trial court’s findings. But these courts instead treat the ultimate determination of obviousness as a question of law to be reviewed de novo. This Article challenges the correctness of this standard of review and argues that courts should treat the ultimate determination of obviousness as a question of fact reviewed with appropriate deference. The Article considers several theoretical and practical reasons that support this argument. The Article concludes: (1) based on general policy considerations concerning standards of review, obviousness should be a question of fact; (2) the precedent on which the courts have relied in determining the standard of review for obviousness does not support the conclusion that obviousness is a question of law; (3) the treatment of obviousness as a question of law is inconsistent with the Federal Circuit’s treatment of analogous issues in patent law; and (4) based on an examination of recent case law, the Federal Circuit almost always treats obviousness as a de facto question of fact even though it is a

* Professor of Law, South Texas College of Law Houston. J.D., summa cum laude, John Marshall Law School, 2002; M.S., Northwestern University, 1990; B.A., University of Illinois at Chicago, 1987. The author thanks Robert Jewett for his research assistance. The author also thanks the faculty of South Texas College of Law Houston for their helpful suggestions at a faculty scholarship workshop. Finally, the author thanks Jessica Y. Field for her encouragement and support. The author welcomes comments via e-mail at tfield@stcl.edu.
de jure question of law. Thus, this Article concludes that the Supreme Court should hold that the ultimate issue of obviousness is properly a question of fact to be reviewed with appropriate deference.

**INTRODUCTION**

I. **STANDARDS OF REVIEW AND QUESTIONS OF LAW AND FACT**

   A. The Federal Circuit’s Standards of Review
      1. De Novo
      2. Clear Error
      3. Substantial Evidence
      4. Abuse of Discretion

   B. How Courts Decide Whether an Issue Is a Question of Law Versus a Question of Fact
      1. Questions of Fact
      2. Questions of Law
      3. A Functional Approach to Determining Questions of Fact Versus Law

II. **INVALIDITY OF PATENT CLAIMS BASED UPON THE PRIOR ART**

   A. Anticipation
   B. Obviousness
   C. The Federal Circuit Classifies the Issue of Obviousness as a Question of Law Based on Underlying Facts

III. **THE ULTIMATE QUESTION OF OBVIOUSNESS SHOULD PROPERLY BE A QUESTION OF FACT AND REVIEWED BY THE FEDERAL CIRCUIT WITH DEERENCE**

   A. The Federal Circuit’s Reasoning in Panduit that the Ultimate Question of Obviousness Is a Question of Law Is Flawed
   B. The Supreme Court’s Statement in Graham that the Ultimate Question of Obviousness Is One of Law Is Not Properly Supported by Precedent
   C. Treating Obviousness as a Question of Law Is Inconsistent with How the Federal Circuit Treats Anticipation and Infringement
INTRODUCTION

Standards of review are crucially important in appeals. And the judges of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit take

1 STEPHEN ALAN CHILDRESS & MARTHA S. DAVIS, FEDERAL STANDARDS OF REVIEW ix (3d ed. 1999) (“[S]tandards of review are the essential language of appeals.”); Kelly Kunsch, Standard of Review (State and Federal): A Primer, 18 SEATTLE U. L. REV. 11, 12 (1994) (“[A]s a concept, [the standard of review] is essential to every appellate court decision. It is to the appellate court what the burden of proof is to the trial court.”); Paul R. Michel, Appellate Advocacy—One Judge’s Point of View, 1 FED. CIR. B.J. 1, 2 (1991) (“Standards of review . . . influence the disposition of appeals far more than many advocates realize.”); Peter Nicolas, De Novo Review in Deferential Robes?: A Deconstruction of the Standard of Review of Evidentiary Errors in the Federal System, 54 SYRACUSE L. REV. 531, 533 (2004) (“In federal appellate practice, the standard of review is the name of the game.”); Amanda Peters, The Meaning, Measure, and Misuse of Standards of Review, 13 LEWIS & CLARK L. REV. 233, 234 (2009) (“Standards of review play a critical role in the appellate decision-making process . . . .”); cf. FED. R. APP. P. 28(a)(8)(B) (requiring the appellant’s brief to contain “for each issue, a concise statement of the applicable standard of review”). Indeed, a standard of review “is often ‘outcome determinative,’ in the sense that the difference between victory and defeat on appeal can turn on whether the standard by which the appellate court reviews the trial court’s decision on an issue is plenary or deferential.” Nicolas, supra.

standards of review seriously. For example, according to retired Judge Paul R. Michel of the Federal Circuit, “[s]tandards of review... influence the disposition of appeals far more than many advocates realize.” Judge Michel further characterized “a clear statement [in a brief as to] why the standard of review is met or is not met” as “a likely ‘pivot point’ in deciding the appeal.” Judge Michel has noted:

[I]n all appeals, the controlling question for us is always the same: Did the trial court commit reversible error? Not just any error, but... most of all, error that meets the relevant standards of review... And always, we view the alleged error through the lens of the standard of review.

A “standard of review is the criterion by which the decision of a lower tribunal will be measured by a higher tribunal to determine its correctness or propriety.” Thus, a standard of review defines the amount of deference that a reviewing court gives to a lower tribunal’s decision. And a standard of review defines “[w]hat is ne-

---

3 See Michel, supra note 1, at 2 (describing the importance of standards of review to the decision-making process of the Federal Circuit); see also Kevin Casey et al., Standards of Appellate Review in the Federal Circuit: Substance and Semantics, 11 Fed. Cir. B.J. 279, 280 (2002) (“[S]tandards of review involve complex and subtle questions of both law and tactics, which often impact the appeal more than the facts and the substantive law issues upon which advocates spend so much time and effort.”); Charles W. Shifley, The Three Stages to Successful Appellate Advocacy Before the Federal Circuit, 1 J. Marshall Rev. Intell. Prop. L. 238, 244 (2002) (“No appeal will have success unless the standard(s) of review [are] identified and appreciated.”).


5 Michel, supra note 1, at 2.

6 Id. at 6.

7 Id. at 2.

8 Kunsch, supra note 1, at 15; see also Richard H.W. Maloy, ‘Standards of Review’—Just a Tip of the Icicle, 77 U. Det. Mercy L. Rev. 603, 604 (2000) (defining “standard of review” as “the limits of review, or the extent to which, and the manner by which, a court of review will scrutinize the findings of fact, conclusions of law, or rulings of a trial court”).

9 CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 1.01, at 1-2; Kunsch, supra note 1, at 14.
cessary to overturn the decision” being appealed. Standards of review serve other important purposes too: they “enhance judicial economy, standardize the appellate process, and give the parties in a lawsuit an idea of their chance of success on appeal.”

But there is at least one more important function of standards of review: they “balance the power among the courts.” Indeed, “the fundamental notion behind a standard of review is that of defining the relationship and power shared among judicial bodies.” Standards of review that allow an appellate court to give less deference to a decision of a trial court necessarily give more power to the appellate court relative to the trial court than standards of review that are more deferential. Thus, the way in which the appellate court establishes standards of review for various issues is related to how much power the court has. Significantly, the U.S. Supreme Court has recently recognized the importance of the standards of review that the Federal Circuit applies in patent cases by altering the Federal Circuit’s standards of review in two cases since 2014.

Commentators have accused the Federal Circuit of generally exercising too much power relative to that of the district courts in patent cases. One particular way in which the Federal Circuit has

---

10 Kunsch, supra note 1, at 14.
11 Peters, supra note 1, at 238.
12 Id.
13 CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 1.01, at 1-3.
been accused of exercising such excessive power is by applying standards of review that are not sufficiently deferential. In particular, many commentators have criticized the court’s longtime practice of treating the issue of claim construction as a pure question of law and reviewing decisions on claim construction without deference. Indeed, the Federal Circuit originally decided en banc that
claim construction was a pure question of law to be reviewed de novo in the 1998 case *Cybor Corp. v. FAS Technologies, Inc.* And despite criticism of this decision, the Federal Circuit in 2014 reaffirmed the *Cybor Corp.* standard en banc, holding that it would continue to review claim-construction decisions with no deference.

But in the 2015 case *Teva Pharmaceuticals USA, Inc. v. Sandoz, Inc.*, the Supreme Court, recognizing the importance of this issue, overturned the Federal Circuit’s practice of reviewing claim-construction decisions with no deference. In *Teva*, the Court began by observing that Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 52(a) requires all courts of appeals to review factual determinations made by judges using the clearly erroneous standard. The Court reasoned that no exception to this rule should apply for the review of
factual underpinnings in claim-construction decisions. The Court then noted that both “precedent” and “practical considerations favor clear error review.” The Court rejected arguments to the contrary and held that the Federal Circuit must review the factual underpinnings involved in a claim-construction decision for clear error. The Court thus effectively overruled the Federal Circuit’s decisions in *Cybor Corp. v. FAS Technologies, Inc.* and *Lighting Ballast Control LLC v. Philips Electronics North American Corp.* to treat claim construction as a pure question of law to be reviewed de novo.

Further underscoring the importance of standards of review in patent cases, the Supreme Court in 2014 overruled the Federal Circuit’s practice of using a non-deferential standard of review in an area of patent law involving attorney fees. Under § 285 of the Patent Act, a party is entitled to an award of attorney fees if the case is “exceptional.” In *Highmark Inc. v. Allcare Health Management System, Inc.*, the Court considered the propriety of the Federal Circuit’s practice of reviewing a district court’s determination as to whether a case is “exceptional” without deference. The Court considered the text of the statute and held that it “em-

---

27 Id. at 837. The Court implicitly recognized that even if “convincing ground[s]” for an exception existed, the Court likely lacked the power to create such an exception to a Federal Rule of Civil Procedure. See id. (“Even if exceptions to the Rule were permissible, we cannot find any convincing ground for creating an exception to that Rule here.”). In a dissent authored by Justice Thomas and joined by Justice Alito, Justice Thomas disagreed that rule 52(a) should apply to the review of claim-construction decisions. Id. at 844–45 (Thomas, J., dissenting). In his dissent, Justice Thomas reasoned that any apparent “subsidiary evidentiary findings” should properly subsume into the overall question of law presented by a claim-construction decision. Id. at 845–53.

28 Id. at 838–39 (majority opinion).

29 Id. at 839–42.

30 Id. at 835.

31 138 F.3d 1448 (Fed. Cir. 1998) (en banc).

32 744 F.3d 1272 (Fed. Cir. 2014) (en banc).


34 134 S. Ct. 1744 (2014).

35 As the Supreme Court held in *Octane Fitness* in 2015, “an ‘exceptional’ case is simply one that stands out from others with respect to the substantive strength of a party’s litigating position (considering both the governing law and the facts of the case) or the unreasonable manner in which the case was litigated.” 134 S. Ct. at 1756.

36 *Highmark*, 134 S. Ct. at 1746–47.
phasizes the fact that the determination [of whether a case is exceptional] is for the district court, which suggests some deference to the district court upon appeal.\textsuperscript{37} The Court also noted that “as a matter of the sound administration of justice, the district court is better positioned to decide whether a case is exceptional because it lives with the case over a prolonged period of time.”\textsuperscript{38} Finally, the court reasoned that “the question is multifarious and novel, not susceptible to useful generalization of the sort that \textit{de novo} review provides, and likely to profit from the experience that an abuse-of-discretion rule will permit to develop.”\textsuperscript{39} Thus, the Court held that the Federal Circuit must abandon its practice of reviewing this issue de novo and instead “apply an abuse-of-discretion standard in reviewing all aspects of a district court’s . . . determination” as to whether a case is “exceptional.”\textsuperscript{40}

The importance of standards of review in patent litigation, as shown by the Supreme Court’s recent attention to standards of review applied by Federal Circuit, gives rise to this question: In what other areas of patent law does the Federal Circuit currently apply non-deferential review where instead the court should really be applying a deferential standard of review? This Article explores an answer to this question for one particular area of the law: invalidity\textsuperscript{41} due to obviousness.\textsuperscript{42} The Supreme Court and Federal Circuit currently review the ultimate decision that a patent is or is not invalid due to obviousness with no deference.\textsuperscript{43} This Article pro-

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Id.} at 1748 (quoting \textit{Pierce v. Underwood}, 487 U.S. 552, 559 (1988)).

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Id.} (citation omitted) (quoting \textit{Pierce}, 487 U.S. at 559–60).

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Id.} at 1748–49 (quoting \textit{Pierce}, 487 U.S. at 562).

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{41} In a patent infringement lawsuit, an accused infringer can raise the affirmative defense of invalidity. See 35 U.S.C. § 282(b)(2)–(3) (2012). In bringing an invalidity defense, the accused infringer asserts that one or more of the asserted patent claims are invalid for failure to satisfy any of the patentability requirements, such as patent-eligible subject matter, utility, novelty, and nonobviousness. \textit{MUELLER}, \textit{supra} note 17, at 582. And once a court declares that a patent claim is invalid, the patent owner is precluded from asserting that claim against any other infringer. \textit{Id.} at 581 (citing Blonder-Tongue Labs., Inc. v. Univ. of Ill. Found., 402 U.S. 313 (1971)). Thus, the effect of an invalidity determination is that the claim “is dead and cannot be resuscitated.” \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{42} For a discussion of the issue of invalidity due to obviousness, see \textit{infra} Section I.B.

poses that the obviousness determination should be reviewed as a question of fact—thus, for clear error in a bench trial, and for substantial evidence in a jury trial.

The most commonly litigated invalidity defense in patent-infringement lawsuits is obviousness. The obviousness determination is governed by § 103 of the Patent Act, under which a patent claim is invalid "if the differences between the claimed invention and the prior art are such that the claimed invention as a whole would have been obvious before the effective filing date of the claimed invention to a person having ordinary skill in the art to which the claimed invention pertains." The Supreme Court has held that the obviousness analysis involves four factual determinations, known as the "Graham factors": (1) level of ordinary skill in the art; (2) scope and content of the prior art; (3) differences between the claimed invention and the prior art; and (4) secondary reasoning behind its holding that obviousness is a question of law, reviewed de novo, see infra Section I.C.

