

Forcible Entry and Detainer Suits

- 1) Filing Fee: \$196.00 (\$46.00 court cost & \$150.00 service fee **per person**). The amount of the debt for which you may sue **may not exceed** the limit of the court, which is \$10,000.00.
- 2) Eviction Suits **MUST** be filed in the precinct and county where the property is located or the court has no other option but to dismiss your case for lack of jurisdiction and you lose your filing fee.
To verify the precinct of the property for which you are filing, you may call the Voter Registrar's office at 940-626-4453. You need to be very specific in asking which commissioner precinct the property is located in and give the address.
- 3) A 3-day notice **MUST** be given unless the signed leased states otherwise. If the notice is **mailed**, tenant must be given **5 days** from mailing date before suit is filed. The suit may be filed after notice has been given and the time passed. Example of 3-day notice: "(Date)-this is your written notice to vacate these premises within three (3) days and give reasons)."
This notice must be delivered personally, by mail, or by posting to the inside of the main entry doo... and must be unconditional.
- 4) After your affidavit has been filed in this office, you will be given a court date, a citation will be issued and given to the Constable to be served. The court date will be no less than 10 days and no more than 21 days from date of service.
- 5) **In court you will be responsible for providing the following information:**
 - Date lease or rental agreement began. Is agreement still valid on a month to month basis?
 - Terms of lease- including rent per month and date rent is due.
 - Amount of pure, (no utilities or late charges), unpaid, back rent that is due through the court date and how it is computed.
 - Date that proper written notice to vacate was given to tenant.
- 6) In summary, state specifically what you are pleading for. I am pleading for possession of property, back rent in the amount of \$_____ and court cost.
- 7) Be sure and have your lease, copy of vacate notice, and payment records available from the judge in the event she asks to see them. The person who delivered the eviction notice must be present for court to testify if defendant contests the case on grounds that no notice was received.
- 8) If you accept back rent after your suit is filed, be sure tenant is told that you are going ahead and prosecuting the eviction suit.
- 9) If you receive a judgment, the court does not collect the money for you.
- 10) If the tenant does not move, or appeal, within 5 days after you have a judgment for possession, you may file a writ of possession. A writ of possession gives the Constable the authority to move the tenant out.
- 11) We cannot give legal advice, but we will do our best to answer procedural questions.
- 12) If filing for other than non-payment of rent, different rules will apply.

Self-Help Legal Information Packet: When an Eviction Case Has Been Filed Against You



Self-Help Legal Information Packets are provided for the benefit of justice courts and individuals seeking access to justice through the court system. They do not constitute legal advice, and the court is not responsible for the accuracy of the information contained in the packet.

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What is an Eviction Case?

An **eviction case** is filed whenever a person or company is trying to recover possession of real property (like land, a house, or an apartment building) from someone else. Usually, it is a landlord filing against a tenant. The person or company filing the case is called the **plaintiff** and the person or company they file against is called the **defendant**.

I Got Served with a Notice to Vacate, Now What?

The first step in the eviction process is for the landlord to give you a notice to vacate. If you do not leave the premises (including removing your personal property) by that date, the landlord can file an eviction suit against you.

The notice to vacate may be delivered to you by:

- 1) Handing it to you personally,
- 2) Mailing it to the premises, addressed to you, or
- 3) Posting it on the **inside** of your front door.

If they cannot post it on the inside of the front door due to a dangerous animal or deadbolt-type device, or because they fear personal harm will come to them or any other person, they may post it on the outside of the front door, in an envelope that has your name, address, and the words "IMPORTANT DOCUMENT" on it. They must also mail it to you the same day.

If you broke the conditions of your lease (for example, by not paying rent or by having a pet when the lease does not allow pets), and have no legal reason for doing so, it will likely be best

to vacate the property once you get the notice to vacate. If you do not, the landlord can get an eviction judgment against you. This judgment might include any rent that is due, plus the landlord's court costs and attorney's fees. Having an eviction judgment against you may make it more difficult for you to rent property in the future.

I Got Served with a Citation, Now What?

If you do not vacate the property and the landlord files an eviction, the next thing that will happen is you will receive a citation, issued by the court, which tells you that you are being sued. The petition was created by the plaintiff and will provide details of why the plaintiff is evicting you, and how much back rent, if any, they are suing for.

If the petition isn't clear regarding what the plaintiff thinks you did wrong or what they want, you can file a motion with the court asking for them to clarify. A motion is a request for the court to do something. This is done by putting your request in writing and sending it to the court and to the plaintiff.

