Self-Help Legal Information Packet: Filing a Small Claims Case



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What is a Small Claims Case?

When a person or company feels like someone else owes them money or has personal property that belongs to them, they can come to justice court and file a lawsuit called a **small claims case**. The person or company who files the case is called the **plaintiff** and the person or company they file the case against is called the **defendant**.

What Can I File a Small Claims Case For?

You can file a small claims case if you have a claim that is within the justice court's **jurisdiction**, meaning the type of cases that court can hear. The four most common reasons that plaintiffs file small claims cases are:

- 1) The defendant made a promise and then didn't honor the promise, which caused the plaintiff to lose money (breach of contract);
- 2) The defendant owes money to the plaintiff and will not pay;
- 3) The defendant did something that caused damage to the plaintiff's property or caused injury to the plaintiff; or
- 4) The defendant is in possession of personal property that belongs to the plaintiff.

What Can I Not File a Small Claims Case For?

You cannot file a small claims case if:

- 1) The amount of money you are trying to recover is more than \$20,000,
- 2) You are trying to recover a piece of personal property that is worth more than \$20,000 (a hearing may be necessary after you file a case for the judge to determine if the property is worth more than \$20,000),
- 3) You are trying to recover or obtain title to real property (land), or
- 4) You are suing for defamation, libel, or slander (things the defendant has said or published about you that you believe to be false and harmful).

You also **cannot** get an order from a justice court to make a party do something or stop doing something. For example, you could **not** get an order from the justice court to make the defendant perform services that you paid for but didn't

receive, stop posting things about you on Facebook, or cut down a tree that is hanging over your property.

Who Do I File a Small Claims Case Against?

You must file the case against the person or company that is responsible for your damages (lost money) or that has possession of your personal property. If you are suing a business that is not a corporation, you should check with the county clerk to see who the owners or partners of the business are. If the business is a corporation, you will need the name of the registered agent, president, or vice-president of the corporation.

To determine the legal nature of a business, you may:

- 1) Go to the Assumed Names Records maintained by the County Clerk
- Contact the Corporation Division of the Office of the Secretary of State at 512-463-5555, or go to their web page at http://www.sos.state.tx.us/help.shtml, to find information and assistance, or
- 3) Contact the Office of the State Comptroller at 1-800-252-1386.

When Can I File a Small Claims Case?

You can only file your claim for a certain amount of time after the incident occurs. This is called the **statute of limitations**. In a breach of contract case, the time period is four years, unless the contract gives a different time period. In most other cases, the time period is two years.

If you file a case where the statute of limitations has run out, you will lose the case. If you are unsure if the statute of limitations has run out in your case, you may wish to talk with an attorney.

Where Do I File a Small Claims Case?

Small claims cases are filed in a justice court and the case will be heard in front of the justice of the peace. You can technically file the small claims case in any justice court in Texas. However, if you file in the wrong **venue** (location), the defendant can have the case moved to the right location. If that happens, you may have to pay the filing fees again, so it is a good idea to file the case in the right venue to start with.

So, what is the right venue? Generally, a case can be filed:

- 1) In the precinct and county where the defendant lives,
- 2) In the precinct and county where the contract was going to be performed, if it is a contract case,
- 3) In the precinct and county where the damage to property or injury to the plaintiff occurred, or
- 4) In the precinct and county where the personal property the plaintiff is suing for is located.

How Do I File a Small Claims Case?

The first step in filing a case (unless you are suing a doctor for medical malpractice, in which case you should talk with an attorney) is to file a **petition**, which is a form that says who you are suing, why you are suing them, how much you are suing them for, and provides contact information. The court will likely have petition forms for you to use.

When you file the petition, you will have to pay a filing fee of \$54. Also, the petition and **citation** (the notice from the court to the defendant that they have been sued) must be **served on** (delivered to) the defendant. This can be done in person or by certified mail or registered mail, and if it is done by mail there must be a return receipt requested, with restricted delivery.

Important - You are not allowed to serve the paperwork yourself! You can either hire a private process server to serve the paperwork, or pay for the constable, sheriff, or clerk of the court to serve the paperwork. The fee for this service varies from county to county, ask the court for details.

If you win your case, you will be awarded the fees that you had to pay, in addition to any other money you are entitled to recover.

What if I Can't Afford to File a Case?

Courts **must not** deny you access to justice simply because you cannot afford filing fees or service fees. If you are unable to pay those fees, fill out a **Statement of Inability to Afford Payment of Court Costs** form – the court **must** provide this form to you.

You must swear to the information that you provide on this form and can face legal consequences if you do not fill it out to the best of your ability. Fill out the form completely and truthfully!

Do I Need a Lawyer to File a Case?

While you are allowed to have a lawyer in a small claims 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 in court by a family member or other person who is not being paid to assist you. This person can help you understand the proceedings and advise you, though that person cannot speak for you in court.

The court is required to make the Rules of Civil Procedure available to you at no cost. Rules 500-507 are the rules that specifically apply to small claims cases.

