

Courthouse Experience Tours

What you will see and who you will meet in the courtroom

How the Courtroom is Organized

Courts decide what really happened in a situation and what should be done about it. They decide whether a person committed a crime and what the punishment should be. They also provide a peaceful way to decide private disputes that people can't resolve themselves.

Two types of cases are taken to court, **civil** and **criminal**. **Civil cases** usually deal with disagreements about people's rights and duties toward one another. **Criminal cases** are brought by the government (either state or federal) against people accused of committing crimes.

Setting the Scene

The Well of the court: As you move from the public seating toward the front of the courtroom, you will see a railing, often with a swinging door. This railing divides the public seating area from the "well of the court." The "well of the court" is a phrase that describes the area where court proceedings are conducted.

Judge's bench: At the very front of the courtroom is the judge's "bench." It's not an actual bench. It's usually a raised platform with a partial rail or enclosure that the judge sits behind.

Judge's chambers: A small room off the courtroom where the judge changes into robes and confers with lawyers.

Directly in front of the judge's bench, you will usually see chairs and computer workstations for 2-3 people.

- **Courtroom clerk:** handles case files and documentation/paperwork.
- **Court reporter:** may use another, and the judge's law clerk may occupy a third chair.

Law clerk: is an attorney who works for the judge and assists the judge in conducting the business of the Court.

Jury Box: is placed along one side of the well. It's easy to spot because there are usually 2-3 rows of about 12 chairs situated inside a large railing or partial enclosure.

Jury room: A room outside the courtroom where the jury deliberates.

Bar: A fence-like barricade that separates the spectators and public from the court.

Counsel tables: are at the back of the well. This is where lawyers and their clients sit during court trials or other court proceedings. Between the judge's bench, the jury box, and the counsel

tables is a large, vacant area. Lawyers will often address the judge or jury or question witnesses from this area, and you may see a podium available for the lawyers to use. Typically, the Plaintiff's table is on the right side, and the Defendant's table is on the left side. However, the Plaintiff's side has the right to sit closest to the jury box. Very often, you will see a secured door on one side of the courtroom and see a deputy positioned beside it. This door is often used by Sheriff's deputies and persons who are in custody (jail).

Witness Stand: Between the judge's bench and the jury box is the witness stand. This is where testifying witnesses will sit while they are giving testimony in a case.

People In The Courtroom

Bailiff: The police officer who maintains order in the court.

Legal Counsel: A name for the lawyer engaged in the trial. Both the plaintiff and the defendant have counsel.

Court clerk: The person who helps with administrative duties and stores the physical exhibits introduced as evidence at the trial.

Court reporter: A person who types every word said during the trial. The document is a permanent record of the trial.

Defendant: The person who is accused of a crime and is being tried.

Defense attorney or public defender: The lawyer who defends the accused person. A public defender is appointed if the accused is unable to pay for an attorney.

Foreperson: The foreperson of the jury speaks for the entire jury.

Judge: The legal officer who presides over the courtroom and directs and controls the trial.

Plaintiff: The person who accuses another and brings the lawsuit to court.

Prosecutor: A public official who brings the government's case against a person accused of a crime and asks the court to convict that person.

Trial Jury: Usually made up of six to twelve people, the jury listens to testimony from both the plaintiff and defendant's side and decides the verdict of a case.

Witness: A person who gives the jury information about the case.

Terms and vocabulary to know

Acquittal: A legal determination that a person who has been charged with a crime is innocent.

Appeal: A request for a higher court to review a decision made by a lower court.

Arraignment: When the accused is brought before the court to hear the charges against the person to plead guilty or not guilty

Conviction: The result of a criminal trial in which a person is found guilty.

Cross-examination: The questioning of a witness by the lawyer for the opposing side.

Direct-examination: The first questioning in a trial of a witness by the lawyer who called that witness.

Indictment: An accusation of a crime, made against a person by a grand jury upon the request of a prosecutor.

Information: An accusation of a crime, made against a person by the prosecutor.

Mistrial: A trial that becomes invalid, is essentially canceled, because of a mistake in procedure.

Motion: How a lawyer asks the judge to make a decision.

Objection: The opposing side finds fault with the question being asked the witness.

Overruled: The judge, following an objection, decides the questions may continue.

Sentence: The punishment given to a person who has been convicted of a crime.

Sustained: The judge, following an objection, agrees that the line of questioning should not continue.

Verdict: A verdict of guilty or not guilty is handed down by the jury.

Your Honor: The way a judge is addressed in a courtroom.