

COMPLAINT FOR VISITATION

COMMON PLEAS COURT
WASHINGTON COUNTY

THESE ARE PACKETS OF LEGAL FORMS AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE IN THE STATE OF OHIO COURTS AND THEY ARE INTENDED TO BE A GENERAL GUIDE TO GET THE FORMS FILLED OUT, FILED WITH THE COURT, AND TO GET A REQUEST PROPERLY BEFORE THE JUDGE. THESE ARE NOT INTENDED TO BE A LEGAL ANALYSIS OF A REQUEST OR A STATEMENT AS TO WHETHER OR NOT THE REQUEST WILL BE GRANTED. THESE ARE MERELY TO ASSIST THE USER IN PREPARING AND PRESENTING A REQUEST TO THE COURT.

Type or Print all Forms - If you are downloading the forms from the website, the forms are in PDF and can be typed online and then saved on your computer or flash drive for revision and printing. You can also access these fillable forms on the website - www.seols.org - at the Get Help page

COMPLAINT FOR VISITATION. This is a complaint to be used to establish visitation only when the person has no visitation order and no order of custody has been established in any court. This is ONLY available for the unmarried father or paternal or maternal relatives of a child born to an unmarried woman. If the person seeking visitation is the unmarried father or a paternal relative, the person must have proof that he is the father as established by legitimation or parentage proceeding (paternity). **YOU SHOULD DO THIS BEFORE YOU FILE THIS COMPLAINT IF YOU ARE THE UNMARRIED FATHER OR A PATERNAL RELATIVE.** This should be filed in the Common Pleas Court where the child(ren) live.

This packet has several parts to it. To help you know that you have each part and to help you figure out how they go together, please note the parts and numbers of pages below.

<u>Document Identification</u>	<u># Pages</u>
Instructions for Complaint for Visitation and Sample -----	3
Complaint for Visitation (blank for you to fill in) -----	1
Parenting Affidavit -----	4
Request for Service (blank for you to fill in, certified mail is the usual method of service in cases of this type) -----	2
Motion for Mediation, Entry and Referral form-----	3
Instructions and sample poverty affidavit -----	2
Poverty Affidavit (blank for you to fill in) -----	1
Instructions for Entry and Sample Entry -----	2
Entry (blank for you and the Judge to complete) -----	1

TYPE OR PRINT ALL FORMS

INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMPLAINT FOR VISITATION BY THE MATERNAL RELATIVES (OR THE FATHER OR PATERNAL RELATIVES IF THE FATHER HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED) - TO OBTAIN VISITATION WITH A CHILD BORN TO AN UNMARRIED WOMAN SO LONG AS THERE IS NO OTHER COURT ORDER INVOLVING THE CHILD

Attached is a form Complaint for visitation. These instructions are intended to be a general guide to help you get the form filled out, filed with the Court, and to get your request properly before the Judge. These instructions are not intended to be a legal analysis of your request or whether or not your motion will be granted, but merely to assist you in preparing and presenting your request. ***THE FATHER MUST FIRST BE ESTABLISHED THROUGH AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT OR PATERNITY PROCEEDING BEFORE THE FATHER OR ANY OF THE FATHER'S RELATIVES CAN FILE A COMPLAINT FOR VISITATION.***

A. FILLING OUT THE FORMS

1. You should fill out these forms before you go to the Courthouse to file it. Other than telling you the time and date of the hearing, the Court staff will not help you in completing these forms.
2. Attached is the sample Complaint for Visitation and Motion for Mediation.
3. COMPLAINT FOR VISITATION - In the #1 blank, fill in the name of the County where the minor child(ren) live and where this will be filed. In the #2 blank, fill in the name(s) of the minor child(ren). In the #3 blank, fill in the birth date(s) of the minor child(ren). In the #4 blank fill in the name of the child(ren)'s mother. In the #5 blank fill in the name of the child(ren)'s father. LEAVE THE CASE NUMBER AND JUDGE LINE BLANK AS THE CLERK WILL FILL THAT IN. In the #6 blank fill in your name (name of the person filing this Complaint). In the #7 blank, you should fill in your relationship with the minor child(ren). In #8 blanks, you should sign your name and fill in your address.
4. MOTION FOR MEDIATION AND ENTRY- In the #1 blank, fill in the name(s) of the minor child(ren). LEAVE THE CASE NUMBER AND JUDGE LINE BLANK FOR THE CLERK TO FILL IN. In the #2 blank, fill in your name. In the #3 blank, sign your name. On the Entry, fill out the first part just like the Motion for Mediation. In the #4 blank, fill in the name of the other party who has physical custody of the children who will be ordered to mediate with you. LEAVE THE JUDGE'S SIGNATURE LINE BLANK.
5. You will need to fill out the mediation referral form (also enclosed) and attach it to your Motion for Mediation so that the Court and the mediators will have the basic information they will need to set up the mediation.
6. If you can not afford to pay the filing fee, you will need a POVERTY AFFIDAVIT which is enclosed.
7. You will also need a REQUEST FOR SERVICE which is enclosed.
8. You will also need a GENERIC ENTRY to take to the hearing which is also enclosed.

