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Small Claims Court Checklist: Filing and Hearing Prep

Small claims court is designed for people without lawyers, but preparation still wins cases. Use this list from demand letter to collection.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Case/claim no.: _____

Before filing

- [ ] Send a written demand letter with a deadline and keep a copy
- [ ] Calculate exactly how much you are claiming and why
- [ ] Check your state's small claims limit
- [ ] Check the deadline to sue for your type of claim
- [ ] Find the defendant's exact legal name and address (for a business, its registered name)

Filing and service

- [ ] File in the correct court: usually where the defendant lives or does business, or where the problem happened
- [ ] Pay the filing fee or ask for a fee waiver
- [ ] Have the defendant served the way your court requires
- [ ] File proof of service before the hearing

Evidence

- [ ] Contracts, invoices, receipts and estimates
- [ ] Photos and videos
- [ ] Emails, texts and letters, printed in date order
- [ ] Witnesses, or written statements if allowed
- [ ] Enough copies for the judge and the other side

At the hearing

- [ ] Arrive early and check in
- [ ] Give a short, organized explanation: what happened, what it cost, what you want
- [ ] Answer the judge's questions directly
- [ ] Stay calm and respectful

After a judgment

- [ ] Ask the defendant to pay voluntarily
- [ ] Learn your court's collection tools, such as wage garnishment or bank levy
- [ ] Track deadlines to appeal or to renew the judgment

Tips

- Many cases settle after a demand letter or on the day of the hearing; get any settlement in writing.
- If the defendant does not show up, you may win by default.

Notes