This Article does not analyze the related, though different, issue of whether the question of obviousness is more properly a decision to be made by the court and never a jury. For a recent and thorough treatment of this separate issue, see generally Lemley, supra note 15.

See FED. R. CIV. P. 52(a) (requiring a "clearly erroneous" standard of review with respect to the findings of fact in a bench trial). For a discussion of the clearly erroneous standard, see infra Section I.A.2.


See Kunsch, supra note 1, at 24 ("Facts found by a jury are reviewed with the common law 'substantial evidence' test." (citing Glasser v. United States, 315 U.S. 60, 80 (1942))). For a discussion of the substantial-evidence standard, see infra Section I.A.3.

Sanofi-Aventis Deutschland GmbH v. Glenmark Pharm. Inc., USA, 748 F.3d 1354, 1358 (Fed. Cir. 2014).

See Matthew Beutler, How a Comparative Analysis of Federal Circuit Standards of Review Supports Limiting the Role of Juries in Determinations of Obviousness, 92 J. PAT. & TRADEMARK OFF. SOC’Y 451, 453 (2010) ("[T]he question of obviousness is so frequently found at the center of disputes concerning patents in both pre-issuance patent procurement as well as post-issuance patent enforcement."). For a more detailed discussion of the obviousness defense, see infra Section I.B.


"Prior art can be understood at a very basic level as the legally available technology and information with which the claimed invention will be compared in order to determine whether that invention is patentable." MUeller, supra note 17, at 284. The exact requirements for a particular piece of technology or information to be considered prior art are defined by the statute. See 35 U.S.C. § 102 (2012).
considerations (i.e., objective indicia of nonobviousness)." After making findings as to these factors, the decision maker must then determine whether the claimed invention would have been obvious to a person having ordinary skill in the art before the effective filing date. Importantly, the obviousness determination is objective because it requires analysis of obviousness with respect to a hypothetical third party—the hypothetical “person having ordinary skill in the art to which the claimed invention pertains.”

Although the Supreme Court and Federal Circuit classify this ultimate determination of obviousness as one of law reviewed without deference, this Article proposes that it should properly be classified as one of fact and reviewed with deference for the following reasons:

- The Federal Circuit’s reasoning that the ultimate question of obviousness is really a question of law rather than a question of fact is flawed;
- The Supreme Court’s statement that the ultimate question of obviousness is one of law was never properly supported by precedent;
- Treating obviousness as a question of law is inconsistent with how the Federal Circuit treats other analogous patent-law issues, such as anticipation and infringement under the doctrine of equivalents; and
- Even though under current law obviousness is supposed to be a question of law, district courts nonetheless treat the issue as a de facto question of fact, without the objection of the Federal Circuit.

---

53 MUELLER, supra note 17, at 279.
57 For a discussion of this issue, see infra Section I.A.
58 For a discussion of this issue, see infra Section I.B.
59 For a discussion of this issue, see infra Section I.C.
60 For a discussion of this issue, see infra Section I.D.
For these reasons, in an appropriate case, the Supreme Court should hold that the ultimate determination of obviousness is a question of fact to be reviewed as such.

Part I begins with a description of standards of review and the difference between questions of law and fact. Part II discusses the two invalidity defenses based on the prior art—anticipation and obviousness. Part III then describes in detail why the ultimate question of obviousness should properly be a question of fact and reviewed by the Federal Circuit with deference.

I. STANDARDS OF REVIEW AND QUESTIONS OF LAW AND FACT

This Part provides background information regarding standards of review and questions of law and fact. Section I.A discusses the different standards of review that are applied by the Federal Circuit. Section I.B discusses how reviewing courts in general decide whether an issue is a question of law versus a question of fact.

A. The Federal Circuit’s Standards of Review

A standard of review “prescribes the degree of deference given by the reviewing court to the actions or decisions under review.” Further, it is “the criterion by which the decision of a lower tribunal will be measured by a higher tribunal to determine its correctness or propriety.” In essence, a standard of review defines “[w]hat is necessary to overturn the decision” being appealed. It is—perhaps surprisingly—a relatively new concept in appellate jurisprudence. But the standard of review has become vitally important in appellate decision-making at the Federal Circuit. The
Federal Circuit uses four basic standards in reviewing district-court decisions: (1) de novo; (2) clear error; (3) substantial evidence; and (4) abuse of discretion. The following sections discuss each of these standards in turn.

1. De Novo

The least deferential standard used by the Federal Circuit is the de novo standard. Where the court reviews an issue under the de novo standard, it “gives the trial tribunal little, if any, deference.” Indeed, the decision under review “receives little or no presumption of correctness.” In applying the de novo standard, the court “must exercise its independent judgment on the evidence of record and [weigh] it as a trial court” would. Although the de novo standard does not require the court to give any deference to the decision it is reviewing, nonetheless, the court is “not . . . re-
quired to ignore the decision below.” The court applies the de novo standard to issues that the court defines as purely legal.72

2. Clear Error

In contrast to the de novo standard, the Federal Circuit must give at least some deference to a district-court judge’s factual findings in a review under the clearly erroneous standard.73 This standard is required by Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 52(a), which provides: “Findings of fact, whether based on oral or other evidence, must not be set aside unless clearly erroneous . . . .”74 The Supreme Court has defined a finding as “clearly erroneous” where “although there is evidence to support it, the reviewing court on the entire evidence is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed.”75 The Seventh Circuit has put a colorful gloss on this definition, which emphasizes the great degree of deference this standard requires: “To be clearly erroneous, a decision must strike us as more than just maybe or probably wrong; it must, as one member of this court recently stated during oral argument, strike us as wrong with the force of a five-week-old, unrefrigerated dead fish.”76

Although it is deferential, the clearly erroneous standard is nonetheless lenient.77 The issue under the clearly erroneous standard is not whether a particular finding is actually correct in the opinion of the Federal Circuit; instead, the issue is whether the finding was “clearly wrong.”78 Thus, in some cases, the clearly er-

---

71 Id. Thus, under the de novo standard, although the court in theory reviews a decision without any deference, “[i]n practice . . . the trial tribunal’s decision will at least have a subtle effect.” Casey et al., supra note 3, at 290. Indeed, the court may be influenced by “the persuasive force of a well-written trial tribunal opinion, which reasons forcefully and examines deftly the law and precedent” even under the de novo standard. Id.
72 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 289–90.
73 Id. at 286.
76 Parts & Elec. Motors, Inc. v. Sterling Elec., Inc., 866 F.2d 228, 233 (7th Cir. 1988); Casey et al., supra note 3, at 299 n.81 (quoting Parts & Elec. Motors, 866 F.2d at 233).
77 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 299.
78 Id.
An important policy rationale for requiring that a reviewing court defer to a district court’s factual findings is that the district-court judge is “in a better position to make findings on the issue” in question.80 Indeed, as one commentator has explained:

[A district court judge is] present throughout the entire course of the trial. [The judge] can observe first-hand the demeanor of each witness and thereby determine each witness’ credibility. [The judge] spend[s] more time with the facts and parties of the case so [the judge] generally [has] a better understanding of the context within which an issue arises.81

Other important policy rationales for deference relate to “the judicial system and what such deference does for the system itself.”82 One important such institutional rationale is that of finality: “The more deference given to the decision of the lower tribunal, the less likely the losing party is to appeal that decision.”83 This rationale also leads to the idea that such finality will reduce court congestion because, “[i]f fewer parties appeal, there will be fewer

---

79 Id.
80 Kunsch, supra note 1, at 20. Indeed, Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 52(a)(6) itself recognizes this rationale in its text: “[T]he reviewing court must give due regard to the trial court’s opportunity to judge the witnesses’ credibility.” FED. R. CIV. P. 52(a)(6).
81 Kunsch, supra note 1, at 20. Although the district court judge’s ability to observe the demeanor of witnesses is an important justification for deference under the clearly erroneous standard, Rule 52(a) nonetheless requires a reviewing court to review all of a district court’s factual findings with deference—even if those findings are based on documentary evidence rather than oral testimony. FED. R. CIV. P. 52(a)(6) (“Findings of fact, whether based on oral or other evidence, must not be set aside unless clearly erroneous . . . .”) (emphasis added)). Despite this requirement, a court of appeals “may more easily find clear error when it has the same documents for decision as were available to the” district court. Casey et al., supra note 3, at 300. But “the Supreme Court has recognized that greater deference is due under the clearly erroneous standard to [the district court’s] findings . . . based upon the credibility of witnesses.” Id. (citing Anderson v. City of Bessemer City, N.C., 470 U.S. 564, 573 (1985); Bose Corp. v. Consumers Union, 466 U.S. 485, 500 (1984)).
82 Kunsch, supra note 1, at 19.
83 Id.
Finally, deference to the district court’s factual decisions helps maintain the public’s confidence in district-court judges; if the courts of appeals’ reversal rates were greater due to a lack of deference to district courts’ findings, the public’s confidence may be reduced.  

Additionally, the assignment of the amount of deference that a court of appeals must give to a district court’s findings “balance[s] the power among the courts.” Indeed, “the fundamental notion behind a standard of review is that of defining the relationship and power shared among judicial bodies.” Standards of review that allow an appellate court to give less deference to a decision of a trial court necessarily give more power to the appellate court relative to the trial court than standards of review that are more deferential. Thus, the way in which the appellate court establishes how much deference to give the district court for various issues is related to the amount of power the court has.

3. Substantial Evidence

Whereas the Federal Circuit uses the clear-error standard to review a district-court judge’s factual findings, the court uses the substantial-evidence standard to review a jury’s factual findings. The substantial-evidence standard is an even more deferential standard than clear error, “based on the policy judgment that bench trial findings are less sacrosanct on review than are jury verdicts.” This result flows from the Seventh Amendment. In addition to providing the right to a jury trial in civil litigation, the Seventh Amendment also limits appellate review of a jury’s factual findings: “[N]o fact tried by a jury, shall be otherwise reexamined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the

84 Id. at 20.
85 Id.
86 Peters, supra note 1, at 238.
87 CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 1.01, at 1-3.
88 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 307; see also, e.g., Kinetic Concepts, Inc. v. Smith & Nephew, Inc., 688 F.3d 1342, 1360 (Fed. Cir. 2012).
89 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 308.
90 U.S. CONST. amend. VII.
Jury trials are very common in patent litigation today, and in a jury trial, the jury usually decides most of the important issues.

Under the substantial-evidence standard, a reviewing court must affirm a jury’s factual finding as long as it is supported by substantial evidence. The Supreme Court has defined “substantial evidence” as follows:

Substantial evidence is more than a scintilla, and must do more than create a suspicion of the existence of the fact to be established. “It means such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion,” and it must be enough to justify, if the trial were to a jury, a refusal to direct a verdict when the conclusion sought to be drawn from it is one of fact for the jury.

4. Abuse of Discretion

Abuse of discretion is the most deferential standard. A reviewing court uses this highly deferential standard for the review of issues where the district court “has a range of choices in deciding an issue.” Under the abuse-of-discretion standard, a reviewing court “will not disturb [the district court’s] choice as long as the choice is within the predetermined range, and is not influenced by any mistake of law or [sufficiently] erroneous findings of fact.”

91 Id.; see also Casey et al., supra note 3, at 308 (“Appellate challenges to jury findings of fact rarely succeed, because the Seventh Amendment proscribes review of such findings even more than Rule 52 restricts review of trial court findings of fact.”).
92 See Lemley, supra note 15, at 1674 (“The jury trial is a fixture of modern patent litigation.”). Professor Lemley determined that, of all the U.S. patent trials between 2000 and June 2011, almost seventy-five percent of them were jury trials rather than bench trials. Id. at 1674 n.1 (citing Mark A. Lemley et al., Rush to Judgment? Trial Length and Outcomes in Patent Cases, 41 AIPLA Q.J. 169, 172, 174 (2013)).
93 Id. at 1674.
94 19 JAMES W. MOORE ET. AL., Moore’s Federal Practice: Civil § 206.02 (3d ed. 2016); Peters, supra note 1, at 245.
95 NLRB v. Columbian Enameling & Stamping Co., 306 U.S. 292, 300 (1939) (citation omitted) (quoting Consol. Edison Co. of N.Y. v. NLRB, 305 U.S. 197, 229 (1938)).
96 Peters, supra note 1, at 243.
97 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 310.
98 Id.
The Federal Circuit specifically defines “abuse of discretion” as where a “decision was based on clearly erroneous findings of fact, an incorrect conclusion of law, or a clear error of judgment.”

The Federal Circuit applies the abuse-of-discretion standard to equitable determinations, such as injunctions, inequitable conduct, enhanced damages, and attorney fees. The court also applies the abuse-of-discretion standard to “discretionary matter[s] involving the admission of evidence, discovery, or other trial management issues.” Indeed, because this standard is so highly deferential, the Federal Circuit rarely reverses such decisions.