B. FILING THE COMPLAINT

1. After you have filled all the forms out, make three copies of each and go to the office of the Clerk of Courts of the Washington County Common Pleas Court. This is the only place you can file your Complaint. File the Complaint for Visitation, Motion for Mediation and Request for Service.
2. There will be a filing fee for the filing of this Complaint and you should ask how much it is. If you are unable to pay the filing fee and believe that you are indigent, you can file this with a poverty affidavit which we have enclosed. This does not mean you will never have to pay costs, it merely means you do not have to pay them in advance. The Court will determine who shall pay court costs.
3. At the time of the filing, the Clerk of Courts will take the original and one or two copies of the Complaint and Motion. Ask for a time-stamped copy so that you can have a copy for your records.
4. Give the entry to the Clerk of Courts to place in the file but the entry will not be file-stamped until after the hearing.
5. The mediation project will get in touch with you and set up the mediation rules, procedures and times.
6. If mediation is not successful and you need a hearing, the mediators will notify the Court. The Court will then notify you of the date and time of the hearing and you will need to appear.

C. HEARING

1. You will need to appear at the hearing on the date and at the time the Court schedules it. Be sure and take with you a copy of the finding of parentage so that the Court can have it for its files.
2. You will need to tell the Judge why you want visitation and let the Judge know what you would like for visitation. Tell the judge if you have had visitation before, if there are other relatives in the home who would like to visit with the child(ren), and your ability to provide transportation. You should be prepared to tell the Court what arrangements you have made for visitation so that the Court is sure that the child(ren) will be well cared for during visitation.
3. Answer the questions truthfully and try to respond to the questions that you are asked. Listen to the question and make sure you understand it before you answer it. If you do not understand the question or are not sure what you are being asked, you have the right to have the question explained to you before answering and you should be sure and ask to have it explained to you.
4. After the Court has decided the case, the Court will use the entry you provided to write out the Court's decision and file it.

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

_____ COUNTY, OHIO

IN THE MATTER OF:

Case No. _____

Judge _____

_____, BORN _____

_____, BORN _____

Child(ren)

Child(ren) of

COMPLAINT FOR VISITATION

and

Now comes _____, natural _____ of
the minor child(ren) in the above action, pursuant to O.R.C. 3109.12, and requests an Order of
reasonable companionship or visitation rights with the minor children named in the caption of
this complaint.

The father of the minor child(ren) has/has not been determined through an
acknowledgement or an action under O.R.C. Chapter 3111.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY, STATE & ZIP CODE

Affidavit 3

COURT OF COMMON PLEAS _____ COUNTY, OHIO

Plaintiff/Petitioner	Case No.	
v./and	Judge	
Defendant/Petitioner/Respondent	Magistrate	

Instructions: Check local court rules to determine when this form must be filed.
 By law, an affidavit must be filed and served with the first pleading filed by each party in every parenting (custody/visitation) proceeding in this Court, including Dissolutions, Divorces and Domestic Violence Petitions. Each party has a continuing duty while this case is pending to inform the Court of any parenting proceeding concerning the child(ren) in any other court in this or any other state. **If more space is needed, add additional pages.**

PARENTING PROCEEDING AFFIDAVIT (R.C. 3127.23(A))

Affidavit of _____
 (Print Your Name)

Check and complete ALL THAT APPLY:

