

Representing Yourself in Court

1. Be on time. To be safe, arrive early. You may have to wait for your case to start if other cases before yours take longer. Bring all the papers and witnesses you will use for your case. Bring a notepad and pen so you can take notes during your hearing.
2. Most courts have metal detectors and security screening at their doors, so it may take several minutes before you can enter the courtroom. Do not bring any weapons with you when you come to the courthouse.
3. Dress to show that you respect the court. Do not wear shorts, t-shirts, tank tops, worn out jeans, or similar items. You do not need to wear a dress or jacket and tie, but your clothes should be neat and clean. Dress as though you are going to an important job interview or attending a special occasion. Do not wear a hat into the courtroom unless you are wearing it for religious reasons.
4. The way you act in the courtroom should show that you respect the court. Do not chew gum or eat or drink anything, talk to other people while court is in session, or read the newspaper. Turn off cell phones and pagers.
5. Bring with you only the people who are needed for your case as a witness and maybe a few people to support you. Do not bring children unless you are asked to do so by the judge or a lawyer, or unless the child is going to be a witness or give information to the judge at the hearing.
6. When your case is called, follow the directions of the court staff, who will tell you where to sit or stand. Take your paperwork with you. Always refer to the judge as “Your Honor” or “Judge” and stand when talking to the judge.
7. Listen carefully and wait your turn to speak. Do not interrupt the judge or witnesses. You will have a chance to tell your side of the story. When it is your turn, speak slowly and try to stay calm so you can tell your story clearly. Address all comments to the judge unless you are questioning a witness.
8. Be ready to give a short summary of your side of the case. Briefly tell the judge exactly what you want and why you should get it. When asking your witnesses questions, start by asking their name, address, and where they work. Then ask the questions that will bring out the information they have about your case.
9. If you have an objection to testimony or papers the other side is presenting to the judge, make your objection according to court rules and state the reason for your objection under the appropriate rule of evidence. You have the right to ask questions of the witnesses on the other side – called “cross-examination.” Make a list of your questions for these witnesses ahead of time. Show respect for all witnesses, even if they testified against you, and try to stay calm.
10. When you and the other side have presented all the evidence, be ready to give the judge a short final statement about your case. Briefly tell the judge what you want him or her to do. The judge may or may not decide the case at that time.