B. How Courts Decide Whether an Issue Is a Question of Law Versus a Question of Fact

Courts admittedly have difficulty in deciding whether an issue is properly a question of law as opposed to a question of fact. But the resolution of this question is important because to determine what level of appellate deference, if any, is appropriate for a particular issue, a court must decide whether the issue should be consi-

100 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 310; see also Highmark Inc. v. Allcare Health Mgmt. Sys., Inc., 134 S. Ct. 1744, 1749 (2014) (holding that the abuse of discretion standard applies to the Federal Circuit’s review of a decision as to whether a case is “exceptional” to support an award of attorney fees).
101 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 310. Technically, for procedural—rather than substantive—issues such as these, the Federal Circuit applies the standard of review as indicated by the precedent of the court of appeals of the regional circuit from within which the district court was located, rather than applying its own determination as to which standard to apply. See Field, supra note 2, at 645 (citing Midwest Indus., Inc. v. Karavan Trailers, Inc., 175 F.3d 1356, 1359 (Fed. Cir. 1999) (en banc in relevant part)). But, for issues involving evidence, discovery, or trial management, the circuit courts of appeals uniformly apply the abuse of discretion standard. See CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 4.01, at 4-2.
102 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 310.
103 See Miller v. Fenton, 474 U.S. 104, 113 (1985) (“[T]he appropriate methodology for distinguishing questions of fact from questions of law has been, to say the least, elusive.”); Pullman-Standard v. Swint, 456 U.S. 273, 288 (1982) (“The Court has previously noted the vexing nature of the distinction between questions of fact and questions of law.” (citing Baumgartner v. United States, 322 U.S. 665, 671 (1944))); Nathan Isaacs, The Law and the Facts, 22 COLUM. L. REV. 1, 1 (1922) (“The delusive simplicity of the distinction between questions of law and questions of fact has been found a will-of-the-wisp by travelers approaching it from several directions.”).
dered a question of law or a question of fact.\textsuperscript{104} Although some issues are easy to classify as either questions of law or fact,\textsuperscript{105} other issues present greater difficulty.\textsuperscript{106} Indeed, it is often more realistic to think of a particular issue as lying on a continuum between law and fact rather than as purely law or purely fact.\textsuperscript{107} Although there is no set rule for determining where on the spectrum a particular issue falls between law and fact,\textsuperscript{108} the Supreme Court has established, and commentators have proposed, guidelines for doing so.\textsuperscript{109}

Section I.B.1 begins by discussing questions of fact. Next, Section I.B.2 discusses questions of law. Finally, Section I.B.3 discusses how many courts use a functional approach to determining questions of fact versus questions of law.

\textsuperscript{104} See, e.g., Teva Pharms. USA, Inc. v. Sandoz, Inc., 135 S. Ct. 831, 844–52 (2015) (Thomas, J., dissenting) (reasoning that the Court must consider whether claim construction is a question of law or fact to determine whether Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 52(a)(6) requires review of subsidiary facts under a clearly erroneous standard); Childress & Davis, supra note 1, § 2.21, at 2-116 (“Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 52 does not draw the lines demarking fact, protected by the rule on appeal, and legal or mixed law-fact questions, which are generally freely reviewed except where they are controlled by underlying facts.”); Casey et al., supra note 3, at 316 (“[T]he type of issue under view, law versus fact, helps to determine the standard of review.”); Steven Alan Childress, “Clearly Erroneous”: Judicial Review over District Courts in the Eighth Circuit and Beyond, 51 Mo. L. Rev. 93, 98 (1986) (“The law-fact distinction . . . is crucial because the clearly erroneous rule protects factfindings from summary reversal but does not apply to errors of law, reviewed de novo.”); Kunsch, supra note 1, at 27–28; Robert L. Stern, Review of Findings of Administrators, Judges and Juries: A Comparative Analysis, 58 Harv. L. Rev. 70, 93–95 (1944) (“More troublesome has been the problem as to just what questions are to be treated as fact or as law.”).

\textsuperscript{105} Ray A. Brown, Fact and Law in Judicial Review, 56 Harv. L. Rev. 899, 900 (1943) (“[E]ven the most obstinate realist could distinguish in kind between the question whether the Rule against Perpetuities may operate to render void a grantor’s power of termination for breach of condition subsequent, and the question whether it was Tom Jones or Bob Smith who drove the automobile that ran over Billy Brown.”).

\textsuperscript{106} Casey et al., supra note 3, at 317 (“The distinction between law and fact for purposes of identifying standard of review is often a difficult line to draw.”).

\textsuperscript{107} Id. at 318; accord Kunsch, supra note 1, at 21.

\textsuperscript{108} Miller, 474 U.S. at 113; Casey et al., supra note 3, at 318; Kunsch, supra note 1, at 22.

1. Questions of Fact

Some issues are clearly questions of fact.110 For example, an issue involving the determination of a pure historical fact 111 is undoubtedly a question of fact.112 Questions of fact also include issues of a more abstract nature, such as the state of mind of an individual—even where that “state of mind may be of legal importance.”113 And even though an inference is required to determine an issue, that issue may still be considered a question of fact.114

Another type of fact is the “ultimate fact,” which is more difficult to classify as a question of law or fact than other types of facts. An “ultimate fact” is a fact that embodies the “ultimate issue for resolution.”115 Indeed, as one commentator has described:

Ultimate facts present a different kind of “factual” inquiry, one involving a process that “implies the application of standards of law.” Like some historical facts, ultimate facts are derived by reasoning or inference from evidence, but, like issues of law, they incorporate legal principles or policies that give them independent legal significance. They often involve the characterization of historical facts, and

---

110 Childress, supra note 104, at 132.
111 “A historical fact is a thing done, an action performed, or an event or occurrence.” William W. Schwarzer et al., The Analysis and Decision of Summary Judgment Motions, 139 F.R.D. 441, 455 (1992).
112 See Teva, 135 S. Ct. at 845 (Thomas, J., dissenting) (“In general, [the Supreme Court has] treated district court determinations as ‘analytically more akin to a fact’ the more they pertain to a simple historical fact of the case . . . .”); Francis H. Bohlen, Mixed Questions of Law and Fact, 72 U. Pa. L. Rev. 111, 112 (1924) (“The primary and popular meaning of the word ‘fact’ is something which has happened or existed . . . .”); Brown, supra note 105, at 902 (“Questions of fact involve inquiries . . . as to the existence of acts and states of being in the concrete physical universe . . . .”); Casey et al., supra note 3, at 317 (“Generally, facts are those findings that respond to inquiries about who, when, what, and where.”) (internal quotation marks omitted); Childress, supra note 104, at 132 (“[W]hat Alice did yesterday is a ‘pure fact’ . . . .”); Kunsch, supra note 1, at 22 (“Where courts perceive the inquiry as empirical—revolving around actual events, past or future—the inquiry is labeled a question of fact . . . .”); Stern, supra note 104, at 93 (“Obviously an issue as to whether a particular act occurred . . . is factual.”).
113 Bohlen, supra note 112, at 112; accord Miller, 474 U.S. at 113; Pullman-Standard, 456 U.S. at 288; Brown, supra note 105, at 902; Stern, supra note 104, at 93.
114 Childress, supra note 104, at 132.
115 Id. at 142.
their resolution is generally outcome-determinative.116

Particular ultimate facts may be closer to questions of fact or questions of law.117

Importantly, just because an issue may be classified as one involving an ultimate fact does not necessarily convert that issue into a question of law.118 In the past, many courts automatically treated ultimate facts as questions of law to be reviewed de novo.119 But the Supreme Court has effectively killed this rule.120 In Pullman-Standard v. Swint, the Court noted:

Rule 52(a) broadly requires that findings of fact not be set aside unless clearly erroneous. It does not make exceptions or purport to exclude certain categories of factual findings from the obligation of a court of appeals to accept a district court’s findings unless clearly erroneous. It does not divide facts into categories; in particular it does not divide findings of fact into those that deal with “ultimate” and those that deal with “subsidiary” facts.121

Thus, the doctrine that an ultimate fact is automatically a question of law “is no longer viable—at least where it allows de novo review ‘whenever the result in a case turns on a factual finding.’”122

116 Schwarzer et al., supra note 111, at 456–57 (footnote omitted) (citing Baumgartner v. United States, 322 U.S. 665, 671 (1944)).
117 Alan K. Chen, The Burdens of Qualified Immunity: Summary Judgment and the Role of Facts in Constitutional Tort Law, 47 AM. U. L. REV. 1, 89 (1997) (“Ultimate facts can be more ‘factual’ (e.g., whether a driver recklessly or negligently operated an automobile), or more ‘legal’ (e.g., whether a defamation plaintiff is a public figure for First Amendment purposes).” (citing Schwarzer et al., supra note 111, at 457)).
118 See Pullman-Standard, 456 U.S. at 287; Childress, supra note 104, at 142.
119 Childress, supra note 104, at 141–42.
120 Id. at 142.
121 456 U.S. at 287 (emphasis added).
122 Childress, supra note 104, at 142 (quoting Pullman-Standard, 456 U.S. at 286 n.16).
2. Questions of Law

Similarly, some issues are clearly questions of law. Such obvious questions of law "are fact-free general principles that are applicable to all, or at least to many, disputes and not simply to the one sub judice." Thus, a general definition of a question of law "is a statement of a general principle or rule, made in advance of a case, awaiting application to particular facts that may arise." Clear questions of law include interpretations of the Constitution and statutes. Questions of law also usually include interpreta-

123 Id. at 132.
124 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 317 (quoting Martin B. Louis, Allocating Adjudicative Decision Making Authority Between the Trial and Appellate Levels: A Unified View of the Scope of Review, the Judge/Jury Question, and Procedural Discretion, 64 N.C. L. Rev. 993, 993 n.3 (1986)).
125 Id.; see also Teva Pharms. USA, Inc. v. Sandoz, Inc., 135 S. Ct. 831, 845 (2015) (Thomas, J., dissenting) ("In general, we have treated district-court determinations . . . as 'analytically more akin to . . . a legal conclusion' the more they define rules applicable beyond the parties' dispute." (second omission in original)); Bohlen, supra note 112, at 112 ("'Law' primarily means a body of principles and rules which are capable of being predicated in advance and which are so predicated, awaiting proof of the facts necessary for their application."); Brown, supra note 105, at 904 ("'Law' in its best accepted sense refers to precepts generally and uniformly applicable to all persons of like qualities and status and in like circumstances."); Stern, supra note 104, at 94 ("When the issue relates to the existence or nature of a general rule or standard which will be applicable to many cases, it is normally regarded as presenting a question of law.").

In 1922, one commentator helpfully likened the distinction between questions of law and fact to major and minor premises in a syllogism. See Isaacs, supra note 103, at 2. He reasoned:

I refer to the legal reasoning in which propositions of law are contrasted with propositions of fact very much as major premises are contrasted with minor premises, and, in which conclusions are drawn by the very same process. Theoretically, the court knows all of those major premises which constitute the law. The jury is asked to tell the truth with reference to the minor premise, the fact of a particular case. Then the conclusion is supposed to take care of itself.

Id.

126 See CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 2.13, at 2-72. In addition to treating constitutional interpretation as a question of law, the Supreme Court also treats fact-finding in constitutional cases under the "law" umbrella. See id. § 2.19, at 2-108 (citing Bose Corp. v. Consumers Union, 466 U.S. 485 (1984)). Thus, the Court reviews such constitutional-fact issues under the de novo standard. Id.
tions of written documents, such as contracts and deeds. Thus, the Supreme Court treats claim construction as a question of law (though sometimes with factual underpinnings), likening interpretation of patent claim terms to interpreting written documents in general. In addition to claim construction, the Federal Circuit treats a variety of other patent issues as questions of law — including, of course, invalidity due to obviousness.

3. A Functional Approach to Determining Questions of Fact Versus Law

Rather than attempting to formally determine whether a particular thorny issue is more like a question of fact or law to determine how much deference to give a lower court’s findings, many appellate courts take a more functional approach. For so-called “mixed questions of fact and law,” these courts rely on policy considerations, such as whether “one judicial actor is better positioned

---

129 For a very brief discussion of claim construction, see supra note 17. For a more detailed discussion of claim construction, see generally Teva, 135 S. Ct. 831; Markman v. Westview Instruments, Inc., 517 U.S. 370 (1996); Mueller, supra note 17, at 447–65.
130 Teva, 135 S. Ct. at 838.
131 Markman, 517 U.S. at 388–89; see Teva, 135 S. Ct. at 845 (Thomas, J., dissenting).
133 Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1566.
134 See Childress, supra note 104, at 133 (describing the use of a “functional approach” that “focuses on review policy, competency, and uncertainty rather than on some analytic meaning ‘inside’ the words ‘fact’ and ‘law’”); cf. Miller v. Fenton, 474 U.S. 104, 113–14 (1985) (describing the determination of law versus fact as “as much a matter of allocation as it is of analysis”).
than another to decide the issue in question."\textsuperscript{135} Under this approach, if an appellate court believes that an issue is better decided by a judge, then the court treats the issue as a question of law.\textsuperscript{136} But if the appellate court believes that the issue is better decided by a jury, then the court treats the issue as a question of fact.\textsuperscript{137} The Federal Circuit took such a functional approach in \textit{Panduit Corp. v. Dennison Manufacturing Co.},\textsuperscript{138} in which the court determined that obviousness is a question of law based on factual underpinnings.\textsuperscript{139}

Some commentators have criticized this functional approach.\textsuperscript{140} They contend that by adopting such an approach, a reviewing court can improperly pick and choose whichever issues it wishes to re-

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Miller}, 474 U.S. at 114; see \textit{Lough v. Brunswick Corp.}, 103 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1997) ("The 'magic' of \textit{de novo} appellate determination . . . serves not to reflect a nuanced definition of law and fact, but to affect trial/appellate authority and . . . the role of the jury."); \textit{Childress}, supra note 104, at 133; \textit{Edward H. Cooper, Civil Rule 50(a): Rationing and Rationalizing the Resources of Appellate Review}, 63 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 645, 660 (1988) ("Characterization of an issue of law application as fact or law for purposes of identifying a formalized standard of review depends on the perceived need for review, not on the actual status of the issue."); \textit{Isaacs}, supra note 103, at 7 ("Historically the distinction between law and facts that our courts have made has been based on procedure."); \textit{Kunsch}, supra note 1, at 23 ("When an issue falls within the blurred area of a mixed question, it might be better to fall back on policy considerations.").