1. I request that the court not disclose my current address or that of the child(ren). My address is confidential pursuant to R.C. 3127.23(D) and should be placed under seal to protect the health, safety, or liberty of myself and/or the child(ren).
2. Minor child(ren) are subject to this case as follows:

Insert the information requested below for all minor or dependent children of this marriage. You must list the residences for all places where the children have lived for the last **FIVE** years.

a.	Child's Name: _____	Place of Birth: _____	
	Date of Birth: _____	Sex: <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	
	<u>Period of Residence</u>	<u>Check if Confidential</u>	<u>Person(s) With Whom Child Lived</u> (name & address)
	to present	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	<u>Relationship</u>
	to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	
	to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	
	to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	

Affidavit 3

b. Child's Name: _____ **Place of Birth:** _____
Date of Birth: _____ **Sex:** Male Female

Check this box if the information requested below would be the same as in subsection 2a and skip to the next question.

<u>Period of Residence</u>	<u>Check if Confidential</u>	<u>Person(s) With Whom Child Lived</u> (name & address)	<u>Relationship</u>
_____ to present	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____
_____ to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____
_____ to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____
_____ to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____

c. Child's Name: _____ **Place of Birth:** _____
Date of Birth: _____ **Sex:** Male Female

Check this box if the information requested below would be the same as in subsection 2a and skip to the next question.

<u>Period of Residence</u>	<u>Check if Confidential</u>	<u>Person(s) With Whom Child Lived</u> (name & address)	<u>Relationship</u>
_____ to present	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____
_____ to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____
_____ to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____
_____ to _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Address Confidential?	_____	_____

IF MORE SPACE IS NEEDED FOR ADDITIONAL CHILDREN, ATTACH A SEPARATE PAGE AND CHECK THIS BOX .

3. Participation in custody case(s): (Check only one box.)

- I **HAVE NOT** participated as a party, witness, or in any capacity in any other case, in this or any other state, concerning the custody of, or visitation (parenting time), with any child subject to this case.
- I **HAVE** participated as a party, witness, or in any capacity in any other case, in this or any other state, concerning the custody of, or visitation (parenting time), with any child subject to this case. For each case in which you participated, give the following information:

Affidavit 3

- a. Name of each child: _____
- b. Type of case: _____
- c. Court and State: _____
- d. Date and court order or judgment (if any): _____

IF MORE SPACE IS NEEDED FOR ADDITIONAL CUSTODY CASES, ATTACH A SEPARATE PAGE AND CHECK THIS BOX .

4. Information about other civil case(s) that could affect this case: (Check only one box.)

- I **HAVE NO INFORMATION** about any other civil cases that could affect the current case, including any cases relating to custody, domestic violence or protection orders, dependency, neglect or abuse allegations or adoptions concerning any child subject to this case.
- I **HAVE THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION** concerning other civil cases that could affect the current case, including any cases relating to custody, domestic violence or protection orders, dependency, neglect or abuse allegations or adoptions concerning a child subject to this case. Do not repeat cases already listed in Paragraph 3. Explain:

- a. Name of each child: _____
- b. Type of case: _____
- c. Court and State: _____
- d. Date and court order or judgment (if any): _____

IF MORE SPACE IS NEEDED FOR ADDITIONAL CASES, ATTACH A SEPARATE PAGE AND CHECK THIS BOX .

5. Information about criminal case(s):

List all of the criminal convictions, including guilty pleas, for you and the members of your household for the following offenses: any criminal offense involving acts that resulted in a child being abused or neglected; any domestic violence offense that is a violation of R.C. 2919.25; any sexually oriented offense as defined in R.C. 2950.01; and any offense involving a victim who was a family or household member at the time of the offense and caused physical harm to the victim during the commission of the offense.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Case Number</u>	<u>Court/State/County</u>	<u>Convicted of What Crime?</u>
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____

IF MORE SPACE IS NEEDED FOR ADDITIONAL CASES, ATTACH A SEPARATE PAGE AND CHECK THIS BOX .

Affidavit 3

6. Persons not a party to this case who has physical custody or claims to have custody or visitation rights to children subject to this case: (Check only one box.)

I **DO NOT KNOW OF ANY PERSON(S)** not a party to this case who has/have physical custody or claim(s) to have custody or visitation rights with respect to any child subject to this case.

