

## Other Helpful Hints:

- ▶ The proper way to address the judge is “your honor.”
- ▶ Speak directly to the judge only when asked, and not to the other party in the case. Do not argue with the judge or the other party.
- ▶ People in need of disability services or language interpreters should notify the courts ahead of time so that arrangements can be made.
- ▶ Speak properly—be respectful and don’t use slang or foul language.
- ▶ Turn cell phones and pagers to “off” or vibrate mode.
- ▶ Food and/or drinks are not allowed in the courthouse.
- ▶ Do not talk, chew gum, eat, drink, read the paper, listen to music, or do anything distracting.
- ▶ Legal problems are upsetting, but try to stay calm and have patience.

## After Your Day in Court

Please remember that the court is not allowed to be on anyone’s side, but must give everyone a chance to tell his or her side of the story. It is unlikely that you will get everything you want, whether you represent yourself or have an attorney. Even if you win a money judgment, it may be difficult or impossible to actually collect it from the other party.

Once the court has made a ruling, that is the end of your case; you have had your chance. Under some circumstances you may have an opportunity to appeal the judge’s decision. If you are still in the courtroom and the judge gives a ruling you do not agree with, you should not continue to persuade or argue with the court or anyone else in the case. Doing so could get you fined or put in jail. If you and the other party in the case cannot resolve your disagreement yourselves, for whatever reason, you will have to live with the court’s decision.

## Where can I find legal information?

We recommend contacting the following for legal texts and resources:

- ▶ Your local library
- ▶ Your local law library
- ▶ Clerk of Court office

For a list of programs that offer free legal help, visit [www.LawHelp.org/LA](http://www.LawHelp.org/LA). LawHelp helps low and moderate income people find free legal aid programs in their communities and has information [NOT ADVICE] about basic legal issues.

## How do I find a lawyer?

There are four Legal Service Corporations (LSCs) in Louisiana who receive grants to provide civil legal assistance for low-income Louisiana citizens. To find out more about these four LSCs, call the Louisiana Civil Justice Center’s Help Line at (504) 355-0970 or (800) 310-7029. Call your local LSC to find out about free notary services.

If you do not qualify for free legal aid and need help locating a lawyer, you may want to contact your local Lawyer Referral Service. They can supply you with the names of lawyers in your area willing to handle your particular type of case and sometimes consult with you at a reduced fee.

|               |                |
|---------------|----------------|
| Baton Rouge:  | (225) 344-9926 |
| Lafayette:    | (337) 237-4700 |
| Lake Charles: | (337) 436-3308 |
| New Orleans:  | (504) 561-8828 |
| Shreveport:   | (318) 222-0720 |

If your legal issue is a criminal matter, check with your local public defender office. You may be able to have a lawyer appointed to your case.

This brochure is produced by the  
**Louisiana State Bar Association**

**Access to Justice**

**Pro Se Subcommittee**



**This document is strictly for informational purposes.**

It does not include legal advice.

**REPRESENTING  
YOURSELF  
IN COURT**  
*Your Rights  
and Responsibilities*



## What is Self-Representation?

A person who goes to court without being represented by a lawyer is called “self-represented” or “pro se.” Pro se is a Latin term that means “for oneself.”

## Can I Represent Myself?

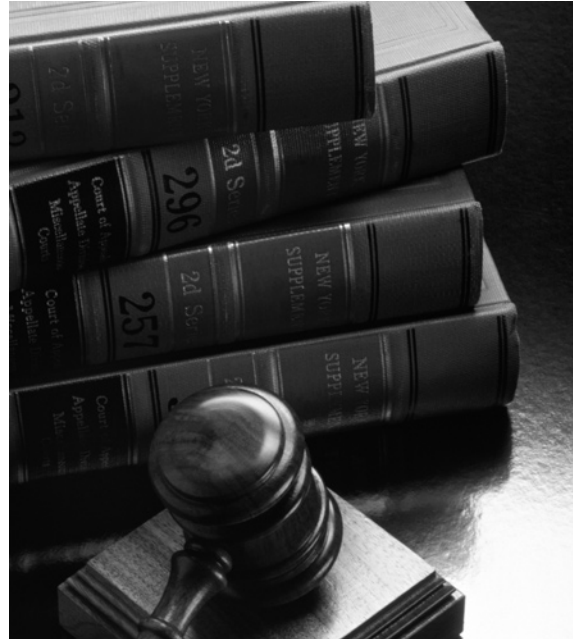
You have a right to represent yourself (appear “pro se”). However, you should not expect any special treatment or assistance from the court, and you must follow all of the Court Rules. If you do not follow the rules, the court may not be allowed to give you what you want, even if it seems like you should win the case. You can also be fined, ordered to pay the other person’s attorney, or be found in contempt of court for violating the rules or failing to appear in court.