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Childress}, supra note 104, at 133.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{United States v. J.B. Williams Co.}, 498 F.2d 414, 431 (2d Cir. 1974) (Friendly, J.) ("[W]hat a court can determine better than a jury, [is] perhaps about the only satisfactory criterion for distinguishing 'law' from 'fact.'" (citing \textit{Loper v. Morrison}, 145 P.2d 1, 6–7 (Cal. 1944) (Traynor, J., dissenting))); \textit{Loper}, 145 P.2d at 6 (Traynor, J., dissenting) ("As a general rule, . . . the court determines the law and the jury the facts, unless it appears that the issue is one that the jury can determine better than the court."); \textit{Childress}, supra note 104, at 133 (citing \textit{J.B. Williams}, 498 F.2d at 431); cf. \textit{Casey et al.}, supra note 3, at 316 ("Implicit in selecting a standard of review is a crucial policy decision: Whether the trial court . . . or the appellate court . . . is better suited to decide a particular issue in a case.").

\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Panduit}, 810 F.2d 1561.

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Id.} at 1566.

\textsuperscript{140} See \textit{CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 3.09, at 3-71}; \textit{R. Jack Ayres, Jr., Judicial Nullification of the Right to Trial by Jury by “Evolving” Standards of Appellate Review}, 60 BAYLOR L. REV. 337, 477–79 (2008); \textit{Brown}, supra note 105, at 900. \textit{But see Bose Corp. v. Consumers Union}, 466 U.S. 485, 501 n.17 (1984) ("Regarding certain largely factual questions in some areas of the law, the stakes—in terms of impact on future cases and future conduct—are too great to entrust them finally to the judgment of the trier of fact.").
view de novo.\textsuperscript{141} And the functional approach allows a court to easily but improperly “renam[e] or recharacteriz[e] traditional fact issues . . . as questions of law . . . .”\textsuperscript{142} Indeed, some commentators have pointed out that courts can use functional determination that a particular issue is a question of law as “an artifice to justify” de novo review of what really should be a factual question reviewed with deference.\textsuperscript{143}

Moreover, another reason that the functional approach may be flawed is because the issue of whether to allocate the determination of a particular question to the trial judge or the jury is properly a separate issue from whether to treat that question as a question of law or fact.\textsuperscript{144} Indeed, the Supreme Court recently treated the allocation issue and the law-versus-fact issue as two separate concerns in \textit{Teva Pharmaceuticals USA, Inc. v. Sandoz, Inc.}, where the Court decided that a judge’s factual findings with respect to the construction of patent claim terms is a question of fact to be reviewed for clear error.\textsuperscript{145} The Court had previously held in \textit{Markman v. Westview Instruments, Inc.} that the issue of claim construction must be allocated entirely to the court, not the jury.\textsuperscript{146} And the Court in \textit{Markman} made this allocation despite characterizing claim construction as “a mongrel practice” of law and fact.\textsuperscript{147}

In \textit{Teva}, the Court expressly distinguished the allocation issue from the law-versus-fact issue:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{141} See Brown, supra note 105, at 900 (“[W]e rather suspect that this seemingly rigid dichotomy of law and fact is only a bit of legalistic mummerly designed to conceal from the uninitiated the fact that the courts decide these questions about as they wish.”).
  \item \textsuperscript{142} Ayres, supra note 140, at 478.
  \item \textsuperscript{143} CHILDRESS & DAVIS, supra note 1, § 3.09, at 3-71.
  \item \textsuperscript{144} See Teva Pharms. USA, Inc. v. Sandoz, Inc., 135 S. Ct. 831, 837–38 (2015) (distinguishing the Seventh Amendment issue of whether to allocate claim construction to the court or jury from the issue of what standard of review to apply); Cybor Corp. v. FAS Techs., Inc., 138 F.3d 1448, 1464–65 (Fed. Cir. 1998) (en banc) (Mayer, C.J., concurring in the judgment) (“[A]ll that \textit{Markman} stands for is that the judge will do the resolving, not the jury. Wisely, the Supreme Court stopped short of authorizing us to find facts \textit{de novo} when evidentiary disputes exist as part of the construction of a patent claim . . . .” (citing Markman v. Westview Instruments, Inc., 517 U.S. 370 (1996))).
  \item \textsuperscript{145} 135 S. Ct. at 833.
  \item \textsuperscript{146} 517 U.S. 370, 372 (1996).
  \item \textsuperscript{147} Id. at 378.
\end{itemize}
Our opinion in *Markman* neither created, nor argued for, an exception to Rule 52(a). The question presented in that case was a Seventh Amendment question: Should a jury or a judge construe patent claims? . . .

When describing claim construction we concluded that it was proper to treat the ultimate question of the proper construction of the patent as a question of law in the way that we treat document construction as a question of law. But this does not imply an exception to Rule 52(a) for underlying factual disputes. . . . Accordingly, when we held in *Markman* that the ultimate question of claim construction is for the judge and not the jury, we did not create an exception from the ordinary rule governing appellate review of factual matters . . . . A conclusion that an issue is for the judge does not indicate that Rule 52(a) is inapplicable.\(^{148}\)

Thus, an appellate court can properly determine whether to allocate an issue to the judge versus the jury and separately decide whether the question is truly of law or fact regardless of the result of the allocation decision. Therefore, which standard of review to apply to a question should not depend upon whether the question is allocated to the judge or jury.

II. INVALIDITY OF PATENT CLAIMS BASED UPON THE PRIOR ART

In a patent-infringement suit, an accused infringer can raise the affirmative defense of invalidity.\(^{149}\) In bringing an invalidity defense, the accused infringer asserts that one or more of the asserted patent claims are invalid for failure to satisfy any of the patentability requirements.\(^{150}\) Two of these requirements are based on the

\(^{148}\) *Teva*, 135 S. Ct. at 837–38 (citations omitted).


\(^{150}\) Mueller, supra note 17, at 582.
prior art: novelty and nonobviousness. This Part provides an overview of these two requirements. Section I.A discusses anticipation—i.e., failure to meet the novelty requirement of 35 U.S.C. § 102. Section I.B examines obviousness—i.e., failure to meet the nonobviousness requirement of 35 U.S.C. § 103. And Section I.C considers the Federal Circuit’s reasoning in categorizing the ultimate issue of obviousness as a question of law to be reviewed de novo.

A. Anticipation

A patent claim is invalid for anticipation where it fails to satisfy the novelty requirement of 35 U.S.C. § 102. In other words, a claimed invention must be new. And if an accused infringer successfully argues that the invention was not new, then the claimed invention is invalid for anticipation. Anticipation requires “strict identity” between a single prior reference and the claimed invention, which means that a prior-art reference anticipates a claim only where that reference alone discloses each and every limitation of the claim. In an infringement litigation where an accused infringer brings a defense of invalidity for anticipation, a presumption exists that an issued patent claim is valid. Therefore, an accused infringer must prove that a claim is invalid by clear and convincing evidence.

A typical example of anticipation occurred in Krippelz v. Ford Motor Co., a case about a patent covering a type of emergency

---

151 “Prior art” is a “[g]eneral term for the categories of prior technology or events against which the patentability of a claimed invention is evaluated.” Id. at 708. “What qualifies as prior art . . . for purposes of novelty is cataloged by the various subcategories of 35 U.S.C. § 102.” Id.


153 See id. § 103.

154 1-3 DONALD S. CHISUM, CHISUM ON PATENTS: A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF PATENTABILITY, VALIDITY AND INFRINGEMENT § 3.01 (2016).

155 Id.

156 Id.

157 Id.

158 Mueller, supra note 17, at 697 (defining “anticipation”).

159 See, e.g., Krippelz v. Ford Motor Co., 667 F.3d 1261, 1265 (Fed. Cir. 2012).


161 Microsoft Corp. v. i4i Ltd. P’ship, 564 U.S. 91, 95 (2011); see also, e.g., Krippelz, 667 F.3d at 1265.

162 Krippelz, 667 F.3d 1261.
light used in automobiles. At issue was the second claim, which read in relevant part:

An emergency warning light for an automotive vehicle having a window on side thereof, comprising in combination a housing mounted in a fixed, substantially unadjustable position on said vehicle adjacent to said window, . . . a source of light mounted within said housing for directing a conical beam of light downwardly through said opening . . . .

The accused infringer argued that the claim was invalid for anticipation because a French patent from 1953 disclosed all the claim limitations. But a jury found that the claim was not invalid for anticipation, and the district court denied the accused infringer’s motion for a judgment as a matter of law. The district court reasoned that a reasonable jury could find that the French patent failed to disclose the “conical beam of light” and “adjacent to the [sic] window” limitations. On appeal, the Federal Circuit reversed on this issue. The Federal Circuit noted that the French patent did indeed disclose both these limitations. Although “the district court cited several varieties of evidence to overcome these disclosures in [the French patent],” the Federal Circuit held that this evidence “was legally insufficient to support a” finding of no anticipation. Thus, the Federal Circuit held that the claim at issue was invalid for anticipation because a single prior-art reference disclosed all limitations of the claim as a matter of law.

162 Id. at 1263.
163 Id. (emphasis added) (quoting U.S. Patent No. 5,017,903 col. 3 l. 19 to col. 4 l. 3 (filed Feb. 21, 1989)).
164 Id. at 1264.
165 Id. at 1264–65.
166 Id. at 1265.
167 Id. at 1270.
168 Id. at 1267, 1269.
169 Id.
170 Id.
As the Krippelz case illustrates, anticipation is a highly technical issue.\textsuperscript{171} As such, anticipation is essentially a question of historical fact—whether the prior-art reference in question discloses each and every limitation of the claim at issue.\textsuperscript{172} Therefore, the Federal Circuit properly treats anticipation as a question of fact,\textsuperscript{173} reviewed under either the clearly erroneous\textsuperscript{174} or substantial-evidence\textsuperscript{175} standard, as appropriate.

\textbf{B. Obviousness}

A patent claim is invalid for obviousness where it fails to satisfy the nonobviousness requirement of 35 U.S.C. § 103,\textsuperscript{176} which provides:

\begin{quote}
A patent for a claimed invention may not be obtained, notwithstanding that the claimed invention is not identically disclosed as set forth in section 102, if the differences between the claimed invention and the prior art are such that the claimed invention as a whole would have been obvious before the effective filing date of the claimed invention to a person having ordinary skill in the art to which the claimed invention pertains. Patentability shall not be negated by the manner in which the invention was made.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{171} See Kori Corp. v. Wilco Marsh Buggies & Draglines, Inc., 708 F.2d 151, 154 (5th Cir. 1983) (“The defense of anticipation, derived principally from § 102(a), is strictly technical, requiring a showing of actual identity in the prior art.” (footnote omitted)).

\textsuperscript{172} Krippelz, 667 F.3d at 1265.

\textsuperscript{173} Taurus IP, LLC v. DaimlerChrysler Corp., 726 F.3d 1306, 1322 (Fed. Cir. 2013).

\textsuperscript{174} Id.

\textsuperscript{175} Ericsson, Inc. v. D-Link Sys., Inc., 773 F.3d 1201, 1214 (Fed. Cir. 2014).


\textsuperscript{177} 35 U.S.C. § 103 (2012). The quoted text of § 103 is that which is currently in force as of the enactment of the Leahy-Smith America Invents Act (“AIA”). The previous version of § 103 remains in effect for patent applications filed before the AIA took effect. 2-5 CHISUM, supra note 154, § 5.01. These provisions are almost identical except that the relevant time frame for the old version is “at the time the invention was made,” whereas in the AIA version, the time frame is “before the effective filing date of the claimed invention.” Compare 35 U.S.C. § 103 (2012), with 35 U.S.C. § 103 (2006). Additional stylistic differences also exist, but these differences do not affect the meaning of the statute.
Unlike anticipation, a claim may be invalid for obviousness even if no single prior-art reference discloses the claimed invention.\footnote{178}

Importantly, whether a claim is invalid for obviousness is an objective inquiry.\footnote{179} The inquiry is not whether a claimed invention is subjectively obvious to the inventor or a particular judge, jury, or expert witness;\footnote{180} instead, the question is whether the claimed invention would have been obvious to a hypothetical “person having ordinary skill in the art to which the claimed invention pertains” (“PHOSITA”).\footnote{181} This hypothetical PHOSITA is analogous to the reasonably prudent person used in applying the objective standard for duty of care in negligence law.\footnote{182}

In 1966, in \textit{Graham v. John Deere Co. of Kansas City}, the Supreme Court provided the framework for determining the question of obviousness under § 103.\footnote{183} And in the 2007 case \textit{KSR International Co. v. Teleflex Inc.}, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that courts today must continue to use this framework in analyzing obviousness.\footnote{184} Using the \textit{Graham} framework, a court must proceed as follows:

Under § 103, [1] the scope and content of the prior art are to be determined; [2] differences between the prior art and the claims at issue are to be ascertained; and [3] the level of ordinary skill in the pertinent art resolved. Against this background, the ob-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{178}{2-5 CHISUM, \textit{supra} note 154, § 5.01.}
\item \footnote{179}{KSR, 550 U.S. at 406.}
\item \footnote{180}{Life Techs., Inc. v. Clontech Lab., Inc., 224 F.3d 1320, 1325 (Fed. Cir. 2000) ("Because patentability is assessed from the perspective of the hypothetical person of ordinary skill in the art, information regarding the subjective motivations of inventors is not material."); 2-5 CHISUM, \textit{supra} note 154, § 5.04 ("We do not measure the knowledge of any particular person, or any particular expert who might testify in the case, but, rather, we measure the knowledge of a hypothetical person skilled in the art, who has thought about the subject matter of the patented invention in the light of that art." (quoting Flour City Architectural Metals v. Alpana Aluminum Prods., Inc., 454 F.2d 98, 107–08 (8th Cir. 1972))).}
\item \footnote{181}{35 U.S.C. § 103 (2012); see 2-5 CHISUM, \textit{supra} note 154, § 5.04.}
\item \footnote{182}{2-5 CHISUM, \textit{supra} note 154, § 5.04 (citing Nickola v. Peterson, 580 F.2d 898, 911 (6th Cir. 1978)).}
\item \footnote{183}{383 U.S. 1, 17–18 (1966).}
\item \footnote{184}{530 U.S. 398, 406 (2007) (citing \textit{Graham}, 383 U.S. at 15–18).}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
viousness or nonobviousness of the subject matter is determined. Such secondary considerations as commercial success, long felt but unsolved needs, failure of others, etc., might be utilized to give light to the circumstances surrounding the origin of the subject matter sought to be patented. As indicia of obviousness or nonobviousness, these inquiries may have relevancy.\textsuperscript{185}