The court is **not** allowed to give you advice on whether you will win a case or not, whether you should file a case, who you should file a case against, or what steps you should take to win your case or collect your 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 "Can I sue someone for this?" or "Who should I sue?" 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 small claims cases, you still are not sure what to do, it may be best to talk with an attorney.

What Happens After I File a Small Claims Case?

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.

The court will generate the **citation**, which tells the defendant that they are being sued. The citation then must be served on the defendant. You can either pay the service fee for the constable or sheriff to serve the citation (or submit a Statement of Inability showing you cannot afford the fee) or hire a private process server to serve it on the defendant.

Once the defendant is served with the citation, they have 14 days to file an **answer**, which is their response to your lawsuit. They are required to send you a copy of their answer. If the defendant does answer, the court will set your case either for trial or for a **pre-trial hearing**.

At a pre-trial hearing, you can discuss any issues such as the need for an interpreter, or for the court to **subpoena** a witness (order them to come to trial to testify).

What if the Defendant Doesn't Answer?

If the defendant doesn't file an answer within the 14-day period, you can ask the court for a **default judgment hearing**, where you can prove to the court that you are entitled to money or personal property and be awarded a judgment.

To get a default judgment, you will also need to provide the last known address of the defendant to the court in writing, as well as an **affidavit** (document signed in front of the clerk or a notary, that you swear to be true) stating either:

- 1) the defendant is on active duty in the U.S. military,
- 2) the defendant is not on active duty in the U.S. military, or
- 3) that you do not know if the defendant is on active duty in the U.S. military.

This affidavit must also state in writing how you know whether the defendant is on active duty in the U.S. military or why you are unable to determine the defendant's military status.

You can verify military service at https://scra.dmdc.osd.mil/.

What is Discovery?

Discovery is the exchange of information between people or companies involved in a lawsuit before the case goes to trial. For information about discovery after a judgment, please see the section on "What if I Win My Small Claims Case?" Discovery must be approved by the judge before the other party has to provide any information or answer any questions.

If you have discovery questions that you want the defendant to answer, submit them to the court with a request for discovery. Requesting the court to do something is called a **motion**, so you would be making a "motion for discovery."

The judge will only approve "reasonable and necessary" discovery, so if you have discovery requests, make sure they actually relate to the case. For example, asking for copies of emails that the defendant sent to a subcontractor about the deck work they did for you is likely reasonable, and asking for a copy of all emails from the defendant over the last three years is likely not.

If you receive a discovery request that has been approved by the judge, you must respond with the requested information or you can file an objection with the court. If you object, the court will hold a hearing to decide if you have to provide the information. **Do not** just ignore a discovery request, you could face penalties from the judge, possibly including dismissal of your case!

How Do I Send Paperwork to the Defendant?

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

What if We Reach 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 come to a settlement agreement, the court can enter a judgment reflecting how much money is awarded. However, the court cannot put specific orders in the judgment, such as payment plans or deadlines. If you wish to have those in your settlement agreement, you need to create a written contract, signed by both parties. If the defendant does not honor that written agreement, you could file a new lawsuit for breach of contract.

Can I Have a Jury Trial?

Yes. Either side in a small claims case may request a jury trial. You must make a request in writing to the court at least 14 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 I Need More Time for Trial?

The court will send you a trial notice at least 45 days before the trial date. If you need more time or if you have a conflict with that date, you can file a motion (request) for **postponement**, also called a **continuance**. You should explain in writing why you need the postponement. **Do not** just decide not to show up on your trial date! That will probably result in your case being 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 **yoir dire**.

Next, you will be able to give an opening statement if you wish, where you explain to the judge and jury what the case is about.

After that, you will call any witnesses you have, and ask them questions so they can **testify**, or tell their story, to the judge or jury. The defendant will also be able to ask your witnesses questions. You can also testify yourself and show any evidence you may have (such as documents, contracts, cancelled checks, receipts, etc.).

Next, the defendant can present any evidence and call any witnesses that they may have. 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.

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

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 Happens if I Lose My Small Claims Case?

If the judgment is in favor of the defendant, you can file a **motion for new trial** within 14 days of the judgment. That means that you want a "do over" in the same justice court. You would need to show that justice wasn't done in the original case. If you file a motion for new trial, you must pay a filing fee of \$54 or file a Statement of Inability to Afford Payment of Court Costs. You must also send a copy of the motion to the defendant within one day of filing it with the court.

Another option is to file an **appeal**, which is a request for the county court to hear your case. You can file an appeal within 21 days of the judgment, or if you filed a

motion for new trial that was denied, you can appeal within 21 days of that denial.

If you properly file an appeal, the county court will hear the case over from scratch (de novo) and the judgment of the justice court will go away. There will be a new judgment from the county court based on the evidence presented there.

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 defendant if you don't pursue the appeal) in the amount of \$500;
- 2) A cash deposit of \$500, which may be awarded to the defendant 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 pay a filing fee of \$54 or file a Statement of Inability to Afford Payment of Court Costs. You must also send a notice of the appeal to the defendant within seven days.

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

What Happens if I Win My Small Claims Case?