I **KNOW THAT THE FOLLOWING NAMED PERSON(S)** not a party to this case has/have physical custody or claim(s) to have custody or visitation rights with respect to any child subject to this case.

a. Name/Address of Person _____

Has physical custody

Claims custody rights

Claims visitation rights

Name of each child: _____

b. Name/Address of Person _____

Has physical custody

Claims custody rights

Claims visitation rights

Name of each child: _____

c. Name/Address of Person _____

Has physical custody

Claims custody rights

Claims visitation rights

Name of each child: _____

OATH

(Do Not Sign Until Notary is Present)

I, (print name) _____, swear or affirm that I have read this document and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, the facts and information stated in this document are true, accurate and complete. I understand that if I do not tell the truth, I may be subject to penalties for perjury.

Your Signature

Sworn before me and signed in my presence this _____ day of _____, _____.

Notary Public

My Commission Expires: _____

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

Division
COUNTY, OHIO

IN THE MATTER OF:

A Minor

Name : Case No.

Street Address : Judge

City, State and Zip Code :
Plaintiff/Petitioner : Magistrate

vs./and

Name

Street Address

City, State and Zip Code :
Defendant/Petitioner :

Instructions: This form is used when you want to request documents to be served on the other party. You must indicate the requested method of service by marking the appropriate box.

REQUEST FOR SERVICE

TO THE CLERK OF COURT:

Please serve the following documents on the following parties as I have indicated below:

- Defendant/Petitioner at the address shown above.
Certified Mail, Return Receipt Requested
Issuance to Sheriff of County, Ohio for Personal or Residence service
Other (specify)

Form 28

Plaintiff/Petitioner at the address shown above.

Certified Mail, Return Receipt Requested

Issuance to Sheriff of _____ County, Ohio for Personal or Residence service

Other (specify) _____

_____ County Child Support Enforcement Agency (provide address below):

Certified Mail, Return Receipt Requested

Issuance to Sheriff of _____ County, Ohio for Personal or Residence service

Other (specify) _____

Other (address): _____

Certified Mail, Return Receipt Requested

Issuance to Sheriff of _____ County, Ohio for Personal or Residence service

Other (specify) _____

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS TO SHERIFF:

Your Signature

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
GENERAL DIVISION
WASHINGTON COUNTY, OHIO

In The Matter of:

_____,

Case No. _____

Judge _____

MOTION FOR MEDIATION

Now comes _____ and moves this Court for an order requiring the parties to attempt to mediate the issue of custody/visitation pursuant to local rules, see attached completed mediation referral form.

NAME

ADDRESS

CITY, STATE AND ZIP CODE

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
GENERAL DIVISION
WASHINGTON COUNTY, OHIO

In The Matter of:

_____.

Case No. _____

Judge _____

ENTRY OF MEDIATION

Upon consideration of the request of _____ and in accordance with local rules, it is hereby ORDERED that _____ and _____ shall be referred to mediation and that all hearings in this matter shall be stayed 90 days.

JUDGE

MEDIATION REFERRAL FORM

Case Number _____

To MEDIATOR

Custodial Parent Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Non-custodial Parent Information:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Is there a protection order in effect involving either parent? _____NO _____YES

If yes, please provide:

Case # _____

Court that issued order _____

Attach a copy of the protection order to referral

Referred by: _____ Date: _____

INSTRUCTIONS FOR POVERTY AFFIDAVIT – COMMON PLEAS

- **PRINT OR TYPE** -

1. Fill in the name of the county where the action is.
2. Fill in the name of the Plaintiff.
3. Fill in the name of the Defendant.
4. Fill in the Case Number of the action.
5. Fill in your name.
6. Sign your name ONLY IN FRONT OF A NOTARY IF THE affidavit is correct.

MAKE 2 COPIES AND TAKE WITH THE MOTION TO THE COURT

PLEASE NOTE: FILING WITH A POVERTY AFFIDAVIT DOES NOT MEAN YOU DO NOT HAVE TO PAY COURT COSTS. IT ONLY MEANS THAT YOU DO NOT HAVE TO PAY IT IN ADVANCE. THE COURT WILL DETERMINE WHO IS TO PAY COURT COSTS AT THE TIME OF THE HEARING.

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

- 1 - Name of County, OHIO

- 2 - Name of Plaintiff ,

Plaintiff,
vs.

