

Court appearances. There may be several times you need to appear in court during your case. People get nervous about appearing in court by themselves, but it is very important to show up and be heard. You have a constitutional right to represent yourself in court with or without an attorney. You may bring witnesses to testify for you and show the court evidence that proves that you should get what you are asking for in the lawsuit. Try to be at the courthouse at least a half an hour before the time set for your hearing. Sick children, traffic problems, getting lost – while these are all reasons for being late, if you're not there on time, the court will move on to the next case. If you don't show up at all, the other side can win by default.

Be prepared. Consider putting together a folder with copies of all of your court documents. Include any evidence that supports your case, such as police records, letters, bills, medical reports, photographs, or anything else that you think will help the judge understand your case. You will also have the right to cross-examine any witnesses presented by the lawyer for the other side. Prepare questions and practice with family or friends ahead of the hearing. If you have asked people to testify for you, ask them to arrive early and dress nicely.

Here are some general guidelines for court procedure:

Be on time. Court may take all day. It is very important to be on time to court. Allow plenty of time to travel. Running late may make you more anxious and nervous about court. More importantly, if you are late, the court clerk may think you are not coming and the judge may enter a judgment against you. If there is an emergency and you cannot be there on time, or if you cannot show up on the day of court, make sure to call the court coordinator and the lawyer for the other party and ask for a continuance. If you know in advance you cannot be there, you should ask for the continuance in writing as early as you can.

Dress appropriately. You do not have to dress formally, but it is a good idea to look respectful in the way that you dress. Some people dress the way they would for church or school. Most bailiffs will require you to take off a hat in the courthouse.

Find childcare. If possible, arrange for someone to take care of your children. If you need to bring your children, it is a good idea if someone can come with you to watch them when you are talking to the judge.

Behavior in court. Most courthouses do not allow you to have food, drink, or gum. Many courtrooms do not allow cell phones. If you bring your cell phone, be sure to put it on "silent" or turn it off in the courtroom. You and your witnesses should avoid talking to each other while court is in session. Avoid behavior that is noisy, distracting and disrespectful. If court is in session, leave and enter the courtroom quietly.

Addressing the judge. When speaking to the judge, stand up. Address him or her respectfully. You can say "Your Honor," or "sir" or "ma'am" or "Judge" and their last name. Wait your turn to speak. The judge will usually let the attorney speak first, especially if he or she filed the suit. You will have the opportunity to speak, so it is important not to interrupt.

Court coordinator. Usually the court will have a court coordinator, who is a person in charge of setting hearings, trial dates, and answering questions on the case. The court coordinator cannot give legal advice. However, the court coordinator may be able to explain how to get hearings set in front of the court, how the court works, and specific rules for the court. If you have questions about those types of matters, you should ask at the clerk's office for the number and name of the court coordinator for the court where your case is set.