



REPRESENTING YOURSELF IN COURT

From Ohio Judicial Conference brochure A Citizens Guide

When you decide to represent yourself in Court, you take on full responsibility for your case. You need to handle legal questions as well as deadlines, documents, evidence, witnesses, and other issues that may come up. Even a seemingly simple case can demand a lot of your time and attention.

Clerk and Court staff may not give legal advice. You may have questions that they are not permitted to answer.

They may not:

- Provide you with legal research;
- Tell you what sort of claims to file or what to put on forms;
- Tell you what to say in Court;
- Give an opinion about how a Judge is likely to decide your case;
- Give you information that they would not give to an opposing party;
- Tell you about a Judge's decision before it is issued by the judge and time-stamped by the Clerk's office.

They may:

- Answer questions about how the court works;
- Explain terms used in the court process;
- Give you information from your case file;
- Provide you with Court forms.

Legal Advice:

It is always a good idea to consult with an attorney and be represented by an attorney in Court. For help finding an attorney, you might turn to the Richland County Bar Association by calling 419-524-994 for information on its Lawyer Referral Program. Employees of the Clerk of Courts office or of the Court may not refer you to a lawyer.

The law is complex. Attorneys are trained professionals who understand the law and how it relates to your case.

Even matters that initially appear simple may raise complicated issues.

Your interests will be best protected by a legal professional.

Ohio Courts and Judges will provide a fair hearing for your case whether or not you are represented by an attorney, and it is your right to represent yourself if you so choose. When you bring a case to Court without the help of an attorney, you are taking on a complex task that is normally done by highly trained professionals. You may do yourself a disservice.

Preparing Your Case

If you do decide to represent yourself, you need to manage all aspects of your case.

Familiarize yourself with the local court rules. Rules and procedures vary slightly from Court to Court, and you need to know the rules that apply in the Court that will hear your case. Obtain a copy of the local rules of Court from your Court or Clerk.

Make sure your filings and documents conform to local standards. Generic forms and sample filings are available in books and on the internet. However, these generic documents may not conform to the standards of the Court that will hear your case. To make sure that your documents will be accepted, ask your Court if there are any forms available for your use.

Respond to all inquiries on time. During trial preparations, you may receive inquiries from the Court or the opposing party. For example, the opposing party may be entitled to “discovery” – to learn evidence or testimony you plan to introduce (you may be entitled to the same). If you fail to respond to such inquiries, you may limit your ability to present your case.

Rules about admissible evidence are complicated. There are many possible reasons that evidence or testimony you think is relevant and important may not be admissible in Court. Since questions about what evidence is admissible are legal questions that are often contested, neither court or clerk staff nor the judge may answer them ahead of time. This can be frustrating for non-attorneys: if your case will involve contested evidence, consider again whether you need an attorney.

Make sure evidence you plan to use will be acceptable and available in Court. If your case will involve evidence – documents, pictures, cost estimates, receipts, or other items – you must prepare it for Court use. In particular you must bring at least 3 copies of all documents (for the Court, for the opposing party, and for yourself) and be able to verify that documents are what you say they are or contain accurate information.

Make sure witnesses are prepared and available in Court. If your case will involve testimony from witnesses, you need to work with them before you and they appear in Court. Make sure your witnesses know what you will ask, and instruct them to answer truthfully. And remember that your witnesses must be present at your trial (they may not, for example, prepare written statements or appear by telephone) and be prepared to answer questions from the opposing party or his or her attorney.

In the Courtroom:

At the trial or hearing itself, you need to present your case in its strongest way. Here are some tips:

Make a good impression. Dress appropriately. Arrive on time with all your materials.

Respect the Court. Stand when the Judge enters or leaves the courtroom and when you speak to the Judge. Address the Judge as “Your Honor.”

Respect the opposing party. Never argue with the opposing party in front of the Judge. Use respectful terms of address.

Speak clearly and succinctly. Be prepared to state your case in a few sentences. Listen carefully and answer questions directly.

Be prepared. Courts are very busy. You want to present your case in the strongest way, but you also want to help the proceedings move efficiently. The better prepared you are, the better the case will go.

Also see:

<http://richlandcourtsoc.us/gendivprose.php>