Case No. - 4 - Case Number

- 3 - Name of Defendant ,

Defendant.

AFFIDAVIT OF INABILITY
TO PREPAY COURT COSTS.

I, - 5 - Fill in your name , being first duly cautioned and sworn, depose and state:

1. That I am a party in interest in the above-captioned action; that I have a meritorious cause of action but am unable to give security or a cash deposit to secure costs.
2. That I am unable to afford the hiring of an attorney to represent me in this matter.
3. That I own no liquid assets or property of any substantial value to prepay court costs.

- 6 - Sign Only In Front of Notary

Sworn to and subscribed in my presence this _____ day of _____,
20_____.

NOTARY PUBLIC

_____, OHIO

Plaintiff,

Case No. _____

vs.

Defendant.

**AFFIDAVIT OF INABILITY
TO PREPAY COURT COSTS**

I, _____, being first duly cautioned and sworn, depose and state:

1. That I am a party in interest in the above-captioned action; that I have a meritorious cause of action but am unable to give security or a cash deposit to secure costs.
2. That I am unable to afford the hiring of an attorney to represent me in this matter.
3. That I own no liquid assets or property of any substantial value to prepay court costs.

Sworn to and subscribed in my presence this _____ day of _____,
20_____.

NOTARY PUBLIC

AT THE END OF YOUR HEARING
INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE GENERIC ENTRY

Attached is an entry with blanks for the Court to fill out at the conclusion of your hearing. Whenever there is a motion filed, the Court makes a decision and that decision must be written down and filed with the Court.

You should fill out the top part of the entry just as you have filled out the top part of your other papers. Leave the rest blank.

At the end of the hearing, the Court will rule on your motion. You should then ask the Court if the Court would like your entry so that the ruling can be written down. You can then give it to the Court, the Court can fill it out, and it will be filed. **BE SURE AND ASK FOR COPIES OF THE ENTRY FOR YOURSELF SO YOU WILL KNOW WHAT THE COURT ORDERED.**

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

- Fill In County - COUNTY, OHIO

- Fill In Name of Plaintiff- .

Plaintiff,

Case No. **- Fill In Case # -**

Judge **- Fill In name of Judge-**

vs.

- Fill In Name of Defendant-

Defendant.

ENTRY ON MOTION

This matter came on to be heard on **- Fill In Your Name -** 's Motion for

- Fill In Name Of Your Motion - .

Upon consideration of the record and the motion, the Court HEREBY ORDERS:

- Leave These Lines Blank -

- Leave Blank -
JUDGE

SUBMITTED BY:

- Sign Your Name -

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS

_____ COUNTY, OHIO

_____,

Case No. _____

Plaintiffs,

Judge _____

vs.

_____,

ENTRY ON MOTION

Defendant.

This matter came on to be heard on _____'s Motion for

_____.

Upon consideration of the record and the motion, the Court HEREBY ORDERS:

JUDGE

SUBMITTED BY:

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 from your court.**
- ✓ **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 for forms and sample filings.
- ✓ **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 about 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 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 three 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 any 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
 - ♦ prepared to answer questions from the opposing party or his or her attorney.

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

In the Courtroom

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

The Role of the Judge

Your case will be heard and decided by a judge (or a magistrate). Keep in mind that the role of the judge is to be an impartial referee in the dispute between you and the opposing party. Among other things, this means that

- ✓ **The judge may not help you present your case.** Helping you—by pointing out possible mistakes or by letting you know what you need to do next—would be unfair to the opposing party. When you represent yourself, you take on the full responsibility of presenting your case.
- ✓ **The judge may not speak with you about your case when the opposing party is not present.** This is true even if the issue you want to speak with the judge about seems like a simple procedural question. Again, such communications would be unfair to the opposing party.
- ✓ **The judge will decide the case on the basis of the facts presented in court and the applicable law.** The judge may only consider the facts as they are presented in court, through evidence and testimony. You need to make sure that all facts supporting your case are properly presented. The judge also needs to follow the laws that apply. Sometimes the law dictates which facts the judge may and may not consider. You need to make sure that you present the facts that the law requires or permits.

Legal Advice

It is always a good idea to consult with an attorney and be represented by an attorney in court.

- ✓ The law is complex. Attorneys are trained professionals who understand the law and how it relates to your case.
- ✓ Even matters that initially look simple may raise complicated issues.
- ✓ Your interests will be best protected by a legal professional.

