

THE EVERYDAY JUSTICE GUIDE

KNOW THE WORDS. KNOW THE PROCESS. USE YOUR RIGHTS WISELY.



START HERE: WHAT KIND OF CASE?

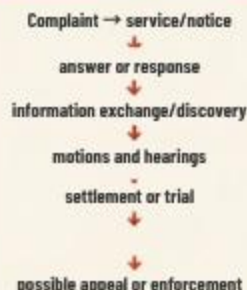
- **Civil:** a person or organization asks a court to resolve a dispute, often for money or an order to do or stop doing something.
- **Criminal:** the government brings charges; the government must prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, and the accused does not have to prove innocence.
- **Administrative:** an agency makes or reviews a decision under its governing rules; review and appeal routes vary.

STATE OR FEDERAL?

State legislators make state laws; Congress makes federal laws. The U.S. Constitution is the supreme law. A valid federal law can take precedence over conflicting state law, but a federal issue does not automatically mean a case belongs to federal court.

State courts handle most criminal cases and many everyday disputes such as family, housing, contracts, and injuries. Federal courts hear matters within federal authority, including federal-law cases, bankruptcy, and certain disputes between people from different states.

THE EVERYDAY CIVIL PROCESS



Deadlines and local rules control. Read every notice and keep copies.

COMMON WORDS, USED CORRECTLY

- **Plaintiff** = person or organization bringing a civil case.
- **Defendant** = person or organization sued in a civil case, or accused in a criminal case.
- **Complaint** = document that starts a civil lawsuit.
- **Answer** = response to a civil complaint.
- **Motion** = request for a judge to make a ruling.
- **Jurisdiction** = a court's authority over the subject and the people.
- **Evidence** = information presented to help prove or disagree a fact.
- **Settlement** = agreement resolving a civil dispute without a trial.
- **Answer** = response to a high court to review a lower court's decision; not a do-over trial.
- **Pro se** = representing yourself, from Latin meaning "for oneself."

! DON'T CONFUSE

- Being served is not the same as being found guilty.
- A summons is not a judgment.
- A motion is not automatically granted.
- An appeal is not a new trial.
- "Legal" does not always mean "fair," and "unfair" does not automatically mean "illegal."

PRACTICAL MOVES THAT PROTECT YOU

- Read the exact document and identify the court, case number, sender, deadline, and requested action.
- To not ignore service, notices, subpoenas, or court dates.
- Keep a dated folder of filings, evidence, and messages, receipts, and notes.
- Do not sign an agreement you don't understand; ask what it changes and what deadlines applies.
- Use calm, factual language and avoid threats or social-media arguments under the case.
- Never assume a viral legal tip applies in your case or facts.

WHERE TO GET REAL HELP



Court website: search for "Self-Help" or "Representing Yourself" for the court handling the case. Court staff can explain procedures and forms, but generally cannot act as a lawyer or tell you what choice to make.



Civil legal aid: USAgov Legal Aid, Legal Services Corporation, and LawHelp.org for state-by-state referrals and information. Eligibility varies.



Criminal defense: If charged with a crime and unable to afford counsel, ask the court about appointed counsel or a public defender. Civil legal aid is a criminal public defender are not the same service.



Local referrals: dial 211 and ask whether legal aid referrals are available in your area. 211 is not a court or public defender.

WHY DOES LEGAL LANGUAGE SOUND OLD?



American legal English was shaped by English legal history, including Law French after the Norman Conquest and Latin in historical legal records. Terms such as "en banc," "pro se," and "habeas corpus" reflect that history.

Knowing a word's origin does not mean you have a rule applies to your case. Plain language, careful reading, and qualified help matter.

FREEDOM + LIBERTY ARE PRACTICAL



The Constitution names the blessings of liberty, and the Bill of Rights protects freedoms while setting rules for government power and fair legal process.

Liberty is not just a slogan: it is strengthened when people understand notices, deadlines, evidence, courts, and lawful ways to ask for review or help.

Know your rights. Respect other people's rights. Use lawful process.

! LEGAL DISCLAIMER

For general education only. This poster is not legal advice, does not create an attorney-client relationship, and cannot replace a qualified lawyer or official court instructions. Laws, deadlines, procedures, and eligibility vary by state, court, and facts. Verify information with the court handling your case or a licensed attorney. If you have been charged with a crime or face an immediate deadline, seek qualified help promptly.



Sources: U.S. Courts, Types of Cases and Glossary; National Archives, Constitution and Bill of Rights; USAgov, Legal Aid, Legal Services Corporation, LawHelp.org, 211 state court self-help guidance; Library of Congress, Legal Literacy, Accessed for educational drafting.