Although the Court in \textit{Graham} characterized “the ultimate question of [obviousness] as one of law,”\textsuperscript{186} the Court recognized that this framework involves “factual inquiries.”\textsuperscript{187}

Indeed, the question that arose in \textit{KSR} presents a good example of how a court analyzes the issue of obviousness.\textsuperscript{188} The claim at issue in \textit{KSR} covered “a mechanism for combining an electronic sensor with an adjustable automobile pedal so the pedal’s position can be transmitted to a computer that controls the throttle in the vehicle’s engine.”\textsuperscript{189} This invention allowed drivers to adjust the position of the accelerator pedal to accommodate drivers of different heights, while at the same time including an electronic—rather than mechanical—sensor for determining the position of the pedal and sending the appropriate signals to a computer-controlled throttle.\textsuperscript{190} The claim at issue covered “a position-adjustable pedal assembly with an electronic pedal position sensor attached to the support member of the pedal assembly” in a fixed position.\textsuperscript{191}

The Court applied the \textit{Graham} framework and held that the scope and content of the prior art included a patent issued to Asano, which disclosed an adjustable pedal with a fixed pivot point (albeit with a mechanical—rather than electronic—position sensor), and a patent issued to Smith, which disclosed a pedal with an elec-

\textsuperscript{185} \textit{Graham}, 383 U.S. at 17–18.
\textsuperscript{186} \textit{Id.} at 17.
\textsuperscript{187} \textit{Id.}.
\textsuperscript{188} \textit{KSR Int’l Co.}, 550 U.S. 398.
\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Id.} at 405.
\textsuperscript{190} \textit{Id.} at 408–09.
tronic sensor mounted in a fixed position on the pedal assembly. The Court then concluded that there was “little difference between the teachings of Asano and Smith and the adjustable electronic pedal disclosed in” the claim at issue. Indeed, the Court noted that the district court “found that combining Asano with a pivot-mounted pedal position sensor fell within the scope of” the claim at issue. Additionally, the Court agreed with the district court’s finding that the level of ordinary skill in the art was “an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering (or an equivalent amount of industry experience) [and] familiarity with pedal control systems for vehicles.” From these facts, the Court concluded that the district court correctly held that it would have been “obvious to a person of ordinary skill to combine Asano with a pivot-mounted pedal position sensor.” Therefore, the Court concluded that the claim at issue was invalid for obviousness.

C. The Federal Circuit Classifies the Issue of Obviousness as a Question of Law Based on Underlying Facts

The Federal Circuit has repeatedly stated that the ultimate issue of invalidity for obviousness is a question of law based on underlying factual determinations. Thus, the Federal Circuit reviews the ultimate question of obviousness de novo. But the court reviews the underlying factual determinations for substantial evidence in a jury trial and clear error in a bench trial.

192 Id. at 408–09. The Court noted that the district court had found that the scope and content of the prior art also included other references that disclosed similar adjustable pedals and pedals using electronic sensors in fixed positions. Id.
193 Id. at 422.
194 Id. at 423.
195 Id. at 412–13 (alteration in original) (quoting Teleflex, 298 F. Supp. 2d at 590).
196 Id. at 424. The Court noted that a person of ordinary skill in the art “would have seen the benefits” of combining Asano and Smith to achieve the invention of the claim at issue. Id. at 422.
197 Id. at 427.
199 See Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1565–66.
200 See Sanofi-Aventis Deutschland GmbH v. Glenmark Pharm. Inc., USA, 748 F.3d 1354, 1358 (Fed. Cir. 2014).
The Federal Circuit confronted the issue of whether the ultimate question of obviousness is one of law or fact in 1987 in *Panduit Corp. v. Dennison Manufacturing Co.* In *Panduit*, after a bench trial, the district court issued a judgment that the relevant patent claims were invalid for obviousness. On appeal, the Federal Circuit reversed the district court’s judgment and held that the claims were not invalid. The Supreme Court then granted the accused infringer’s petition for a writ of certiorari based on the argument that “the Federal Circuit ignored Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 52(a) in substituting its view of factual issues for that of the district court.” The Court criticized the Federal Circuit for failing to even “mention Rule 52(a),” failing to “explicitly apply the clearly-error standard to any of the district court’s findings on obviousness,” and failing to “explain why, if it was of that view, Rule 52(a) had no applicability to this issue.” The Court noted that it “lacked the benefit of the Federal Circuit’s informed opinion on the complex issue of the degree to which the obviousness determination is one of fact.” Thus, the Court vacated the Federal Circuit’s original opinion and remanded the case to the Federal Circuit “for further consideration in light of Rule 52(a).”

On remand, the Federal Circuit again reversed the district court’s holding that the relevant claims were invalid for obviousness. In an opinion written by Chief Judge Markey, the court

---

202 810 F.2d 1561 (Fed. Cir. 1987).
204 *Id.*
206 *Id.* at 810. Rule 52(a) provides that courts of appeal must give deference to the fact findings of district courts: “Findings of fact, whether based on oral or other evidence, must not be set aside unless clearly erroneous, and the reviewing court must give due regard to the trial court’s opportunity to judge the witnesses’ credibility.” FED. R. CIV. P. 52(a)(6).
207 *Panduit*, 475 U.S. at 811.
208 *Id.*
209 *Id.*
analyzed in detail whether the obviousness determination under § 103 is one of fact or law. The court began by noting that this determination involves issues of both fact and law. The court gave examples of the types of facts that may be involved in the analysis:


The court held that it must defer to the findings of the district court concerning these facts, reversing such findings only if they are clearly erroneous under Rule 52(a).

The late Chief Judge Howard T. Markey was a well-respected leader in patent law. See generally Paul R. Michel, A Memoir of the First Chief Judge by the Fifth Chief Judge, 6 J. Marshall Rev. Intell. Prop. L. 310 (2007); Antonin Scalia, The Legacy of Judge Howard T. Markey, 8 J. Marshall Rev. Intell. Prop. L. (Special Issue) 1 (2009). After a distinguished career as a patent practitioner and then a judge on the Court of Customs and Patent Appeals, he was selected to be the first chief judge of the Federal Circuit. Michel, supra, at 310. He was an “extremely active jurist, sitting in over 5,000 cases on the Court of Customs and Patent Appeals and the Federal Circuit and sitting as a visiting judge in over 1,400 cases, both civil and criminal, in every one of the Regional Circuit Courts.” Scalia, supra, at 1 (footnotes omitted). And “[h]e authored over 1,000 opinions, numerous articles on the law and delivered countless speeches and lectures.” Id. (footnotes omitted).

See Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1566–68.

Id. at 1566.

Id. These facts are a detailed description of those that the Supreme Court outlined in Graham v. John Deere. For a brief discussion of these so-called Graham factors, see supra text accompanying notes 183–87.

See Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1569. The court stated:

Rule 52(a) is applicable to all findings on the four inquiries listed in Graham: scope and content of prior art; differences between prior art and claimed invention; level of skill; and objective evidence (secondary considerations). The last may include: commercial success due to the invention; failure of others; long felt need; movement of the skilled in a different direction; skepticism of
But as far as the ultimate conclusion of obviousness or nonobviousness, the Federal Circuit held that this question is one of law. The question to be answered in this analysis is whether the claimed invention would have been obvious to a hypothetical PHOSITA. Likening this hypothetical PHOSITA to the reasonably prudent person used in negligence law, the court reasoned that this question is one of law:

To reach a proper conclusion under § 103, the [decision maker] must step backward in time and into the shoes worn by that “person” when the invention was unknown and just before it was made. In light of all the evidence, the [decision maker] must then determine whether the patent challenger has convincingly established that the claimed invention as a whole would have been obvious at that time to that person.

The court concluded that “[t]he answer to that question partakes more of the nature of law than of fact, for it is an ultimate conclusion based on a foundation formed of all the probative facts.”

The Federal Circuit took a functional approach in determining whether the ultimate question of obviousness should be a question of law or fact. The court analyzed such “functional factors, including the decisional process, a literal impression in which the inquiry ‘partakes’ more of law, drawn from facts, and precedent, cite-
ing the circuits and scholars and analyzing previous Supreme Court dicta. Importantly, the court reasoned that treating the obviousness inquiry as a question of law would “facilitate a consistent application of that statute in the courts and in the Patent and Trademark Office [‘PTO’].” The court ultimately held that the issue of obviousness is a question of law subject to factual underpinnings.

III. THE ULTIMATE QUESTION OF OBVIOUSNESS SHOULD PROPERLY BE A QUESTION OF FACT AND REVIEWED BY THE FEDERAL CIRCUIT WITH DEFERENCE

The Federal Circuit was incorrect in Panduit in holding that the ultimate issue of obviousness should be treated as a question of law. Instead, this issue should be treated as a question of fact. This Part considers the reasons why. Section I.A begins by analyzing why the Federal Circuit’s reasoning in Panduit was flawed. Next, Section I.B discusses how the Supreme Court’s statement in Graham that the ultimate question of obviousness is one of law is not properly supported by precedent. Section I.C considers how treating obviousness as a question of law is inconsistent with how the Federal Circuit treats anticipation and infringement. Finally, Section I.D concludes that even though obviousness is supposed to be a question of law, district courts nonetheless treat the issue as a de facto question of fact.

A. The Federal Circuit’s Reasoning in Panduit that the Ultimate Question of Obviousness Is a Question of Law Is Flawed

The Federal Circuit’s reasoning in Panduit that the ultimate question of obviousness is a question of law is flawed. The

---

222 Id.
223 Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1566; Casey et al., supra note 3, at 320 (quoting Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1567).
224 Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1566; Casey et al., supra note 3, at 320 (citing Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1566).
225 Panduit, 810 F.2d 1561.
226 Id. at 1566–67.
227 For a discussion of the Federal Circuit’s reasoning in the Panduit case, see supra Section I.C. In addition to holding that the ultimate question of obviousness is a question of law, the Federal Circuit in Panduit confirmed that the obviousness determination is
court’s first instance of faulty reasoning is in holding that the obviousness “determination engages [the] court in an exercise legal in nature.” But the obviousness determination is not legal in nature. To be “legal in nature” under the traditional definition, the issue should involve “fact-free general principles that are applicable to all, or at least to many, disputes and not simply to the one sub judice.” And such a “legal” issue should be “a statement of a general principle or rule, made in advance of a case, awaiting application to particular facts that may arise.” But the question of obviousness does not meet either of these definitions. Instead, the question of whether a particular claim in a particular patent is invalid for obviousness affects only that claim and that patent. The determination does not have application beyond the case sub judice. It is simply not “an exercise legal in nature.”

Moreover, the fact that a determination of invalidity has preclusive effect does not turn obviousness into a question of law. The Supreme Court held in *Blonder-Tongue Laboratories, Inc. v. University of Illinois Foundation* that whenever a court declares a patent claim to be invalid in an infringement action, that claim is dead to the whole world and cannot be reasserted by the patentee against a different party in a different action. This principle of non-mutual collateral estoppel applies regardless of the grounds for validity—

---

Based on factual underpinnings, which are to be reviewed with deference. *Panduit*, 810 F.2d at 1568–69. This Article does not question this holding, which is plainly correct in the author’s opinion.

---

228 Id. at 1566.
229 Id.
230 Casey et al., *supra* note 3, at 317 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Louis, *supra* note 124, at 993 n.3).
233 *Panduit*, 810 F.2d at 1566.
234 402 U.S. 313, 350 (1971); see also MUELLER, *supra* note 17, at 581 (“[O]nce a U.S. patent has been declared invalid, it is dead and cannot be resuscitated.”). This result follows from the doctrine of non-mutual collateral estoppel, and thus it requires that the patentee “had a full and fair opportunity to litigate” the invalidity issue in question. *Blonder-Tongue*, 402 U.S. at 329.
whether obviousness, anticipation, or anything else. Thus, an argument exists that an obviousness determination is legal in nature because it is “applicable to . . . many[] disputes and not simply to the one sub judice.” But many of the grounds for invalidity other than obviousness—such as anticipation—are questions of fact. If the application of the Blonder-Tongue collateral-estoppel rule could make obviousness a question of law, then it logically would have to convert all these other grounds for invalidity into questions of law as well. But that result makes no sense. These other grounds for invalidity are questions of fact because they are factual in nature. So the Blonder-Tongue rule cannot properly be the reason that obviousness is considered a question of law.

Another example of faulty reasoning in Panduit was when the Federal Circuit likened the PHOSITA to the reasonably prudent person used in negligence law. The court reasoned that because the obviousness determination is objective and relies on the PHOSITA, whether a claimed invention would have been obvious to a PHOSITA is “more of the nature of law than of fact, for it is an ultimate conclusion based on a foundation formed of all the

236 Casey et al., supra note 3, at 317 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Louis, supra note 124, at 993 n.3).
238 Indeed, such a rule would logically have to convert any issue that might have a preclusive effect under collateral estoppel into a question of law.

240 See Panduit Corp. v. Dennison Mfg. Co., 810 F.2d 1561, 1566 (Fed. Cir. 1987) (“With the involved facts determined, the [decision maker] confronts a ghost, i.e., ‘a person having ordinary skill in the art,’ not unlike the ‘reasonable man’ and other ghosts in the law.”).
probative facts.”241 This reason is faulty for at least two reasons: (1) negligence is a question of fact, not a question of law; and (2) just because obviousness—like negligence—is an “ultimate fact,” does not mean that courts must treat obviousness as a question of law.