The citation may contain your trial date, which will be between 10 and 21 days from the day the landlord filed the case. If it does not contain your trial date, contact the court to find out when it is. If you need more time for trial or have a conflict with the date that the trial is scheduled, you can file a motion (request) for postponement, also called a continuance. You should explain in writing why you need the postponement. In eviction cases, the case can't be postponed for more than 7 days unless both sides agree in writing.

Do not just decide not to show up on your trial date! That likely will result in the landlord getting a judgment removing you from the property. If you cannot appear on that date and do not get a postponement, try to send someone else to appear for you with any information or documents to present on your behalf.

Do I Need a Lawyer?

While you are allowed to have a lawyer in an eviction case, the rules and procedures are designed to be simple and straightforward, allowing people to seek justice without needing to hire a lawyer.

If you do not have a lawyer, the judge may allow you to be assisted or represented in court by a family member or other person. This person can help you understand the proceedings and advise you on what to do or say.

The court is required to make the Rules of Civil Procedure available to you at no cost. Rule 510 specifically applies to Eviction Cases and Rules 500-507 are the rules that generally apply to justice court.

The court is not allowed to give you advice on whether you will win a case or not, what to say in court, or what steps you should take to win your case or avoid paying a judgment.

Questions the court can answer for you are questions like “What do I need to do to have a jury trial?” or “How many days do I have to file an appeal?”

Questions the court cannot answer for you are questions like “Should I just move out instead of going to court?” or “Is it a good idea to get a jury for this case?” or “Am I going to win?”

If, after reviewing these materials and the rules for eviction cases, you still are not sure what to do, it may be best to consult an attorney.

How Do I Send Paperwork to the Plaintiff?

Any paperwork such as motions, requests for a hearing, appeals, etc., must be sent to the plaintiff as well as to the court. You can send those papers to the plaintiff by:

- 1) delivering it to them in person,
- 2) mailing it to them using certified or registered mail,
- 3) using a delivery service such as FedEx or UPS,
- 4) faxing it to them, or
- 5) sending it by email if the plaintiff provided their email address for document delivery and agreed to email service in writing.

On the copy you give to the court, you must write down how and when the paperwork was delivered to the plaintiff.

The plaintiff's contact information will be available in the petition they filed, which was attached to the citation that you received.

IMPORTANT - Make sure to keep your address updated with the court and the other party so that you will receive any paperwork or notices sent to you.

What if the Plaintiff Owes Me Money?

When the defendant files a claim with the court stating the plaintiff owes money to the defendant, that is called a counterclaim. Counterclaims are not allowed in eviction cases. If you feel that the plaintiff owes you money, such as a security

deposit, you would need to file a separate small claims case. For more information see the information packed on Filing a Small Claims Case.

Can I Have a Jury Trial?

Yes. Either side in an eviction case may request a jury trial. You must make a request in writing to the court at least 3 days before the date set for trial and pay a jury fee of \$22.

If no one requests a jury, the trial will be heard by only the judge, which is called a bench trial.

What if the Plaintiff and I Make an Agreement?

If the case goes to trial, usually there will be a “winner” and a “loser,” resulting in someone being happy and someone being unhappy. To reduce that risk, parties will often come to a settlement, or an agreement on how to resolve the case. If you reach a new agreement with the plaintiff allowing you to remain in the property, continue to appear at all court dates until you receive a notice that the case has been dismissed.

What Happens at the Trial?

Be sure to bring all of your witnesses and documents with you on your trial date! If the trial is a jury trial, the first step will be jury selection, which is formally called *voir dire*.

Then, the plaintiff will be able to give an opening statement if they wish, where they explain to the judge and jury what they

feel the case is about. You can respond with your own opening statement, you can wait to give one until after the plaintiff has given all of their information, or you can decide not to give one.

Next, the plaintiff will call any witnesses they may have, and ask them questions so that they can testify, or tell their story, to the judge or jury. You get to ask questions of any witnesses they call, which is called **cross-examination**. You may ask the witnesses questions that relate to the facts of the case but must remain calm, polite, and respectful of the court process, even if you disagree with what the witness says.

Once the plaintiff has presented all of their witnesses and evidence, they will rest, which means they are done. It is now your turn, and you can call any witnesses you have. You can also testify yourself and show any evidence you may have (such as documents, contracts, cancelled checks, receipts, etc.).

