

ANSWERS TO PRO SE LITIGANTS' COMMON QUESTIONS

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE
EASTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN



Milwaukee, the Historical United States Courthouse Building, Constructed 1891-1899 1891

Clerk of Court – Milwaukee Division

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Introduction

For a variety of reasons, many people represent themselves in court. A person who represents himself in court is often said to be proceeding “pro se” (pronounced “pro say”) and may be called a “pro se litigant” or a “self-represented litigant.”

A person who is not a lawyer can represent only himself in court. A non-lawyer generally cannot represent another person in court, even if that person is a close family member. A non-lawyer also cannot represent a corporation or limited liability company (LLC) in federal court even if the person is the owner of the company or corporation. If a corporation or LLC is a party to a lawsuit in federal court, the corporation or company must be represented by an attorney.

This guide will provide you basic information about representing yourself in a civil action in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin. It is designed to address questions that come up after a case has already been filed and before trial. It does not directly address questions about how to file a case or about trial. This guide provides only the most basic information. It is not a substitute for an attorney. This information is general in nature and some of it might not apply to your case.

This guide also lists other places you may wish to turn for more information.

THE COURT DOES NOT ENDORSE ANY ORGANIZATION, ENTITY, SERVICE, OR WEBSITE.

The staff of the Clerk of Court’s office will be able to answer certain procedural questions, but they absolutely **cannot give you legal advice**. Therefore, the staff of the Clerk of Court’s office will **not** be able to predict whether you might win your case, recommend a strategy of how you might win your case, predict how a judge might decide an issue, or interpret the meaning of any statute, rule, regulation, order, or decision.

You will be notified about all of the court’s actions in your case through the mail. Therefore, **if your mailing address changes while this case is pending you must immediately notify the court**. Do not assume that your mail will be forwarded to you or

that the court knows that your address changed. It is your responsibility to notify the court. If you fail to do so, you might not receive important information about your case. This could result in you losing important rights or losing your entire case.

What are the Local Rules and Federal Rules of Civil Procedure?

The [Federal Rules of Civil Procedure](#), often abbreviated Fed. R. Civ. P., are rules that control every civil case filed in federal court everywhere in the country. They can be found at a law library or on many websites including: www.law.cornell.edu/rules/frcp and www.uscourts.gov.

The [Local Rules](#), often abbreviated L.R., are rules that apply to every case filed in the Eastern District of Wisconsin. Copies of the Local Rules can be obtained at the Clerk of Court's office or at the Eastern District of Wisconsin's website, www.wied.uscourts.gov. The Local Rules are divided into three sections: (1) General Rules that apply to all cases; (2) Civil Rules that apply in only civil cases; and (3) Criminal Rules that apply in only criminal cases.

Like everyone else, pro se litigants **MUST** comply with these rules. Failure to comply with these rules may have serious consequences. Depending upon the circumstances, it is possible that **you might lose your case if you do not comply with all the rules.**

What does that word mean? A glossary of common legal terms.

Courts and lawyers often use terms that have special meanings when used in the legal setting. Simple definitions of some of the most common terms are below. Additional information can be found at various websites such as <http://www.uscourts.gov/glossary> or by consulting a legal dictionary.

Affidavit:	A written or printed statement made under oath.
Amount in controversy:	The amount of money at issue in a case.
Answer:	The document that a defendant files in response to a plaintiff's complaint. See <i>Fed. R. Civ. P. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12</i> .
Brief:	A written statement submitted to a court that explains a party's factual and legal arguments in support of a motion.
Civil case:	A legal action where a plaintiff seeks some sort of relief from a defendant.
Civil cover sheet:	A form submitted by the plaintiff along with a complaint. It asks for basic information about a case and is used for keeping track of what types of cases are filed in federal court.
Costs:	Money a court may award to a party who wins a lawsuit for expenses incurred by the winning party during the lawsuit for things such as filing fees, service of a summons or subpoena, court reporters, or witnesses. See <i>Fed. R. Civ. P. 54(d); 28 U.S.C. § 1920</i> .