## Do I Need A Lawyer?

It is a good idea to have a lawyer to help you when you go to court. You may need a lawyer if you have a complicated case or a case that may become complicated. It is important to remember that the judge and court staff cannot give you legal advice.

## Knowing Your Case

**Get Organized and Gather Your Materials.** Collect all materials related to your case. Write down names, addresses, phone numbers and details about people and events in your case. Start keeping a diary or a journal of past and upcoming events and deadlines. Keeping dates and events in one location will make them easier to locate. Organize your documents. Keep original documents safe, so that you can bring them to court. It’s a good idea to make copies of all documents, so if the judge wants to keep one, you will have the original and another copy for your records.



**If you are delivered or served with court papers, read them right away!** They often include dates important to your case, such as when you have to file papers or go to court.

**Know the Law and Your Case.** If you do not have a lawyer, you’ll need to learn about the law and court rules. Your local library or law library will be able to assist you with your research. There is legal information available online at [www.LawHelp.org/LA](http://www.LawHelp.org/LA). Your research should include the law of your case, court procedure, and rules of professional conduct. If there is a pending court case, review the papers in the court’s record. Ask a court clerk for help with this.

**Explore Other Options.** You may be able to solve your problem without having to go to court. For example, if your issue can be resolved through a discussion with the opposing party and does not require a judgment, then Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) may offer a fair resolution. Sometimes the court will order you to try ADR before litigating your case.

## Preparing For Court

**Complete the Court Forms and Documents.** Cases are started by filing a petition or motion that clearly states the issue of the case and the resolution being sought.

You may be required to respond to the lawsuit or file papers with the court. Legal forms and documents can be complicated, and it is usually best to have a lawyer. However, there may be simplified forms for your issue. Ask the court clerk if there are any forms you can fill out for your case. Additional forms may be available online at [www.LawHelp.org/LA](http://www.LawHelp.org/LA).

**Filing Court Forms and Documents.** Filing court forms costs money. If you do not have money to file, you can ask for a court order to let you file papers without paying in advance. To do so, you need to file a form called an “In Forma Pauperis” form, or “IFP” for short. You can complete this form online at the Louisiana Supreme Court’s website:

<http://www.lasc.org/rules/dist.ct/COURTRULESAPPENDIX8.0.pdf>.

This document will outline your financial situation so that a judge can decide whether or not to waive the fees. However, you should be prepared to pay all associated costs to file your case in case the judge does not grant a fee waiver.

**Do I Need Witnesses?** Witnesses can testify about facts to help tell your story. They should know the case and have seen or heard the evidence themselves. If you have a witness who can support your case, you should bring them with you to court. At court, both you and your witnesses should follow a business dress code.

## Going To Court

**What Should I Wear to Court?** Court is a business type of environment. Dress in a way that shows respect for the court. You should avoid wearing shorts, tank tops, flip-flop sandals and hair curlers.

**When Should I Arrive at Court?** Arrive at the courthouse at least 30 minutes before your scheduled court appearance. It is very important that you allow time to park and find your courtroom. If you miss your hearing, the judge can make decisions that you may not agree with and which could seriously affect you.

**What about Court Security?** Upon entering the courthouse, you will be expected to pass through a metal detector. Any metal object on your body must be removed and inspected.

**How Do I Find the Correct Courtroom?** Most courts post a list of cases in the lobby of the courthouse. If you need help locating your name, ask a court employee for help. Contact the clerk or the bailiff in the courtroom to let them know you have arrived and to make sure you are in the correct courtroom. Let them know if you need to leave the courtroom for any reason.

**What Materials Should I Bring?** Bring copies of all documents that you have filed with the court and that you have been served with. The court will not have these documents for you. Also bring copies of the documents that support your case. Organize your evidence so that it is easy for the judge to understand your side of the story.

**How Long Will I Have to Wait?** It is very likely that you will have to wait for your case to be called, depending on the number of other people in court that day and the order in which the judge calls cases. For some cases, you might need to plan on being there all day. Some courts do not allow children in the courtroom. Make sure to schedule enough time away from work or for child care so that you will not miss your court appearance.