

Small Claims Court Overview

A Plain-Language Guide to Everyday Disputes

Small Claims Court is a special division of the court system designed to resolve disputes involving smaller amounts of money quickly, inexpensively, and without the need for an attorney. It is often referred to as “The People’s Court” because of its simplified procedures.

What is Small Claims Court?

- **Jurisdictional Limit:** Every state sets a maximum dollar amount that can be claimed in Small Claims Court (e.g., 5,000, 10,000, or more). If your claim is for more than this limit, you must file in a higher court.
- **Less Formal:** The rules of evidence and procedure are significantly relaxed compared to a regular civil trial. This makes it easier for self-represented individuals to present their case.
- **No Juries:** Cases are almost always heard and decided by a judge or a magistrate, not a jury.

Common Types of Cases

Small Claims Court is the appropriate venue for many common civil disputes:

- **Unpaid Debts:** Money owed from a loan, service provided, or bounced check.
- **Property Damage:** Claims for the cost of repairing or replacing damaged personal property.
- **Landlord-Tenant Disputes:** Claims for the return of a security deposit or for minor property damage.
- **Breach of Contract:** Disputes where one party failed to fulfill the terms of a simple agreement.
- **Consumer Disputes:** Claims against a business for faulty goods or poor service.

The Small Claims Process

The process is designed to be straightforward for the average person.

Step	Action	Simple Explanation
1. File the Claim	You (the Plaintiff) file a simple form called a Statement of Claim or Complaint with the court clerk. You must pay a small filing fee.	
2. Serve the Defendant	You must formally notify the person you are suing (the Defendant) by having them legally served with a copy of the claim.	
3. The Defendant Responds	The Defendant has a limited time to file a response. If they fail to respond, you may be granted a Default Judgment .	
4. Attend the Hearing	Both parties appear before the judge. You will present your evidence (receipts, photos, witnesses) and tell your side of the story. The judge may ask questions.	
5. Judge Issues a Decision	The judge will issue a decision, often on the same day or shortly after the hearing. This decision is called a Judgment .	

Enforcing the Judgment

Winning a judgment is only half the battle. The court does not automatically collect the money for you. If the Defendant does not pay, you may need to take further steps, such as filing a **Writ of Execution** to seize property or garnish wages.

Important Notice:

The information provided in this guide is for educational purposes only. We do not provide legal advice, legal interpretation, or attorney services, and we cannot represent anyone in court. Our goal is to help you learn, understand, and feel confident when navigating legal topics.