Complaint: A written statement filed by the plaintiff to begin a lawsuit. In this document, the plaintiff outlines his case and states what he would like to happen. *See Fed. R. Civ. P. 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.*

[Consent/Refusal to Proceed Before U.S. Magistrate Judge](#)

A form on which a party states whether he or she authorizes a United States Magistrate Judge to be the judge in the case. If all parties consent, the magistrate judge will handle all aspects of the case, including a jury trial, if necessary.

If even one party does not consent to have a magistrate judge handle the case, the case will be handled by a district judge.

Damages: Money that a defendant pays a plaintiff in a civil case if the plaintiff has won. Damages may be compensatory (to compensate for a loss or injury) or punitive (to punish or deter future misconduct).

Default judgment: Judgment entered in favor of the plaintiff and against a defendant when the defendant fails to answer or respond to a complaint. *See Fed. R. Civ. P. 55.*

Defendant: In a civil case, this is the party being sued by the plaintiff.

Deposition:	A part of discovery where a witness or party answers questions under oath. Generally, this happens in-person, and although similar to testifying in court, this generally takes place in a lawyer's office. <i>See Fed. R. Civ. P. 27, 28, 30, 31, 32.</i>
Discovery:	The phase of a civil case where each party collects information about the case from the other side. It may also refer to the actual information collected during this process, which may include copies of documents, written answers to questions, or depositions. <i>See Fed. R. Civ. P. 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37.</i>
Dispositive motion:	A motion that, if granted, would end a portion of a case or end an entire case. Examples include a motion to dismiss or a motion for summary judgment.
District court:	The court in the federal system where most actions start. The District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin is a district court.
District judge:	A federal judge appointed to serve for life by the President and confirmed by the Senate to serve in a district court under Article III of the Constitution.
Docket:	A brief written chronological list of what has happened in a case that is maintained by the Clerk of Court.

Electronic Court Filing (ECF):

A way for attorneys to file documents with the court by uploading them to a website. In the Eastern District of Wisconsin, pro se litigants cannot file documents this way. Pro se litigants must file documents by submitting them to the Clerk of Court. The Clerk's office staff will then upload the documents to the ECF system.

Evidence:

Information presented in testimony or documents that is used to persuade a judge or jury to decide a case a certain way.

[Federal Rules of Civil Procedure:](#)

The rules for conducting a civil lawsuit filed in a federal court. Often abbreviated Fed. R. Civ. P.

[Federal Rules of Evidence:](#)

Rules that govern what types and how evidence may be presented in federal court. Often abbreviated Fed. R. Evid.

Hearsay:

Evidence where a witness recounts what he learned from someone else. Hearsay is generally not admissible in court. *See Fed. R. Evid. 801, 802, 803, 804, 806, 805, 807.*

In Forma Pauperis (IFP):

Latin phrase meaning "as a poor person." It is used when a party cannot afford to pay the filing fee to start a civil suit and therefore asks the court for permission to proceed "as a poor person" and not require him to pay the fee. A person wishing to proceed in forma pauperis must complete this district's "[Request to Proceed without Prepaying the Filing Fee](#)," which is available on the court's website or from the Clerk of Court's office. *See 28 U.S.C. § 1915.*

Interrogatory:	One party's written question to another party that is asked as part of discovery. <i>See Fed. R. Civ. P. 33; Civ. L.R. 33.</i>
Judgment:	The final action by the court that ends a case in a district court.
Jurisdiction:	The legal authority of a court to hear and decide a certain type of case. It also is used as a synonym for venue, meaning the geographic area over which the court has territorial jurisdiction to decide cases.
Litigant:	A party to a lawsuit.
<u>Local Rules:</u>	Rules that apply to cases brought in a specific court. Often abbreviated L.R.
Magistrate judge:	A federal judge appointed by the judges in a district court who may oversee all aspects of a civil case if the parties consent.
Mediation:	A process where the parties meet with a neutral third party (sometimes a magistrate judge) in an effort to reach a mutually agreeable settlement of the case.
Motion:	A request by a litigant to a judge for a decision on an issue relating to the case. <i>See Fed. R. Civ. P. 7(b); Civ. L.R. 7.</i>
Movant:	The party that files a motion.
Order:	The court's command to a party, decision on a motion, or resolution of an issue in the case.