First, negligence is not a question of law—courts generally treat negligence as a question of fact.242 Thus, if the Federal Circuit wishes to analogize the obviousness determination to the negligence determination,243 then it must treat the obviousness determination as a question of fact.

Second, although the issue of obviousness—like negligence—is an “ultimate fact,”244 such an ultimate fact is not automatically a question of law.245 In a negligence cause of action, the issue of whether the defendant engaged in negligent conduct is a question of ultimate fact.246 And this ultimate fact “reduces to a series of purely factual determinations.”247 Such determinations include “a determination of the burden of precautions, the magnitude of the injury, the likelihood that the injury would occur if the defendant failed to take the precautions, and the relation among these variables, all of which are factual, and their relation to each other likewise.”248

Similarly, the obviousness determination is an ultimate fact.249 It embodies the “ultimate issue for resolution,”250 “implies the
application of standards of law,” 251 involves the “characterization of historical facts,” 252 is “outcome-determinative,” 253 and—just like the negligence determination—“reduces to a series of purely factual determinations.” 254 These factual determinations 255 are analogous to the factual determinations involved in the issue of negligent conduct. But this reasoning runs counter to the Federal Circuit’s assertion in *Panduit* that if the obviousness determination is “itself a fact, it would be part of its own foundation.” 256 Therefore, contrary to the Federal Circuit’s holding that the obviousness determination is a question of law based on factual underpinnings, 257 the obviousness determination is really an ultimate fact that incorporates “a series of purely factual determinations” 258—just like the negligence determination. 259 And, like the negligence determination, the obviousness determination should be a question of fact. 260

250 Childress, *supra* note 104, at 142 (quoting East v. Romine, Inc., 518 F.2d 332, 339 (5th Cir. 1975)).
251 Schwarzer et al., *supra* note 111, at 456–57.
252 *Id.* (emphasis omitted).
253 *Id.*
254 *Thomas*, 288 F.3d at 308.
255 These factual determinations include:

1. what a prior art patent as a whole discloses;
2. what it in fact disclosed to workers in the art;
3. what differences exist between the entire prior art, or a whole prior art structure, and the whole claimed invention;
4. what the differences enabled the claimed subject matter as a whole to achieve;
5. that others for years sought and failed to arrive at the claimed invention;
6. that one of those others copied it;
7. that the invention met on its merits with outstanding commercial success.

257 *Id.*
258 *Id.*
259 *Thomas*, 288 F.3d at 308.
260 See *id.*; Hillen, *supra* note 242, at 196 n.45 (noting that the Federal Circuit has made the “opposite choice” from negligence law in holding that the ultimate question of obviousness is a question of law “where the distinction between foundational facts and ultimate conclusions so closely parallels the analogous tort doctrine”).
261 See Beutler, *supra* note 49, at 466 (noting the argument that “patent law should be treated no differently than any other area of the law and that to limit a jury’s role in the legal question of obviousness is inappropriate, since there is no reason to limit a jury’s participation in questions of law outside the patent realm”).
Finally, the Federal Circuit incorrectly reasoned that obviousness should be a question of law to “facilitate a consistent application of that statute in the courts and in the Patent and Trademark Office.”261 First, treating obviousness as a question of law would not lead to a consistent application of obviousness law in the courts. Courts are no more experts at making an obviousness determination than juries. Typical district-court judges—like typical jurors—do not have an engineering or science background. And even most of the judges of the Federal Circuit do not have engineering or science backgrounds.262 Therefore, leaving the decision of obviousness to the Federal Circuit does not necessarily promote uniformity among courts. Moreover, any time the Federal Circuit holds that a patent claim is invalid for obviousness under a de novo standard of review, the court necessarily disagrees with the determination of the Patent Office that the claim in question was patentable. Thus, treating the ultimate issue of obviousness as a question of law does nothing to “facilitate a consistent application of [the obviousness] statute . . . in the Patent and Trademark Office” either.263

B. The Supreme Court’s Statement in Graham that the Ultimate Question of Obviousness Is One of Law Is Not Properly Supported by Precedent

In holding that the ultimate question of obviousness is a question of law, the Federal Circuit relied on the Supreme Court’s treatment of the issue as a question of law in *Graham v. John Deere Co. of Kansas City*.264 But the Supreme Court’s conclusion in *Graham* is merely a conclusory statement that rests on shaky

---

261 Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1567; Casey et al., *supra* note 3, at 320 (quoting Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1567); *see also* Hillen, *supra* note 242, at 216–17 (arguing that the Federal Circuit should review obviousness with no deference to help promote consistency in patent law).


263 Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1567.

264 383 U.S. 1 (1966); Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1567. In Panduit, the Federal Circuit further noted that this statement was consistent with the Court’s answer to the obviousness question in *Graham* “because the validity issue in *Graham* turned on that answer and because [the Court] disagreed with conclusions reached below, did not remand, described no finding as ‘clearly erroneous,’ and did not mention Rule 52(a).” Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1567.
precedent. In *Graham*, the Court stated that “the ultimate question of patent validity is one of law,” citing a 1950 case, *Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. v. Supermarket Equipment Corp.*, as supporting authority. But this citation was not to the controlling majority opinion of *Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.*; instead, the Court cited Justice Douglas’s concurring opinion without even identifying it as such. And because it is a concurring opinion, it does not have the precedential value that a majority opinion has.

Moreover, even if the concurring opinion in *Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.* had any precedential value, it would still be weak precedent. The sentence of *Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.* that the Court cited in *Graham* states: “The standard of patentability is a constitutional standard; and the question of validity of a patent is a question of law.” In his concurrence, Justice Douglas cited only one authority to support this statement: *Mahn v. Harwood*. But *Mahn* fails to support Justice Douglas’s proposition that invalidity for obviousness is a question of law because the issue decided in *Mahn* was quite different than the issue decided in *Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.*


267 Id.

268 See 21 C.J.S. Courts § 189 (2016) (“A concurring opinion, while persuasive, is not binding, and does not constitute authority under the doctrine of stare decisis, or have any precedential value.” (footnotes omitted)).

269 See Lane, supra note 265, at 1170–71 (criticizing Justice Douglas’s reliance on *Mahn v. Harwood* for the proposition that an appellate court owes no deference to a district court’s conclusion on obviousness).


271 Id. (citing *Mahn v. Harwood*, 112 U.S. 354, 358 (1884)).

272 See Lane, supra note 265, at 1171 (describing how “*Mahn* stands for the proposition that the federal district courts may adjudicate the validity of issued and reissued patents in an infringement action free of the factual determinations made by a patent examiner” rather than the standard of review an appellate court should apply when reviewing a district court’s conclusion on invalidity for obviousness).
In *Mahn*, obviousness was not at issue—what was at issue was the validity of a reissue patent. The Court affirmed the circuit court’s holding that the reissue claims were invalid. The Court reasoned that laches applied because the patentee waited too long to apply for a broadened reissue patent. In reaching this decision, the Court held:

> [T]he question whether the application for correction and reissue is or is not made within reasonable time is, in most, if not all, of such cases, a question which the court can determine as a question of law by comparing the patent itself with the original patent, and, if necessary, with the record of its inception.

This issue is quite different than obviousness, so the holding of *Mahn* fails to support Justice Douglas’s assertion that obviousness must be a question of law.

And even if the issues in *Mahn* and *Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co.* were similar enough to compel the same conclusion—i.e., that because the application of laches to a reissue patent was a question

---

273 The process of having a patent reissued allows a patentee “to correct a patent that is . . . wholly or partly inoperative or invalid.” 4A-15 CHISUM, supra note 154, § 15.01. Under today’s law, one way in which a patent can be defective is if the claims are too narrow, thus “failing to protect the full scope of the invention.” *Id.* And today’s law freely permits such a broadening reissue if it meets all the other requirements and is applied for within two years of the original issue date. 35 U.S.C. § 251(d) (2012). But, in 1884, when *Mahn* was decided, “a long series of Supreme Court decisions [had] placed limits on reissues that broadened the scope of the original claims.” 4A-15 CHISUM, supra note 154, § 15.02. Indeed, the law at the time that *Mahn* was decided allowed a broadening reissue only if the patentee filed the reissue application without any significant delay such that the defense of laches would not apply. Miller v. Brass Co., 104 U.S. 350, 356 (1881) (“But in reference to reissues made for the purpose of enlarging the scope of the patent, the rule of laches should be strictly applied; and no one should be relieved who has slept upon his rights, and has thus led the public to rely on the implied disclaimer involved in the terms of the original patent.”).

274 *Mahn*, 112 U.S. at 357 (“[T]he only object of the reissue was to enlarge the claims . . . . Nothing was altered, nothing was changed, but to multiply the claims and to make them broader.”).

275 *Id.* at 363–64.

276 *Id.*

277 *Id.* at 360 (emphasis added).

of law, obviousness must also be a question of law—this holding also does not support Justice Douglas’s assertion. The *Mahn* holding is merely that the Court could decide that particular case as a matter of law—not that it could decide all cases involving laches and reissue applications as a matter of law.\(^{279}\) Thus, the Court’s holding really was that the laches issue in *Mahn* was a question of law because the facts were not in dispute.\(^{280}\) Today, this case would allow a court to issue summary judgment\(^{281}\) or a judgment as a matter of law\(^{282}\) because the facts were not in dispute and no reasonable juror could hold otherwise.

But Justice Douglas did not actually cite this holding; instead, he cited the following dictum\(^{283}\) from *Mahn*:

> In cases of patents for inventions, a valid defense . . . often arises where the question is whether the thing patented amounts to a patentable invention.\(^{284}\) This being a question of law, the courts are not bound by the decision of the commissioner, although he must necessarily pass upon it.\(^{285}\)

This statement does not support Justice Douglas’s assertion that in reviewing a trial court’s holding in an infringement lawsuit, validity is a question of law. Instead, this statement in *Mahn* merely means that a trial court may review a patentability determination of the PTO without deference to the Office’s factual findings.\(^{286}\)

\(^{279}\) See *Mahn*, 112 U.S. at 360 (holding that this issue could be decided as a question of law “in most, if not all, of such cases” (emphasis added)).

\(^{280}\) In other words, this case would allow a court today to issue summary judgment, see Fed. R. Civ. P. 56, or a judgment as a matter of law, see Fed. R. Civ. P. 50, because the facts were not in dispute.

\(^{281}\) See Fed. R. Civ. P. 56.


\(^{283}\) Lane, supra note 265, at 1171 (“[T]he portion of *Mahn* cited by Justice Douglas may be dictum.”).

\(^{284}\) This question today would be called one of nonobviousness. See Graham v. John Deere Co., 383 U.S. 1, 14 (1966) (describing that before Congress enacted § 103 of the 1952 Patent Act, the analogous test to nonobviousness was the judicially created “invention” requirement (citing S. Rep. No. 82-1979, at 6 (1952); H.R. Rep. No. 82-1923, at 7 (1952), reprinted in 1952 U.S.C.C.A.N. 2394)).


\(^{286}\) Lane, supra note 265, at 1171 (“*Mahn* stands for the proposition that the federal district courts may adjudicate the validity of issued and reissued patents in an
Thus, the statement that Justice Douglas cited does not support his assertion that patent validity must be a question of law.

Furthermore, at the time that the Supreme Court decided *Graham*, other Supreme Court authority existed that held that validity was a question of fact.\textsuperscript{287} Indeed, *Mahn* was the only case available that even hinted that validity was a question of law.\textsuperscript{288} At least three other pre-*Graham* cases stated that validity was a question of fact.\textsuperscript{289} For example, in 1924, the Court very clearly stated in *Thomson Spot Welder Co. v. Ford Motor Co.* that “[t]he question whether an improvement requires mere mechanical skill or the exercise of the faculty of invention, is one of fact; and in an action at law for infringement is to be left to the determination of the jury.”\textsuperscript{290} Thus, when *Graham* was decided in 1966, the number of cases stating that validity was a question of fact outnumbered those stating that it was a question of law by a ratio of at least three to one.\textsuperscript{291}

\textbf{C. Treating Obviousness as a Question of Law Is Inconsistent with How the Federal Circuit Treats Anticipation and Infringement}

Treating obviousness as a question of law is inconsistent with how the Federal Circuit treats two related doctrines: anticipation and infringement. The court treats the ultimate question of whether a patent claim is invalid for anticipation\textsuperscript{292} as a question of

\footnotesize{
287 \textit{Id.} at 1170 n.77.
288 \textit{Id.} at 1170.
289 \textit{Id.} at 1170 n.77; \textit{see} Dow Chem. Co. v. Halliburton Oil Well Cementing Co., 324 U.S. 320, 322 (1945) (“The conflicting views of the appellate courts concerning the validity of the . . . patent led us to grant certiorari in this case, and oblige us to decide independently the factual issue of validity.” (emphasis added) (citation omitted)); United States v. Esnault-Pelterie, 299 U.S. 201, 205 (1936) (“Validity and infringement are ultimate facts on which depends the question of liability.” (emphasis added)); Thomson Spot Welder Co. v. Ford Motor Co., 265 U.S. 445, 446 (1924).
291 Lane, \textit{supra} note 265, at 1170 n.77.
292 For a discussion of anticipation, \textit{see supra} Section I.A.
}
The court also treats infringement—both literal and under the doctrine of equivalents—as a question of fact. The obviousness determination is similar, or at least analogous, to the determination of anticipation and infringement, yet the court treats obviousness as a question of law. Section I.C.1 discusses anticipation and obviousness, and Section I.C.2 examines infringement and obviousness.

1. Anticipation and Obviousness

Although anticipation and obviousness are different grounds for invalidating a patent claim, they share important similarities such that they should both be treated as questions of fact. Namely, they both involve the determination of what a hypothetical PHOSITa would think. Thus, because anticipation is a question of fact, obviousness should likewise be a question of fact.

