



Practical Tips for Accessing Courts and Court Records

While we can't guarantee that you will get every court record or attend every court proceeding you desire, the following tips will help ensure that you take full advantage of the wealth of information available through state and [federal](#) courts.

Tips for Accessing Court Proceedings

- **Know your rights and be prepared.** If you want to attend the court proceeding for a specific case, check with the clerk's office to see whether either party has filed a motion to close the proceedings. If you find a motion pending, you should consider getting [legal assistance](#) to help you oppose the motion. If the judge closes the proceedings while you are present in the courtroom, be prepared to object to the closure on the spot. Consult the section on [Remedies if you are denied access](#) for more information.
- **Be polite.** Judges and court personnel take court decorum very seriously, so be respectful. A calm demeanor will also help you be taken more seriously. If you are asked to leave the courtroom, do not refuse to do so. Exit, and get [legal help](#) in planning your next step.
- **Understand courtroom restrictions on newsgathering activities.** While you may be able to attend most judicial proceedings, there will often be restrictions on what tools you may use to take notes or record the session. For more information on newsgathering activities in court see the section on [Recording Court Hearings](#).

Tips for Accessing Court Records

- **Make sure your request is clear.** Even though courts will generally accept oral requests, draft a clear description of the records you wish to request before visiting the courthouse. Try to be as specific as possible. General requests -- such as "all files relating to X subject" -- are unlikely to work and will often result in delays and additional costs. Writing out your request will force you to be clear about what you want.
- **Be willing to compromise.** You should anticipate that problems will arise. The court might need more time to locate and review the records, or the information might be covered by one or more exemptions. When appropriate, offer to revise or narrow the scope of your request to move things along.
- **File a lawsuit as a last resort.** The simplest -- and often most effective -- remedy is to seek informal resolution of any disputes related to your request. A follow-up telephone call or email can sometimes get things back on track. If your informal approach is not successful, a lawsuit may be on the only way to get the records. Keep in mind, however, that obtaining records through legal action can be a costly and drawn-out process.

Remember that accessing court records is only one of many important fact-finding tools in your information gathering toolbox. For a broad overview of how you can investigate the actions of a full range of actors, including government, individuals, and corporations, see the [Newsgathering](#) section of this guide and check out the Center for Investigative Reporting's entertaining and inspirational guide, [Using Hell: A Citizens Guide to the Fine Art of Investigation](#).

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