Party:	The plaintiff or the defendant in a lawsuit.
Plaintiff:	The party that starts a civil lawsuit by filing a complaint.
Pleadings:	Written statements filed with the court that describe a party's legal or factual assertions about the case. Pleadings may include a complaint, an answer, a motion, or a brief.
Prejudice:	Motions or cases can be resolved with or without prejudice. If "with prejudice," the case or motion cannot be filed again. If "without prejudice," the case or motion might be able to be re-filed at a later time.
Pro bono:	Phrase commonly used to refer to when a lawyer represents a person for free.
Relief:	What a party seeks either in a lawsuit or in a particular motion.
Reply:	A movant's submission following the other party's response to a motion. When a motion is filed, the movant may submit a brief in support. The other party will be able to submit a response. The movant will then be able to reply. The court will then decide the motion. <i>See Civ. L.R. 7, 56.</i>

Response:	A submission made by a party in opposition to a motion. When a motion is filed, the movant may submit a brief in support. The other party will be able to submit a response. The movant will then be able to reply. The court will then decide the motion. <i>See Civ. L.R. 7, 56.</i>
Scheduling conference:	A meeting with the court involving any pro se litigant and attorney representing a party to discuss how the case will proceed. The court decides whether any conference will be held in person or by telephone. <i>See Fed. R. Civ. P. 16; Civ. L.R. 16.</i>
Service of process:	The act of formally providing the defendant with a copy of a summons and a copy of the complaint to inform him of the lawsuit against him. <i>See Fed. R. Civ. P. 4.</i>
Settlement:	Parties to a lawsuit resolve their dispute without having a trial. Settlements often involve the payment of compensation by one party in at least partial satisfaction of the other party's claims, but usually do not include the admission of fault.
Statute of limitations:	The time within which a lawsuit must be filed or a criminal prosecution begun. The deadline can vary, depending on the type of case.
Subpoena:	A command, issued under a court's authority, to a witness to appear and give testimony or to produce certain documents.

- Summons: A form prepared by the plaintiff and issued by a court that informs the defendant that he or she has been sued. *See Fed. R. Civ. P. 4.*
- Summary judgment: A decision made on the basis of statements and evidence presented for the record without a trial. It is used when it is not necessary to resolve any factual disputes in the case. Summary judgment is granted when – on the undisputed facts in the record – one party is entitled to judgment as a matter of law. *See Fed. R. Civ. P. 56; Civ. L.R. 56.*
- Text Only Order: An order entered by a judge that appears only on the docket and is not accompanied by a longer formal written order. These orders are generally short and for minor matters.
- Waiver of service: A process where a defendant may agree that a plaintiff will not have to formally serve him with a summons and a copy of the complaint. *See Fed. R. Civ. P. 5(d).*

How will my case proceed?

Filing the Complaint

When a complaint is submitted to the Clerk of Court's office, you must either pay a \$402.00 filing fee or petition the court to proceed in forma pauperis.

You also must promptly submit the "[Consent/Refusal to Proceed Before U.S. Magistrate Judge](#)" form. This form will be provided to you when you file your case. The form is also available on the Eastern District of Wisconsin's website. The court might not take any action on your case until you submit this form.

If you cannot afford the filing fee and therefore wish to petition to proceed in forma pauperis, you must the form included in the Court's "[Guide and Complaint for Non-Prisoner Filing Without a Lawyer](#)." This form is available at the Clerk of Court's office or at the court's website. After you submit this completed form, the court will review the information you provide to determine if you can pay the filing fee. If the court determines you can pay the filing fee, the court will order you to do so.