Anticipation is properly a question of fact because it is essentially a question of historical fact—whether the prior-art reference

---

293 See, e.g., Taurus IP, LLC v. DaimlerChrysler Corp., 726 F.3d 1306, 1322 (Fed. Cir. 2013). Courts have treated anticipation as a question of fact since at least the nineteenth century. See Magin v. Karle, 150 U.S. 387, 391 (1893) (treating anticipation as a question of fact); Haines v. McLaughlin, 135 U.S. 584, 597 (1890) (quoting with approval a jury instruction stating that “[t]he question of anticipation is purely a question of fact, and is exclusively for the jury to determine”).

294 See, e.g., Cadence Pharm. Inc. v. Exela PharmSci Inc., 780 F.3d 1364, 1368 (Fed. Cir. 2015).

295 A determination that a patent claim is invalid for anticipation means that the Patent Office should not have issued the claim because it failed to meet the novelty requirement of 35 U.S.C. § 102. See, e.g., Mueller, supra note 17, at 697 (defining “anticipation”); id. at 706 (defining “novelty”). But a determination that a claim is invalid for obviousness means that the Patent Office should not have issued the claim because it failed to meet the nonobviousness requirement of § 103. See, e.g., id. (defining “nonobviousness”). For a discussion of anticipation and obviousness, see supra Sections I.A–B.

296 Compare Advanced Display Sys., Inc. v. Kent State Univ., 212 F.3d 1272, 1282 (Fed. Cir. 2000) (“[I]nvalidity by anticipation requires that the four corners of a single, prior art document describe every element of the claimed invention, either expressly or inherently, such that a person of ordinary skill in the art could practice the invention without undue experimentation.” (emphasis added)), with Senju Pharm. Co. v. Lupin Ltd., 780 F.3d 1337, 1341 (Fed. Cir. 2015) (“An obviousness inquiry assesses ‘the differences between the subject matter sought to be patented and the prior art’ to ascertain whether ‘the subject matter as a whole would have been obvious at the time the invention was made to a person having ordinary skill in the art to which said subject matter pertains.’” (emphasis added) (quoting 35 U.S.C. § 103(a) (2006))).
in question discloses each and every limitation of the claim at issue.\textsuperscript{297} Indeed, anticipation is a highly technical issue.\textsuperscript{298} Therefore, the Federal Circuit properly treats anticipation as a question of fact\textsuperscript{299} reviewed under either the clearly erroneous\textsuperscript{300} or substantial-evidence\textsuperscript{301} standard, as appropriate.

In contrast, as discussed above,\textsuperscript{302} instead of being a “four-corners” type defense like anticipation,\textsuperscript{303} the crux of the obviousness analysis is objective and relates to the hypothetical PHOSITA.\textsuperscript{304} The fact finder must determine obviousness by referring to this PHOSITA and answering the question of whether the claimed invention would have been obvious to a PHOSITA before the effective filing date.\textsuperscript{305}

But anticipation and obviousness are similar in that they both require the fact finder to refer to a hypothetical PHOSITA. In anticipation, the question of whether a patent claim is invalid is whether “the four corners of a single, prior art document describe every element of the claimed invention, either expressly or inherently, such that a person of ordinary skill in the art could practice the invention without undue experimentation.”\textsuperscript{306} Thus, if anticipation is a question of fact even though it requires the fact finder to make a factual determination as to what a hypothetical PHOSITA would think, then obviousness is not foreclosed from being a question of fact even though it, too, requires the fact finder to make a factual determination as to what a hypothetical PHOSITA would think.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{297} Krippelz v. Ford Motor Co., 667 F.3d 1261, 1265 (Fed. Cir. 2012).
\bibitem{298} See Kori Corp. v. Wilco Marsh Buggies & Draglines, Inc., 708 F.2d 151, 154 (5th Cir. 1983) ("The defense of anticipation, derived principally from § 102(a), is strictly technical, requiring a showing of actual identity in the prior art." (footnote omitted)).
\bibitem{299} Taurus IP, LLC v. DaimlerChrysler Corp., 726 F.3d 1306, 1322 (Fed. Cir. 2013).
\bibitem{300} Id.
\bibitem{301} Ericsson, Inc. v. D-Link Sys., Inc., 773 F.3d 1201, 1214 (Fed. Cir. 2014).
\bibitem{302} See supra Section I.B (discussing the issue of invalidity due to obviousness).
\bibitem{303} See Advanced Display Sys., Inc. v. Kent State Univ., 212 F.3d 1272, 1282 (Fed. Cir. 2000) ("[I]nvalidity by anticipation requires that the four corners of a single, prior art document describe every element of the claimed invention . . . .").
\bibitem{305} See Graham, 383 U.S. at 17.
\bibitem{306} Advanced Display, 212 F.3d at 1282 (emphasis added).
\end{thebibliography}
2. Infringement and Obviousness

Parallels exist between infringement\(^{307}\) and obviousness such that because infringement is a question of fact,\(^{308}\) obviousness should also be a question of fact. Determining whether the accused infringer practiced the patentee’s actual “patented invention” and thus infringed requires a two-step analysis.\(^{309}\) First, “the court determines the scope and meaning of the patent claims asserted . . . .”\(^{310}\) Second, the fact finder “compares the claims to the allegedly infringing device[].”\(^{311}\) If this comparison reveals that each and every limitation of the claimed invention is met by the accused device, then the device literally infringes the claim in question.\(^{312}\)

But even if the accused device does not literally infringe, it nonetheless may infringe under the doctrine of equivalents.\(^{313}\) The existence of the doctrine of equivalents “ensures that the scope of a patent is not limited to its literal terms but instead embraces all equivalents to the claims described.”\(^{314}\) The Supreme Court originally created the doctrine of equivalents “to prevent competitors from avoiding infringement by making unimportant and insubstantial differences to their technology.”\(^{315}\) Another important policy rationale supporting the doctrine of equivalents is that claim language may be incapable of “captur[ing] every nuance of the invention or describe[ing] with complete precision the range of its novelty.”\(^{316}\) To show infringement under the doctrine of equivalents, the

---

\(^{307}\) Patent infringement occurs when someone “without authority makes, uses, offers to sell, or sells any patented invention, within the United States or imports into the United States any patented invention . . . .” 35 U.S.C. § 271(a) (2012).

\(^{308}\) See, e.g., Cadence Pharm. Inc. v. Exela PharmSci Inc., 780 F.3d 1364, 1368 (Fed. Cir. 2015).


\(^{310}\) Id. (quoting Cybor Corp. v. FAS Techs., Inc., 138 F.3d 1448, 1454 (Fed. Cir. 1998)).

\(^{311}\) Id. (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Cybor, 138 F.3d at 1454).


\(^{315}\) Id.

\(^{316}\) Festo, 535 U.S. at 731.
patentee must prove that each and every claim limitation is either “literally or equivalently present in the accused device.” As mentioned above, both literal infringement and infringement under the doctrine of equivalents are questions of fact.

Determinations of literal infringement and anticipation are mirror images of each other with respect to time. As the maxim goes: “That which would literally infringe if later in time anticipates if earlier than the date of the invention.” Indeed, the test for anticipation “is the same test as for literal infringement.” For anticipation, the fact finder must look backward from the issue date of the patent and determine whether a reference that came before the patent discloses each and every limitation of the claim at issue. And for literal infringement, the fact finder must look forward from the issue date of the patent and determine whether an accused device, composition, method, or manufacture meets each and every limitation of the claim at issue. Because the tests for anticipation

---

317 Energy Transp. Grp., Inc. v. William Demant Holding A/S, 697 F.3d 1342, 1352 (Fed. Cir. 2012) (quoting Sage Prods., Inc. v. Devon Indus., Inc. 126 F.3d 1420, 1423 (Fed. Cir. 1997)). To show that a limitation is present equivalently, the patentee must prove that the element of the device is insubstantially different from the corresponding claim limitation. Warner-Jenkinson Co. v. Hilton Davis Chem. Co., 520 U.S. 17, 39 (1997). The insubstantial-differences test “simply asks whether there is a substantial difference between an element of the patented product and the accused product.” Holbrook & Osborn, supra note 314, at 1368. And one way in which the patentee can show that the element is insubstantially different is by showing that the element performs substantially the same function, substantially the same way, to achieve substantially the same result as the corresponding claim limitation. Warner-Jenkinson, 520 U.S. at 39; Holbrook & Osborn, supra note 314, at 1368. For a discussion of the doctrine of equivalents, see generally MUELLER, supra note 17, at 468-77.


320 Siekman, supra note 319, ¶ 11 (emphasis omitted) (quoting DONALD S. CHISUM & MICHAEL A. JACOBS, UNDERSTANDING INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY LAW § 2C[3][a] at 2-54 (1992)).


and literal infringement are the same, and because the determinations involved are factual in nature, it makes sense that the Federal Circuit treats both of these issues as questions of fact.324

Although the determinations of infringement under the doctrine of equivalents and obviousness are not exact mirror images of each other with respect to time, these determinations are nonetheless analogous and should be treated consistently—as questions of fact.327 Indeed, as one commentator described:

Obviousness is a snare for the patentee; equivalence the bane of an accused infringer. Yet the two concepts have much in common. Each extends around a more definite entity a ghostly penumbra of legal significance. Obviousness expands the obstacles to patentability posed by the disclosures of the prior art; equivalence broadens the reach of the patent beyond what the patentee explicitly claimed.328

323 Siekman, supra note 319, ¶ 11 (emphasis omitted) (quoting CHISUM & JACOBS, supra note 320).
324 See Ericsson, 773 F.3d at 1214.
325 Durham, supra note 319, at 970. “The courts . . . have preserved the distinction” between the doctrine of equivalents and obviousness. Id. “A product infringes by equivalence . . . not because it is an obvious variation of the claimed invention, but because the differences are ‘insubstantial.’” Id. But see Siekman, supra note 319, ¶ 11 (“The interplay between the doctrine of equivalents and obviousness can be summarized by the maxim ‘that which infringes under the doctrine of equivalents, if later, would render obvious, if earlier.’”).
326 See Lewmar Marine, Inc. v. Barent, Inc., 827 F.2d 744, 748 (Fed. Cir. 1987) (“[T]he doctrine of equivalents . . . , if one wished to draw a parallel, is somewhat akin to obviousness.”); Durham, supra note 319, at 970 (“[T]he two concepts [of obviousness and infringement under the doctrine of equivalents] have much in common.”); Siekman, supra note 319, ¶ 11. One commentator has explored treating the determinations under the doctrine of equivalents and obviousness symmetrically. See generally Durham, supra note 319. In other words, “if ‘nonobvious’ changes are enough to distinguish a patentable invention from the prior art, then further ‘nonobvious’ changes should be enough to avoid infringing the patent.” Id. at 969 (emphasis omitted).
327 Hillen, supra note 242, at 198 n.53 (“The striking similarity between the so-called ‘doctrine of equivalence’ [sic] and the obviousness inquiry leads one to wonder how the doctrine of equivalence [sic] could be a ‘determination of fact,’ dictating deference to the trial court’s findings, while obviousness is a legal inquiry open to [plenary] appellate review.” (citation omitted)).
328 Durham, supra note 319, at 970.
Importantly, the ultimate determinations for both infringement under the doctrine of equivalents and invalidity for obviousness involve the PHOSITA. The question for obviousness is whether the claimed invention would have been obvious to a hypothetical PHOSITA. Similarly, the question for infringement under the doctrine of equivalents is whether a PHOSITA would recognize that an element of the accused device was only insubstantially different from the corresponding claim limitation. Although these determinations are not identical, they do not differ from each other in any meaningful way with respect to whether they are questions of law and fact. Both determinations are factual in nature. The Federal Circuit treats infringement under the doctrine of equivalents as a question of fact. Therefore, the court should also treat the analogous obviousness determination as a question of fact.

D. Even Though Obviousness Is Supposed to Be a Question of Law, District Courts Nonetheless Treat the Issue as a De Facto Question of Fact

Although it is supposedly well settled that the ultimate question of obviousness is supposed to be a question of law for the court, district courts nonetheless routinely treat the issue as if it were one of fact for the jury. Indeed, the Federal Circuit expressly allows district courts to submit the issue of obviousness to juries. In doing

---

330 § 103; see 2-5 CHISUM, supra note 154, § 5.04.
331 See Lighting World, 382 F.3d at 1357. And “the requirement that equivalence be evaluated from the perspective of one of ordinary skill in the art applies whether equivalence is measured by the ‘function-way-result’ test or by the ‘insubstantial differences’ test.” Id.
332 Durham, supra note 319, at 970.
335 Theresa Weisenberger, Note, An “Absence of Meaningful Appellate Review”: Juries and Patent Obviousness, 12 VAND. J. ENT. & TECH. L. 641, 659 (2010) (“While the obviousness determination is a legal one, the Federal Circuit allows the court to submit this issue to the jury and rejects the notion that these verdicts are merely advisory.”) (footnote omitted) (citing McGinley v. Franklin Sports, Inc., 262 F.3d 1339, 1356 (Fed. Cir. 2001); Perkin-Elmer Corp. v. Computervision Corp., 732 F.2d 888, 893 (Fed. Cir. 1984))).
so, the district court may decide to (1) submit the entire issue of obviousness to the jury to issue a general verdict concerning obviousness, or (2) submit only the factual underpinnings of obviousness to the jury and require the jury to answer special interrogatories concerning these factual underpinnings. If the ultimate question of obviousness were a de facto and de jure question of law, then this second option should be common. But an examination of recent Federal Circuit opinions has revealed that this second option is relatively rare. Instead, in the vast majority of recent Federal Circuit cases that review obviousness judgments involving jury findings, district courts chose the first option and sent the ultimate issue of obviousness to the jury for a general verdict. In so doing, these courts have treated the ultimate issue of obviousness as a de facto question of fact rather than a question of law, and the Federal Circuit has routinely allowed them to do so.