Attorneys can be expensive, but consider this:

- ✓ What might you lose if your case goes badly? Paying for an attorney may be a good investment.
- ✓ Meet with several attorneys to discuss your case and their fees—don't let one consultation make up your mind.
- ✓ You may qualify for legal aid or help from legal clinics or other programs—be sure to investigate the resources in your community.

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.

For help with finding an attorney, you might turn to your local bar association. Your local bar association is:

Asking Court Staff

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

- ✗ **Court staff may not**
 - ✗ provide you with legal research;
 - ✗ tell you what sorts 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 the opposing party;
 - ✗ tell you about a judge's decision before it is issued by the judge.
- ✓ **Court staff 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 and sample filings and documents.

Court staff are there to help those who use the court. They can usually tell you *how* to do things, but **may not** advise you about *what* you ought to do. Please be courteous to staff and respect the limits on what they may do for you.



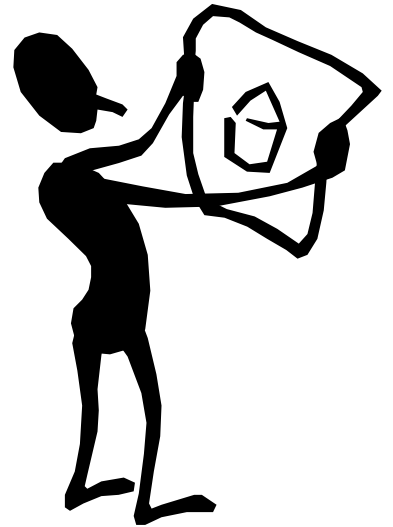
REPRESENTING YOURSELF IN COURT

A CITIZENS GUIDE



Representing Yourself in Court?

How to Use Photographs,
Letters, Business Records,
and Other Evidence to Help
Prove Your Case



What is Evidence?

Evidence is anything you use to prove your claim. Evidence can be a photograph, a letter, documents or records from a business, and a variety of other things. All evidence that is properly admitted will be considered by the judge.

Your case probably will be decided by a judge. If there is a jury, it will look at admitted exhibits during its deliberations.

For example:

- **In a request for change of custody**, the child's school records could be introduced as evidence that the child's grades have dropped or he/she has missed a significant amount of school while living with the other parent.
- **In a domestic violence or stalking civil protection order case**, a photograph of any injury you suffered or a threatening letter written by your abuser may help your case.
- **In a divorce case**, a copy of tax return documents or documents showing who has title to a car may be introduced as evidence.

Why Use Evidence?

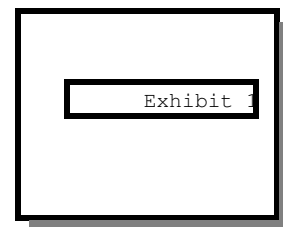
- ① Evidence is more **believable and trustworthy** than what a person says. For example, in a domestic violence case, if you say that your ex-boyfriend has left you threatening messages but he testifies that this is an absolute lie, the judge may not know whom to believe. However, if you submit a tape recording of one of these messages the judge will be more likely to believe you.
- ② Evidence may make something **easier to understand**. “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Some things are hard to explain in words, while a drawing or photograph is descriptive and clear.

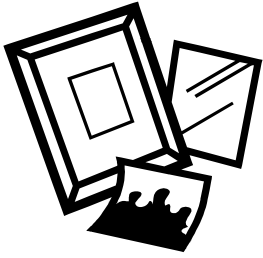
How Do I Present Evidence to the Court?

Each court is different, but in most courts, you can't just walk into court with a photograph or document and show it to the judge or jury. There are many things you must do before the court will even look at the evidence you have. Further, there are many different types of evidence, and the rules for using each type of evidence are different. Once you follow these rules, your evidence will be “admitted”.