If the court determines you cannot afford the filing fee, the court will review your complaint to determine if it is sufficient to proceed. If the court finds your complaint is sufficient, your case will go forward.

Serving the Defendant

The next step is providing each defendant with a copy of the complaint and either a [summons](#) or both a [Request to Waive Service of Summons](#) and a [Waiver of Service of Summons](#) form. This process is called "serving the defendant." If you paid the filing fee, the Clerk of Court will provide you with instructions on how to serve the defendant. If you were granted permission to proceed in forma pauperis, in most cases the United States Marshals Service must serve defendant. Even if you were granted permission to proceed in forma pauperis, you will be charged a fee to have the United States Marshals Service serve the defendant. The current fee for the United States Marshals Service to provide a defendant with a waiver-of-service packet is \$8.00. If personal service is required, the current fee is \$65.00 per hour,

plus travel costs and any other out-of-pocket expenses for each Deputy Marshal needed for service. See 28 C.F.R. § 0.114 for more information on the fees the United States Marshals Service will charge.

If you are appealing a denial of Social Security benefits, the Clerk of Court will serve the defendant for you.

After the defendant is served with a summons and a copy of the complaint, the defendant generally must file an answer to the complaint. If you are appealing a denial of Social Security benefits, your case will proceed differently; after the defendant is served the Clerk of Court will mail you a letter explaining how your case will proceed.

Discovery

Once the defendant answers the complaint, the court will usually schedule a conference with the parties. The judge may decide to have this conference over the phone or in court. During this conference, the court will discuss scheduling of further proceedings in your case. The court will set a deadline for the parties to make their initial disclosures, as required by Fed. R. Civ. P. 26(a). The court will usually also set deadlines for the parties to complete all discovery and for filing dispositive motions.

During the discovery phase of the case, the parties exchange information about the case. This may include exchanging documents, presenting interrogatories, or conducting depositions. The discovery phase may last a number of months.

At any point in the case, the parties may try to negotiate a settlement of the case. The parties may try to do this on their own or may ask an unbiased third party, sometimes a magistrate judge, to help them settle the case through mediation.

Filing Dispositive Motions

The court will usually set a deadline for any party to file a motion for summary judgment. There are very specific rules about how to file and respond to a motion for summary judgment. In a motion for summary judgment, a party claims that the undisputed facts demonstrate that he must win the case. The other party must

respond, and the movant may reply. The court will then decide the motion. The court's resolution of the motion might end the case. If the court's decision does not end the case, the court will schedule the matter for trial. It normally takes at least a year from the time a case is filed until a trial is held; in many cases, the time is longer.

I need information. Where can I learn more about the law?

Internet Resources

Filers are advised that documents created with the assistance of artificial intelligence (AI) tools may contain errors, misrepresentations, or fabrications. Filers are responsible for ensuring the accuracy and integrity of their filings. Filings that contain factual errors, misrepresentations of law, citation to a nonexistent case, or any other misrepresentation may result in sanctions by the court under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11.

Wisconsin State Law Library: <http://wilawlibrary.gov/>.

Under "Legal Topics"

- Links to hundreds of resources organized by topic.
- Links to legal forms.
- Links to other organizations, organized by county.
- Links to case law, statutes, and rules.

Law Libraries

Marquette University Law School Library

1215 W. Michigan St., Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53233, 414-288-7031.

A law library with access to full range of legal materials. Library is open to members of the public for the purpose of conducting legal research. However members of the public are not able to check out materials. Staff is available to assist patrons with research needs. Public patrons must register at the lobby desk upon entering Eckstein Hall by signing in and showing photo identification.

Eastern District of Wisconsin Law Library

517 E. Wisconsin Ave., Room 516, Milwaukee, WI 53202,
414-297-1698.

The library is open, as a courtesy, to members of the bar, government employees and the general public on weekdays between 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. The library will be closed on all federal holidays and other days when the federal courthouse is closed. On occasion the library may be closed when staff attend work-related events elsewhere.