336 See, e.g., InTouch Techs., Inc. v. VGO Commc’ns, Inc., 751 F.3d 1327, 1337 (Fed. Cir. 2014) (reviewing a district court’s judgment of obviousness where the district court submitted the entire issue of obviousness to the jury); see also Weisenberger, supra note 335, at 660–62 (describing how the Federal Circuit reviews jury verdicts of obviousness where the jury has issued a general verdict). Where a district court allows the jury to render a general verdict concerning the ultimate issue of obviousness, the Federal Circuit reviews the district court’s judgment by “first presum[ing] that the jury resolved the underlying factual disputes in favor of the verdict.” InTouch Techs., 751 F.3d at 1339. The Federal Circuit then “leave[s] those presumed findings undisturbed if they are supported by substantial evidence.” Id. Finally, the Federal Circuit “examine[s] the [ultimate] legal conclusion [of obviousness] de novo to see whether it is correct in light of the presumed jury fact findings.” Id. (second and third alterations in original) (citing Kinetic Concepts, Inc. v. Smith & Nephew, Inc., 688 F.3d 1342, 1356–57 (Fed. Cir. 2012)); see also, e.g., Sanofi-Aventis Deutschland GmbH v. Glenmark Pharm. Inc., USA, 748 F.3d 1354, 1358 (Fed. Cir. 2014) (“When the question of obviousness is tried to a jury, on appeal we ascertain whether the jury was correctly instructed on the law, whether there was substantial evidence in support of factual findings necessary to the verdict, and whether the verdict was correct on the supported facts. The court must ‘accept implicit factual findings upon which the legal conclusion is based when they are supported by substantial evidence.’” (quoting Kinetic Concepts, 688 F.3d at 1359)). The Federal Circuit upholds “[a] general jury verdict of invalidity . . . if there was sufficient evidence to support any of the alternative theories of invalidity.” InTouch Techs., 751 F.3d at 1346.


338 I/P Engine, Inc. v. AOL Inc., 576 F. App’x 982, 985 (Fed. Cir. 2014) (per curiam) (reviewing a district court’s judgment of nonobviousness where the district court submitted the factual issues to the jury and then determined the ultimate issue of obviousness itself based on the jury’s factual findings), cert. denied, 136 S. Ct. 54 (2015).
For this Article, the author examined the Federal Circuit’s opinions from 2013 to 2015 in which juries considered the issue of obviousness.339 There were twenty-four such opinions, both precedential and non-precedential.340 Interestingly, in twenty-one of

339 The author searched the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (“CTAF”) database on Westlaw using the following search: “obvious! & patent & jury,” restricted to the years 2013 through 2015. After performing this search, the author reviewed the results and discarded each false positive—i.e., each case in which the Federal Circuit did not actually review a jury’s determination of obviousness in a district court infringement action.

In no way does the author intend this examination of Federal Circuit opinions to be any sort of rigorous empirical analysis. Indeed, the data gathered here suffers from serious limitations. First, the sample size here is quite small—only twenty-four cases in total. Second, the time period sampled is quite small—only three years. Third, the author examined only opinions available on Westlaw—thus, the author was not able to take summary affirmances into account in any way. Fourth and finally, the author examined only Federal Circuit opinions—the author did not examine any district court opinions. An extensive examination of district court opinions might yield more interesting results, but such an empirical study is beyond the intended scope of this Article.

340 Of the twenty-four opinions, sixteen were precedential opinions, and eight were non-precedential opinions. There were four precedential cases from 2015. See ABT Sys., LLC v. Emerson Elec. Co., 797 F.3d 1350 (Fed. Cir. 2015); Carnegie Mellon Univ. v. Marvell Tech. Grp., Ltd., 807 F.3d 1283 (Fed. Cir. 2015); Circuit Check Inc. v. QXQ Inc., 795 F.3d 1331 (Fed. Cir. 2015); MobileMedia Ideas LLC v. Apple Inc., 780 F.3d 1159 (Fed. Cir. 2015), cert. denied, 136 S. Ct. 270 (2015). And there was one non-precedential case from 2015. See Innovention Toys, LLC v. MGA Entm’t, Inc., 611 F. App’x 693 (Fed. Cir. 2015), vacated, 136 S. Ct. 2483 (2016).


these twenty-four opinions, the district courts and the Federal Circuit effectively treated the ultimate issue of obviousness as a question of fact, not as a question of law.341

For example, Alexsam, Inc. v. IDT Corp. is typical of how district courts and the Federal Circuit treat obviousness as a de facto question of fact.342 In Alexsam, the district court gave the issue of obviousness to the jury, which found that the asserted claims were not invalid for obviousness.343 There is no mention anywhere in the Federal Circuit’s opinion that the district-court judge treated the issue as a question of law and only used the jury to find the underlying Graham facts.344 Instead, the district court allowed the jury to make the ultimate determination that the asserted claims were not invalid for obviousness.345 And although the Federal Circuit stated in its opinion that the ultimate issue of obviousness is a question of law depending on underlying facts,346 the court nonetheless reviewed the jury’s decision that the claims were not invalid for obviousness as if this issue were a question of fact.347 In doing so, the court held that there was substantial evidence that supported the jury’s finding of non-invalidity,348 as would be typical in a review of a purely factual question.349 The court then affirmed the jury’s de-

---

341 The court did not effectively treat the issue as a question of fact in only three cases. See ABT Sys., 797 F.3d at 1357; I/P Engine, 576 F. App’x at 986; Soverain Software, 705 F.3d at 1336.
342 715 F.3d 1336 (Fed. Cir. 2013).
343 Id. at 1341.
344 See id. at 1340–41, 1346–48.
345 See id.
346 Id. at 1346.
347 See id. at 1346–48.
348 Id.
349 See MOORE ET. AL., supra note 94, § 206.02. In general, when reviewing a jury verdict, a reviewing court must affirm the verdict if the record shows that substantial evidence supports the verdict. Id. The rules for applying this substantial-evidence review are as follows:

The reviewing court may not reweigh the evidence or reassess the credibility of witnesses. Rather, it must view all the evidence, all reasonable inferences, and all credibility determinations in the light most favorable to the verdict. If, in that light, the evidence is such that a rational finder of fact could come to the same conclusion, then there is sufficient evidence to support the verdict.
cision because it concluded that “[s]ubstantial evidence ... supports the jury’s finding that [the asserted] claims ... are not invalid.” Such a review is no different than how the court reviews what it considers to be a pure issue of fact.

The Federal Circuit treated the ultimate question of obviousness as a question of law in only two of the twenty-four cases examined, and these cases stand out as examples of where the court followed its de jure rule that obviousness is a question of law rather than its de facto rule that treats obviousness as a question of fact. One of these cases was ABT Systems, LLC v. Emerson Electric Co., in which the district court allowed the jury to determine the issue of obviousness, and the jury found that the claims at issue were not invalid for obviousness. In response, the accused infringers filed a post-trial motion for judgment as a matter of law (“JMOL”) notwithstanding the verdict. The district-court judge denied the JMOL motion and deferred to the jury’s findings, holding that the jury could have reasonably found that the claims were not invalid. In doing so, the judge applied the substantial-evidence rule to the jury’s verdict of nonobviousness. Thus, the

---

Id. (footnote omitted).

350 Alexsam, 715 F.3d at 1348. Although Judge Mayer dissented, his dissenting opinion was not based at all on the issue of invalidity for obviousness. See id. at 1348–51 (Mayer, J., dissenting). Instead, Judge Mayer’s dissent was based on the issue of invalidity for lack of subject-matter eligibility. See id.

351 See, e.g., i4i Ltd. P’ship v. Microsoft Corp., 598 F.3d 831, 848–52 (Fed. Cir. 2010), aff’d, 564 U.S. 91 (2011). In i4i, the Federal Circuit reviewed a jury’s finding of infringement. Id. The court noted that a finding of “[i]nfringement is a question of fact.” Id. at 849. In reviewing a jury verdict of infringement, the Federal Circuit “review[ed] the verdict only for substantial evidence.” Id. The court then identified evidence that supported the jury’s verdict of infringement. Id. at 849–52. The court ultimately concluded that the verdict was supported by substantial evidence of contributory infringement, and inducement to infringe. Id. at 851–52. Thus, the Federal Circuit affirmed the jury’s finding of infringement. Id. at 863.


353 797 F.3d at 1352.

354 Id. at 1353–54.

355 Id. at 1354.

356 Id. In reviewing a decision on a post-verdict JMOL motion, a district court must grant such a motion only if “the court finds that a reasonable jury would not have a legally sufficient evidentiary basis to find for the party on that issue.” Id. (quoting FED. R. CIV. P.
district-court judge followed the norm in treating obviousness as a de facto issue of fact.

In reviewing the judgment in *ABT Systems*, the Federal Circuit reversed the district court’s decision to deny the JMOL motion. In doing so, the Federal Circuit departed from the norm of treating obviousness as a de facto issue of fact, and instead treated it as a question of law. The Federal Circuit began by “assign[ing] due deference to the jury’s verdict” and “presume[d] that the jury resolved the underlying factual disputes in favor of the verdict.” Taking these facts implied by the verdict in conjunction with all the undisputed facts, the Federal Circuit substituted its judgment for the jury’s and concluded that the claims were invalid for obviousness. The court effectively emphasized that its precedent allowed it to decide the ultimate question of obviousness as a question of law: “[A] jury verdict does not mean that we are free to abdicate our role as the ultimate decision maker on the question of obviousness. That decision remains within our province.”

Of the cases examined, one is unique in that instead of sending the issue of obviousness to the jury, the district court granted a pre-verdict motion for JMOL that the claims at issue were not invalid for obviousness. On appeal, the Federal Circuit held that taking this issue from the jury did not violate the accused infringer’s right to a jury trial. The Federal Circuit then reviewed the district court’s grant of JMOL de novo. The Federal Circuit disagreed

---

50(a)). And the district court must draw “all reasonable inferences . . . in favor of the nonmoving party without making credibility assessments or weighing the evidence.” *Id.* (quoting Penford Corp. v. Nat’l Union Fire Ins. Co., 662 F.3d 497, 503 (8th Cir. 2011)).

357 *Id.* at 1357.

358 See *id.* at 1362. Interestingly, the patentee characterized the accused infringer’s arguments that the Federal Circuit should overturn the jury’s verdict of nonobviousness as “an attempt to retry credibility and factual determinations made by the jury.” *Id.* at 1356.

359 *Id.* at 1357.

360 *Id.* at 1362.

361 *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Richardson-Vicks Inc. v. Upjohn Co., 122 F.3d 1476, 1479 (Fed. Cir. 1997)).


363 *Id.* at 1336–37.

364 *Id.* at 1337.
with the district-court judge’s decision and reversed, holding that the evidence compelled a judgment that the claims were invalid for obviousness.\footnote{Id. at 1347.}

Although the district court’s approach in \textit{Soverain Software LLC v. Newegg Inc.} seemingly treated the ultimate issue of obviousness as a question of law, this approach is nonetheless consistent with treating the ultimate issue of obviousness as a question of fact. As the Federal Circuit noted in \textit{Soverain Software}, a trial court is always free to take an issue from the jury and grant JMOL where “the facts are sufficiently clear that the law requires a particular result”\footnote{Id. at 1336 (quoting Weisgram v. Marley Co., 528 U.S. 440, 448 (2000)).}—even for an issue that is a question of fact.\footnote{See generally 9B CHARLES ALAN WRIGHT & ARTHUR R. MILLER, FEDERAL PRACTICE & PROCEDURE: FEDERAL RULES OF CIVIL PROCEDURE § 2524 (3d ed. 2016).} Thus, even if the ultimate issue of obviousness is treated as a question of fact, a district-court judge is free to take the issue from the jury by granting a pre-verdict JMOL where compelled by the facts, and a judge is free to grant a post-verdict JMOL where no reasonable jury could have reached a particular verdict.\footnote{See FED. R. CIV. P. 50(a); WRIGHT & MILLER, supra note 367, § 2524.} Under this approach, treating the ultimate issue of obviousness as a question of fact would allow courts to decide the issue as a question of law where compelled by the facts, while still requiring the Federal Circuit to defer to jury verdicts in close cases where the district court did not grant JMOL.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Although the Supreme Court and Federal Circuit classify this ultimate determination of obviousness as one of law reviewed without deference,\footnote{Graham v. John Deere Co., 383 U.S. 1, 17 (1966); Panduit Corp. v. Dennison Mfg. Co., 810 F.2d 1561, 1566 (Fed. Cir. 1987).} this determination should properly be classified as one of fact and reviewed with deference. Indeed, the Federal Circuit’s reasoning that the ultimate question of obviousness is really a question of law rather than a question of fact is flawed. Contrary to the Federal Circuit’s reasoning, the obviousness determination does not “engage[ the] court in an exercise legal in na-
The court correctly draws a parallel between the PHOSITA in obviousness law with the reasonably prudent person in negligence law. But the negligence determination is a question of fact, so the obviousness determination should also be a question of fact. And just because obviousness is an “ultimate fact,” does not mean that it should not be treated as a question of fact and reviewed with deference.

Moreover, the Supreme Court’s statement that the ultimate question of obviousness is one of law was never properly supported by precedent. And treating obviousness as a question of law is inconsistent with how the Federal Circuit treats other analogous patent-law issues, such as anticipation and infringement under the doctrine of equivalents. Finally, even though under current law obviousness is supposed to be a question of law, district courts nonetheless treat the issue as a de facto question of fact, without the objection of the Federal Circuit. Therefore, for these reasons, in an appropriate case, the Supreme Court should hold that the ultimate determination of obviousness is a question of fact to be reviewed as such.

---

370 Panduit, 810 F.2d at 1566.
371 Id.
373 Cf. Pullman-Standard v. Swint, 456 U.S. 273, 287 (1982) (“Rule 52(a) . . . does not divide findings of fact into those that deal with ‘ultimate’ and those that deal with ‘subsidiary’ facts.”).
374 Lane, supra note 265, at 1169–72.