Finally, each side can make a final statement, called a **closing argument**, where you explain why you think you should win the case.

After that, the decision will be made by the jury if there is one, or by the judge if there is no jury. The decision will be announced in open court, and a written **judgment** will be made available.

What if I Don't Appear for Trial?

If you don't appear at trial, the information in the plaintiff's sworn petition will be taken as the truth. If they provided enough information in your petition, they will be awarded a default judgment.

What Happens if I Lose My Eviction Case?

If the judgment is in favor of the plaintiff, they will be able to remove you from the property. If you wish, you can file an appeal, which is a request for the county court to hear the eviction case over again. You can file an appeal within 5 days of the judgment. The 5 days include weekends and holidays. If the fifth day is a weekend, holiday, or day the court closes before 5 P.M., you have until the next business day to file your appeal.

To appeal, you will have to file either:

- 1) An appeal bond (promise from another person, called a surety, to pay the bond amount to the plaintiff if you don't pursue the appeal) in an amount set by the court;
- 2) A cash deposit in an amount set by the court, which may be awarded to the plaintiff if you don't pursue the appeal; or
- 3) A Statement of Inability to Afford Payment of Court Costs if you cannot afford an appeal bond or cash deposit.

If you appeal with an appeal bond or a cash deposit, you must send notice of the appeal to the plaintiff within five days of filing it with the court.

If you lose an eviction case based on not paying rent, and you appeal with an appeal bond or a Statement of Inability, you will be ordered to pay one month's rent to the court within 5 days. If you fail to do so, your appeal will still be heard by the county court, but the plaintiff can have you removed from the property immediately, or at any time before your case can be heard by the county court. If that happens, and then the county court

rules in your favor, you will be placed back in possession of the premises.

Once your appeal is filed with the county court, you will be required to pay the filing fee or file a Statement of Inability to Afford Payment of Court Costs with the county court.

What If I Don't File an Appeal?

If you do not appeal within the 5 day time period, and don't leave the property, the plaintiff can come to the court and get a **writ of possession**, which is an order for you and your property to be removed from the premises. If a writ is issued, a 24-hour notice will be posted on the door, and if the property isn't vacated in that 24-hour period, the constable will come out and supervise the removal of you and your property.

If the plaintiff gets a judgment against you for money (such as back rent, court costs, or attorney's fees), they may seek to enforce the judgment against you. Below is a brief description of some of the tools that the plaintiff can use against you to enforce a monetary judgment.

Post-Judgment Discovery: The plaintiff can send questions that you must answer describing what assets you may have that could be used to satisfy a judgment. You will get at least 30 days to respond to these discovery requests, either by providing the requested information or by making an objection with the court. If you object, the court will hold a hearing to decide if you have to provide the information.

Abstract of Judgment: If you own real property (land), the plaintiff can get an abstract of judgment from the court that issued the judgment and file it with the county clerk in the county or counties where you own the property. This puts a lien on the property in the plaintiff's name, which means if you sell the property, they could get the proceeds to satisfy the judgment.

Writ of Execution: This is an order for the constable to go out and seize your personal property and sell it to satisfy the judgment. **IMPORTANT** - many items of personal property are exempt, meaning it is not legal for the constable to seize them and sell them. The plaintiff generally must wait at least 30 days after judgment before getting a writ of execution.

Writ of Garnishment: If a third party, such as a bank, has assets that belong to you, the plaintiff can get a writ of garnishment to order that them to be given to the plaintiff to pay the judgment.

What Happens if I Win My Eviction Case?

If the judgment is in your favor, the plaintiff has a right to file an appeal within 5 days. You will receive a notice in writing if the plaintiff appeals. This would mean the process would start all over in the county court. You would need to file a written answer with the county court explaining why you should not be evicted from the premises within 8 days of the case being filed in the county court. Make sure to file this answer!

Resources

Texas Lawyer Referral Service - (800) 252-9690

To check military status - <https://scra.dmdc.osd.mil/>

Texas Justice Court Training Center information for self-represented litigants - www.tjctc.org/SRL

Office of Court Administration Self-Represented Litigant Site: www.txcourts.gov/programs-services/self-help/self-represented-litigants/

State Bar of Texas Information, including Legal Information and Low or No-Cost Legal Assistance: www.texasbar.com, and then click on “For The Public.”

Forms and Information, including for other types of cases - www.texaslawhelp.org