

Going to court can be one of the most important and stressful days of your life. The court may be deciding an issue that affects your future, such as who should care for your child, or whether you owe someone money. This video will discuss some tips you can follow as you prepare for your day at court.

If you can, have a lawyer come to court with you. Without one, you may be at a disadvantage, especially if the other side has a lawyer. While currently, you do not have a constitutional right to a lawyer in most civil (that is, non-criminal) cases, you may be able to get free or reduced cost legal help. Visit the Maryland People's Law Library at [www.peoples-law.org](http://www.peoples-law.org) for more information on how to find a lawyer or get free or reduced cost legal help. You may also want to watch our video *Finding Legal Help*.

Whether or not you have a lawyer, follow these steps to be sure your day goes smoothly.

First, write down and meet deadlines. Be sure to file responses and motions on time. Keep any paperwork that the court or other party sends to you, and put important dates on your calendar.

Second, if you have children, try to find childcare for them on that day, unless they are required to come to court. If you are stressed, they may become stressed as well. It may be difficult for you to present your case effectively while also caring for children. You also do not want your children to hear information that might be upsetting or inappropriate. Remember, court hearings can be unpredictable. A hearing scheduled for 9

a.m. may take longer than you think, or it may be delayed until the afternoon. That can be a very long day for a child.

Third, find out the court's rules, and how the court normally does things so you won't be surprised. To be prepared, you need to know what the court will expect from you. Look at the court's website and the Maryland Rules to find out what the court will require. You can find the Maryland Rules online or at a law library.

Fourth, research the law – including laws and earlier cases. Remember, you must be able to present the facts of your case and prove that they show that the result you want is the correct one under the law. How can you do that, unless you know what the law is, and whether your facts satisfy the law? You can find basic information about Maryland law at [www.peoples-law.org](http://www.peoples-law.org). You may also be able to get help from the State Law Library or a local public law library.

Finally, organize evidence and arrange for witnesses. Prepare the information that you'll present to the court. It is up to you and you alone to prove your case. Practice what you're going to say to the court, and gather evidence such as pictures and documents. If necessary, you can draw a diagram or put information into charts. If there are witnesses to the incident, you can ask those individuals to testify as to what they know about the case. Remember, the judge is not your lawyer, and he or she may not consider any facts outside of the courtroom, so you must bring those facts into the courtroom with exhibits and testimony. Make three copies of any written documents you plan to give the court as evidence. One for you, one for the judge, and one for the other side.

So remember:

1. Have a lawyer represent you if possible.
2. Write down and meet deadlines;
3. Find childcare;
4. Find out the court's rules;
5. Research the law relevant to your case; and
6. Organize what you want to say, arrange for witnesses, and bring evidence.

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