Non-court users are asked to sign in at the front desk and may use materials only in the library. Photocopiers are available. Some older materials are kept in store rooms. If you do not see a volume you need on the shelf, check with the library staff who will retrieve materials from the store room. Materials which are checked out to chambers will not be retrieved for use by non- court users. The computers in the library are for use by court staff only.

Milwaukee Legal Resource Center (MLRC)

901 N. 9th St., Courthouse, Room G10-1, Milwaukee, WI 53233, 414-278-4900.

A branch of the State Law Library, the Milwaukee Legal Resource Center (MLRC) is the law library for Milwaukee County. Library staff is available to provide reference and research assistance, including locating procedural information, forms, and other types of legal resources. The library's collection contains Wisconsin primary legal materials, as well as State Bar of Wisconsin CLE practice books and other secondary legal materials. The library also has federal materials, such as U.S. Supreme Court Reporter, Code of Federal Regulations, and the United States Code Service, a core collection of treatises, Milwaukee County and Milwaukee City ordinances, general reference books, and some titles aimed at the non-lawyer. The library offers several public computers with free access to the Internet, Westlaw, Shepard's Public Access, the Wisconsin State Law Library catalog (including MLRC titles), and the LOIS Wisconsin Series CD-ROM.

County law libraries:

Many county courthouses maintain small un-staffed public law libraries. Contact a specific county courthouse for current information.

I need help. Where can I find a lawyer or get legal advice?
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State Bar of Wisconsin Lawyer Referral and Information Service (LRIS)

(800) 362-9082 or (608) 257-4666 (in Dane County and outside of Wisconsin). Available Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM.

Online service is available 24 hours per day through the State Bar of Wisconsin's website, <http://www.wisbar.org/forPublic/INeedaLawyer/Pages/Lawyer-Referral-Request.aspx>. You can search for an attorney by geographical location and area of practice.

When you call the service, you will not get legal advice. However, you will talk to a legal assistant who is experienced in analyzing potential legal problems – and in helping you locate the best source of help.

After speaking with an LRIS legal assistant, you may decide that you need to hire an attorney. If so, we can refer you to an attorney in your area who has indicated an interest in your type of legal situation. Attorneys referred through LRIS agree to charge no more than \$20 for the first consultation, up to one half hour.

In some cases, you will resolve your legal issue at the first meeting. If your problem requires work beyond the first half-hour, you will be charged the lawyer's regular fees.

Attorneys participating in LRIS may accept referrals in any field of law in which they consider themselves competent. LRIS does not warrant that panel attorneys have any special expertise in the area of law for which a client was referred.

Legal Action of Wisconsin

www.legalaction.org

Milwaukee: 230 W. Wells St., Milwaukee, WI 53203, 414-278-7722.

Racine: 4900 Spring St., Ste. 100, Racine, WI 53406, 262-635-8836.

Oshkosh: 404 N. Main St., Ste. 702, Oshkosh, WI 54901, 920-233-6521.

Green Bay: 201 W. Walnut St., Ste. 203, Green Bay, WI 54303, 920-432-4645.

Legal Action of Wisconsin provides free legal services to low-income individuals. However, **Legal Action focuses upon only a few areas of law. For example, Legal Action generally does not represent litigants in employment discrimination cases.** Areas of law that Legal Action handles that are most likely to come up in federal court include:

Consumer Law - Mortgage foreclosures, utility shut-offs and restoration of utility services, predatory lending such as payday and car title loans, and some bankruptcies.

Government/Public Benefits (Welfare) and Health Law - Wisconsin Works (W-2), Child Care Assistance, BadgerCare, Food Stamps, Title 19 or Medicaid, Kinship Care, Unemployment Compensation and other government benefit programs.

SeniorLAW - SSI, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid. .

Social Security – Appeals of Social Security Disability (SSDI) and Social Security (SSI) denials when private attorneys cannot be found.