Steps to Follow to Admit Evidence

- Before you ever go to court, think about the evidence you want to use to prove your case. Mark each piece of evidence with an exhibit number (attach a sticker labeled “Exhibit 1,” “Exhibit 2,” etc.)
- Bring these marked Exhibits with you to court. When you want to show the court one of the exhibits, do the following things:
 - ① Show the exhibit to the other party or the other party's attorney.
 - ② Then “lay the foundation” for the evidence. To do this, you must show that the evidence is relevant to your case and authentic (not a forgery). Depending upon what you want the court to consider, follow the rules listed in this pamphlet for “laying the foundation” - explaining why and how the exhibit is connected to your case.
 - ③ Either you or your witness must testify about the exhibit.
 - ④ Ask the court to admit the exhibit into evidence. The other party or attorney may object to the exhibit for some reason. Try to answer these objections as best you can. If you can't, let the judge decide.
 - ⑤ If there are no objections from the other party, or the judge has ruled in your favor, ask the court to “admit the Exhibit into evidence.”





Laying the Foundation for Photographs

1. Explain why a photo is connected to your case. For example:
“This photo shows the injury I suffered after my ex-boyfriend punched and kicked me.”
2. Explain how you know about what is in the photo. For example:
“I had my sister take this photograph within 2 hours after the incident occurred and went to get the film developed myself the following day.”
3. Explain that the photo is timely. For example:
“At the bottom right-hand corner of the photo is the date on which it was taken. As you can see, the photo was taken on the same day that the incident occurred, which is also the same day the police arrested my ex-boyfriend.”
4. Explain that the photo “fairly and accurately” shows what is depicted in the photo as it appeared on the date relevant to your case. For example:
“This photo is a fair and accurate depiction of how my face and side looked two hours after the incident and for the next two weeks.”

TIP

When using photographs, it is best to use color photos and enlarge them, if possible.

Foundation for Letters

1. Explain why the letter is connected to your case. For example:
“This is the letter that I received from my ex-boyfriend shortly before he beat me up.”
2. Explain when and how you got the letter. For example:
“This letter was shoved under the door to my apartment some time before 6 p.m. on Wednesday, January 2, 2001. I found it on the floor when I came home from work that day.”
3. Prove that the signature is that of a party to the case. Ways to prove this:
 - **Explain to the court: that you are familiar with the other party’s signature, how you came to know that person’s signature, and that it is your opinion that the signature on the letter is the other party’s signature.**



- **Call a witness who is familiar with the party’s signature, and ask the witness:**
“Do you know the other party in this case? Are you familiar with the party’s signature? How?”

Then show them the letter and ask “Is this the other party’s signature?”

- **Call the person who signed the letter.**
Show the witness the document, and ask the witness if that is his or her signature. (Only do this if you think they will admit to it).

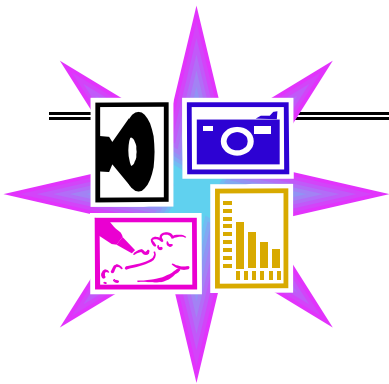
4. Explain that the letter is in the same condition now as when you received it. (“The letter was kept in a safe place and nothing has been changed since I received it.”)

TIPS

Do not read anything from the letter until the court has admitted it into evidence.

If the other party objects to the letter saying that it is hearsay, respond by saying: “The letter shows the letter writer’s state of mind.”

Laying the Foundation for Documents and Records From Businesses



1. Explain how the document or record is related to your case.
2. Call a witness from the business/agency that produced the record, ask the witness what his or her responsibilities are at the business/agency and how he or she is involved in record keeping.

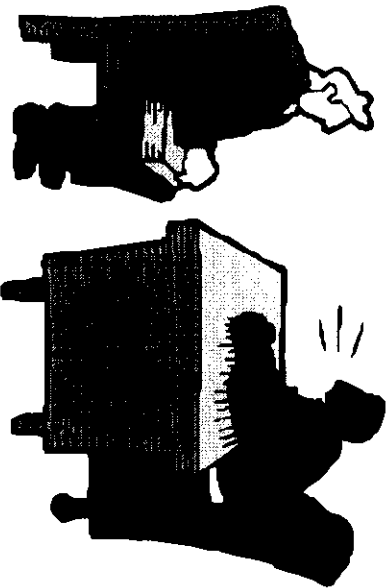
3. Show the witness the record and ask him/her if it is a record from the business/agency.

