

How to format and fill out court documents and forms

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You must correctly format court papers that you've filled out to give to a Washington state court. Read this to learn the formatting rules and how to fill out court forms.

1. Format rules

If you're filling out and submitting your own court papers for a court case in Washington State, you should know the rules for how court papers should look and be formatted:

- You must use letter-sized (8½ x 11 inches) white paper.
- You must write or type on only one side of the page.
- All handwriting must be printed, readable, and in black or dark blue ink.
- The 1st page must have a margin of at least 3 inches from the top and 1 inch from the other 3 sides. Each page after that must have at least 1 inch for each margin.
- Your papers shouldn't have any highlighting or colored marking.

You can read the rules about how to format your court papers at Civil Rule 10(e) (https://www.courts.wa.gov/court_rules/pdf/CR/SUP_CR_10_00_00.pdf). These rules are for Superior Court. Other courts in Washington have their own rules (https://www.courts.wa.gov/court_rules/).

What if I don't follow these rules?

It depends.

- The court may fine you.
- The clerk may return your documents to you without filing them. This could cause you to miss a court deadline.
- The clerk may say your paper or material can't be filed or scanned. The court may order the paper sealed or converted to an exhibit.

Are there other pre-made forms I can use that already are formatted properly?

Maybe. For many kinds of cases, the Washington state Administrative Office of Courts (AOC) has created forms you must or should use (<https://www.courts.wa.gov/forms/>), called mandatory forms or pattern forms. Pattern forms are available for many types of common court cases, such as family law. If you use a pattern form, you'll know the format is correct. We've also created forms for many situations AOC doesn't cover.

Using forms from AOC (<https://www.courts.wa.gov/forms/>) or our Form Library is easier than creating your own form. We may change or update forms after the law changes or for other reasons. The forms in our library and on AOC's website should be current.

Your county's superior court may also have its own forms you should use. Get those from the clerk or at the law library (<https://waccl.weebly.com/directory.html>).

Should I make sure that I use up-to-date forms?

Yes. Before using a pattern form, make sure it's the latest version. The last date the form was updated (called the revision date) is in the footer in the lower left corner of the form, just above the form number. **For example**, this footer shows a form updated in January 2023 (01/2023):

RCW 26.09.020; 26.60.100
Mandatory Form (01/2023)
FL Divorce 201

Should I review my completed papers before filing them with the court?

Yes, you should review your papers to make sure nothing in them might cause the clerk to reject them. Here are some things to check for:

- You've filled out the case caption wherever needed.
- The case number is correct wherever you've put it.
- You've included all pages of each document.
- You scheduled a hearing on a day the judge is available to hear it.
- You put the parties' names on the case caption in the correct order.
- Your papers are formatted correctly.
- If you're trying to file an order, decree, judgment, or bond, make sure that the judge has signed it.
- You don't have to file discovery documents.

What if I still have questions after reading this?

If your county has a family law facilitator (https://www.courts.wa.gov/court_dir/?fa=court_dir.facils), they may be able to help you.

2. Fill out court forms

These are general instructions for all court forms.

Caption

The **caption** is the top section of every court form. It includes the name of the court (Superior, District, Municipal, or Juvenile) and the location (county or city). On the left side, there's space for the names of the people involved in the case (the parties). On the right, there's space for the case number (No.) and the form title. Below the title, there may be some capital letters in parentheses (a docket code) that the court clerk uses to process the form when it is filed.

In most family law cases, the person who starts the case is the **Petitioner** and the other side is the **Respondent**. In other case types, the parties are called **Plaintiff** and **Defendant**.

Here's an example of a caption from a family law case in Superior Court:

Superior Court of Washington, County of (County Name)

In re:

Petitioner/s *(person/s who started this case)*:

Chris Smith

And Respondent/s *(other party/parties)*:

Evan Smith

No. 99-9-99999-99

Title of the form

(ABC)

How to fill out the caption

Top: **Court of Washington,** . In the left blank, put the type of court where your case is or will be filed. This could be Superior, District, Municipal, Juvenile, Appeals, or whatever it says on the Petition or Complaint you received. In the right blank, put the county name. For Municipal and some District Courts, put the name of the city.

Left side: Parties names. Put the names of the Petitioner/s (or Plaintiff/s) and the Respondent/s (or Defendant/s). If you're responding, copy the names from the Petition or Complaint you received.

Right side: Case number. The court clerk assigns a case number to every new case that is filed. Put that number near the top on the right-hand section of the first page of every form after "No." When you first file a case, the court clerk may have a stamp you can use to put the case number on each paper. You can also print it. **If you're responding,** copy the case number from the papers you received. If you don't see a case number, it might not be filed yet. You can call the court clerk to check

If you don't put the **case number** on the first page of everything that you file with the court, your papers may be lost, or the clerk may return them to you. Some courts will fine you for filing incorrect forms.

Title. Each form has a title on the right-hand side of the form under the case number. Sometimes the title is repeated in large type under the caption.

Contents

Fill out each form according to its instructions. In most counties, you may print or type the information. It must be readable. You must use **black or dark blue ink**. After filling out each form, re-read it. Make sure you've correctly filled in all blanks you need to. Any corrections must be neat and readable.

Don't write in the margins or on the back side of any page. The clerk may reject your form.

Dates. The last page of most forms (not orders) has a space for the person filling out a form to put the date they signed it. Do not put a date on proposed orders. The judge will date an order when the judge signs it.

Your Signature. After you fill out a form, look for places to sign your name:

- When you prepare and file motions, you're the moving party. After you prepare a motion, look for each place marked "signature of moving party or lawyer." Look carefully. You may have to sign in more than one place. You may have to write the date and the place (city, state) you signed the form.
- When you prepare an order and plan to present it for the judge to sign, look for the place at the end for your signature. Check "is presented by me."

Judge's Signature. Leave the judge's signature line and the date blank.

Other signatures. A witness or person serving papers who must sign a form must fill out all information correctly and sign in the right space.

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