Legal Aid Society of Milwaukee

www.lasmilwaukee.com

728 N. James Lovell Street, Third Floor, North Suite, 414-727-5300.

The Legal Aid Society of represents low income families and individuals who have problems involving housing, government benefits, disability, foreclosure, employment, homelessness, consumer law, eviction, HIV/AIDS, and civil rights. The Civil Division conducts regular walk-in hours on Mondays and Wednesdays from 1:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

State Bar of Wisconsin Modest Means Program

Information and application form available online: www.wisbar.org/forPublic/INeedaLawyer/Pages/Modest-Means.aspx

The Modest Means Program of the State Bar of Wisconsin is designed to assist people whose income is too high to qualify for free legal services, but too low to pay a lawyer's standard rate. The program has income qualifications based on family size.

Only certain types of cases are eligible under this program. **Generally, any case that may result in you suing for a monetary award or damages is not eligible for a reduced fee referral (personal injury, medical malpractice, etc.).** Cases that qualify for this program that are most likely to come up in federal court include insurance policy disputes, contracts, and consumer fraud.

Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic (MVLC)

www.marquettelegalclinic.org

At the Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic, volunteer attorneys and Marquette University law students serve the Milwaukee community at various locations by providing pro bono legal information and referral services on a walk-in basis to individuals in need of legal assistance. Legal information is provided in most areas of civil law.

The MVLC does not provide legal advice regarding employment discrimination issues.

No attorney-client relationship is formed and on-going representation is not provided. No appointment is necessary. You should bring all paperwork related to your question.

MVLC locations:

House of Peace Community Center

1702 W. Walnut St.,
Milwaukee, WI
Tuesdays:
4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.
(sign-in starts at 3:30 p.m.)

Milwaukee Justice Center

Milwaukee County Courthouse,
Room G9 - 901 N. 9th Street
Milwaukee County residents only.
Thursdays (sign-in starts at 1:30 p.m.);
Fridays (sign-in starts at 8:30 a.m.)

Marquette Volunteer Legal Clinic for Veterans

This clinic serves only veterans, active duty service members, and their families.
6419 W. Greenfield Ave.,
West Allis, WI
1st and 3rd Mondays:
4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

United Community Center

Services available in English and Spanish.
730 W. Washington St.,
Milwaukee, WI
Wednesdays:
5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.
(sign-in starts at 4:30 p.m.)

Community Advocates

<http://communityadvocates.net/advocacy/>

Community Advocates can provide referrals for legal representation in **Social Security** Disability and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) appeals.
Call 414-449-4777.

Eastern District of Wisconsin Bar Association (EDWBA) Pro Se Federal Civil Litigant Help Line

Information and application available at edwba.org.

The EDWBA Help Line offers free, confidential, independent guidance (up to two hours) from a volunteer lawyer who will provide you information about federal civil litigation. Although these volunteer lawyers cannot represent you, they can help you represent yourself. Topics include:

- Filing a civil case
- Writing litigation documents
- Understanding deadlines, court procedures, and rules
- Understanding statutes and case law
- Making and responding to discovery requests

Can the court appoint an attorney to represent me?

Unlike a criminal case, there is no right to counsel in a civil case. However, under certain circumstances, the court may attempt to find an attorney who is willing to volunteer his or her time to represent a person in federal court. Because the court lacks the funds to pay attorneys who agree to represent poor litigants in civil cases, these attorneys do so without being paid (referred to as “pro bono”).

Before the court will consider trying to find an attorney to volunteer to represent a litigant in a civil action, the litigant must attempt to find an attorney on his or her own.

If after making appropriate efforts to find an attorney a party is unable to find an attorney, the party may file a motion asking the court to recruit an attorney. In this motion, the party must explain why he or she is unable to afford counsel. The party must also provide details about his or her efforts to find counsel.

The court will review the motion. If the court finds that the person lacks the resources to hire an attorney and has made appropriate efforts to obtain counsel on his or her own, the court will consider various factors to decide whether or not to try to find a volunteer attorney.