4. Ask the witness:
 - Was the record made by a person with knowledge of the acts or events appearing on it.
 - Was the record made at or near the time of the acts or events appearing on it.
 - Is it the regular practice of the business/agency to make such a record, and
 - Was the record kept in the course of a regularly conducted business activity.

TIP

If the record is certified (a statement is attached to the record stating that it is in fact a record from a public agency or it has an agency seal on it) you do not need to do anything before you show it to the judge. Just let the judge know it is certified.

How to Handle Witnesses When You Are Representing Yourself



When Should I Bring a Witness to Court?

It is always a good idea to bring a witness with you simply to tell the Court that you are an honest person or to confirm that what you are telling the Court is true.

In most cases that come before the Court, both sides are telling a different version of the same story. The Court knows that each side may be telling the version that best serves his or her own interests. The testimony of a witness (someone not involved in the case directly) will make your side of the story more believable.

In some types of cases, you are required by law to bring a witness. For example, in divorce cases, many Courts require a that you bring a witness to testify that you are a person known to have good character in your community (that you are an honest and good person).



What If My Witnesses Can't Come to the Hearing?

Your witness must come to the hearing! A handwritten note from a person will not be accepted by the Court—the witness must show up at the hearing and testify live. Live testimony is required so that the other side has an opportunity to ask questions of your witness as well.

To make sure your witnesses will show up, make sure you call them the week of the hearing and again the day before the hearing to remind them.



Who Should I Bring as a Witness?

→ People who know you and your reputation in the community.

→ People who know about the situation that brought you to the Court from things they have seen or heard. Only use witnesses after you have talked to them and are sure that they will tell the Court what is helpful to your case.

While it is okay to have a friend or family member be a witness for you, it is always best to have someone who does not favor one side over the other. With family members and friends, the Court may assume that the person is testifying for you simply because they like you and want you to win.



How Do I Prepare My Witnesses?

→ Think about what is the most valuable thing each witness could say on your behalf.

→ Write down a few questions that will help the witness get the idea across.

→ Practice with your witness ahead of time, so you know what answers will be given.





What Should I Do With My Witnesses at the Court Hearing?

- Start by asking the witness their name and address.
- If your witness is a professional, you should ask what their job is, what their educational degrees are, and how long they have been doing their job.
- Then ask specific questions about what information they have about your case.

With your own witness, it is not okay to ask "leading questions." Leading questions give the witness the answer you want them to say.

You must keep your questions open-ended. *Open-ended questions are Who, What, Where, When, How, and Why questions.*

Examples to use:

- How would you describe my husband's condition when he dropped the children off at your house?
- What did my husband do when he would pick the children up from day care?

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What About the Other Side's Witnesses?

The other side will question them first. The judge will give you an opportunity to "cross examine" them (that is, ask them your own questions). You do not have to ask any questions if you think the witness will only repeat what was already said.

When asking questions of the other side's witnesses, you are allowed to ask leading questions. Leading questions have Yes or No answers.

Examples to use:

- Was my husband ever drunk when he dropped the children off at your house?
- Didn't my husband yell and swear at the children when he came to pick them up from day care?

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Rules To Follow When Questioning Witnesses

- Keep your questions short.
- Never ask a question when you do not know what the answer will be—the answer could hurt your case more than help it.
- If you don't get the answer you were expecting from a witness, do not argue with them or accuse them of lying. It makes you look bad before the judge. Remember . . . politeness at all times!
- If a witness refuses to answer a question, ask the judge to make the person answer.

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Samples of Questions to Ask My Witnesses

- What is your name?
- What is your address?
- How long have you known me?
- During the time that you have known me, have you become familiar with my reputation in the community?
- Do I have a reputation for good character and honesty in the community?
- From what you know about me, am I someone the Court can rely upon to tell the truth?
- You have heard what I have said in Court. To the best of your knowledge, do you know it to be true?
- Please explain how you know this to be true.

Prepared by:

NAPIL Equal Justice Fellow
Ohio State Legal Services Association
September 2000

In addition to the forms in this packet, you may find additional forms and informational pamphlets to help you on the internet at the following website:

www.ohiolegalhelp.org

Click on “Statewide Forms & Information”

Locate and click on the legal area that you would like to review – use the search box if you are not sure which area to review

You can also search this website to learn how to access the local legal services program for your area