

TIPS ON HOW TO REPRESENT YOURSELF IN COURT

1. Arrive at the Courthouse Early

Your court hearing is not an appointment that you can simply reschedule if you miss it. If you need to change your court date for some reason, you will need to file legal documents requesting a different court date or get the other side to agree to the change in writing.

2. Bring Your Files

You should have a file with copies of all papers you and the other side have filed with the court, or given to each. Bring a notepad and pens for taking notes during the hearing.

3. Bring your Evidence and Witnesses

What you need to bring to court with you may depend on the nature of your hearing or trial. Witnesses may or may not be allowed to testify of your behalf depending on the type of hearing. If you are suppose to bring evidence and witnesses to the hearing, bring everything. Ask you witnesses to arrive early and dress nicely. If an important witness will not come voluntarily, you may consider requesting the court to issue a subpoena.

If you have documents or pictures, bring the original item and two (2) copies (original for the court, one copy for you, on copy for the other side.) Things that you may need to bring to court may include any contracts at issue, receipts, estimates, letters, bills, photograph, etc. Some documents can't be used as evidence unless the right person is in the courtroom to explain the document and answer questions about it. There are many rules about evidence and you may want to talk to a lawyer about what evidence you need and how to make sure your evidence can be considered by the judge.

4. Arrange for an Interpreter

Make sure that you and your witness are able to testify. If you do not have an interpreter, contact the court.

5. Dress Appropriately

Dress conservatively. Your are not required to wear any particular type of outfit like a suit but you should refrain from wearing shorts, tank tops, halter-tops, or shirts that show your midriff. All hats and sunglasses must be taken off prior to entering the courtroom.

6. Arrange for Childcare

Unless you are required to bring you children to court for some reason, make arrangements to have someone else watch them

7. Bring an Outline of what you want to say

Representing yourself in court can be an intimidating experience. You do not want to read a prepared statement but an outline can be a useful tool to remind you of the main points that you want to cover.

8. Conduct yourself properly in the courtroom

Do not chew gum, eat, read a newspaper, sleep, listen to earphones, or have your cell phone turned on.

During the hearing you should listen carefully and talk directly to the judge whom you should address as “Judge” or “Your Honor.”

Do not talk when the judge is talking.

Do not speak unless you have the judge’s permission. When the judge gives you permission to talk, talk to the judge, not to anyone else.

Do not raise your voice or act in a hostile or aggressive way. Do not make any negative, threatening or harassing statement or gesture to anyone.

Do not interrupt anyone.

Do not argue with the judge, a witness, or a lawyer.

Do not talk, make noise, or gesture with your body when someone else is talking.

Do not use any electronic device, recorder or camera.

Do not come and go from the courtroom while court is in session.

Do not raise your hand to speak. It is up to the participants to call witnesses. If you are not called by a participant or the court as a witness you will not be allowed to speak.

Do not speak or gesture to participants or witnesses as they come or go from the courtroom.

During your hearing keep your emotions in check. If the other side is making an argument that you disagree with or you feel that they are just plain lying, be sure to write down the point that you wish to make. You will have the opportunity to address this point with the Judge either when it is your turn to speak or after the other side has finished speaking.

9. Understand what just happened

Representing yourself in court can be an emotional experience but you do not want to leave the courtroom without understanding the outcome of the hearing or trial and what, if anything, you need to do next. For instance, will you need to attend another hearing? Do you need to prepare any written legal arguments or file any documents with the Court? Do you need to prepare an order or will the Judge do this? Seek clarification from the Judge at the time of the hearing, for example: “Your Honor, I need to file the document by what date?”

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