If the judgment is in your favor, you will almost surely not walk out of court with a check in the full amount of the judgment. The defendant might file a motion for new trial or an appeal. If they don't, it is your responsibility, not the court's, to pursue enforcement of the civil judgment. Below is a brief description of some of the tools that you can use to enforce a judgment.

Warning: Not all of these tools may be useful in any given situation. If you are unsure which of these to use, you may wish to talk with an attorney.

Post-Judgment Discovery: You can send questions to the defendant that they must answer describing what assets they may have that could be used to satisfy a judgment. The defendant gets at least 30 days to respond to these discovery requests. It is not required to get the judge's approval for post-judgment discovery.

Abstract of Judgment: If the defendant owns real property (land), you 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 the defendant owns the property. This puts a **lien** on the property in your name, which means if they sell the property, you could receive some of the proceeds to satisfy the judgment.

Writ of Execution: This is an order for the constable to go out and seize the defendant's 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.

To get a writ of execution, you file an application with the court that issued the judgment, at least 30 days after judgment.

Writ of Garnishment: This is used when another person or company has money or property that belongs to the defendant, and they are ordered to give it to you to satisfy the judgment. This is almost always used to take money from a bank account held by the defendant.

To get a writ of garnishment, you file an application including an affidavit (sworn statement) explaining why you are entitled to the garnishment with the court that issued the judgment.

Important – if the person or company has no money or property belonging to the defendant, you may be responsible for paying attorney fees related to their response. Be very sure that a writ of garnishment is the best option before getting one.

Learn more about exemptions and the judgment enforcement process at www.texaslawhelp.org/exempt-property or by scanning this QR code with your camera phone:

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Address:	Address:
Email:	 Email:
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Justice Court Civil Case Information Sheet

Cause Number (for clerk use only):					
Styled					
(e.g., John Smith v. All American Insurance Co: In re Mary Ann Jones; In the Matter of the Estate of George Jackson)					
should be the best available at the time of	filing. This sheet, required ly. It neither replaces nor s	l by Rule of Civil Proc upplements the filings	is filed to initiate a new suit. The information redure 502, is intended to collect information s or pleading or documents as required by law and it is not admissible at that:		
1. Contact information for person co	ompleting case inforn	nation sheet:	2. Names of parties' in case:		
Name:	Jame: Telephone:		Plaintiff(s):		
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3. Indicate case type, or identify the	most important issue	in the case (selec	t only 1):		
Debt Claim: A debt claim case to recover a debt by an assignee collector or collection agency, a find a person or entity primarily engage lending money at interest. The claim than \$20,000.00, excluding statutor costs but including attorney fees, if a	of a claim, a debt ancial institution, or ed in the business of a can be for no more y interest and court	☐ Eviction: An eviction case is a lawsuit brought to recover possession of real property, often by a landlord against tenant. A claim for rent may be joined with an eviction case if the amount of rent due and unpaid is not more than \$20,000.00, excluding statutory interest and court costs but including attorney fees, if any.			
Repair and Remedy: A repair and remedy case is a "lawsuit filed by a residential tenant under Chapter 92. Subchapter B of the Texas Property Code to enforce the landlord's duty to repair or remedy a condition materially affecting the physical health or safety of an ordinary tenant. The relief sought can be for no more than \$20,000.00, excluding statutory interest and court costs but including attorney fees, if any.		brought for the penalties, person by law. The \$20,000.00, exception	ms: A small claims case is a lawsuit the recover of money damage, civil and property, or other relief allowed claim can be for no more than cluding statutory interest and court ing attorney fees, if any.		

https://scra.dmdc.osd.mil create an account single record request

	CAUSE NO		
-7	§	IN	THE JUSTICE COURT
Plaintiff			
VS	§	PR	ECINCT
	§	FR	IO COUNTY, TEXAS
Defendant			
AFFIDA	IT OF MILITARY STATUS OF	F DEFEN	DANT
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My name is <i>[please print]</i> the plaintiff or in the above styled and number this affidavit. The facts sta are true and correct.	d cause. I am over the	age of	18 and am capable of making
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PENALTY FOR MAKING OR USING FALSE AFFIDAVIT: A person who makes or uses an affidavit knowing it to be false, shall be fined as provided in Title 18 United States Code, or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both.

Instructions: The Servicemembers Civil Relief Act applies to a civil proceeding in the Justice courts. Before entering a default judgment against an individual defendant, the plaintiff must file with the court an affidavit stating whether or not the defendant is in the military service, showing necessary facts to support the affidavit, or stating that the plaintiff is unable to determine whether or not the defendant is in military service, if that is the case. The requirement for an affidavit may be satisfied by a written, signed document declared to be true under penalty of perjury. If it appears that the defendant is in military service, the court may not enter a judgment until after the court appoints an attorney to represent the defendant. If the court is unable to determine if the defendant is in military service, the court may require the plaintiff to file a bond in an amount approved by the court. A person who makes or uses an affidavit under this Act knowing to be false, may be fined or imprisoned or both. 50 USC App. 501 et seq. To obtain certificates of service or non-service under the Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act, you may access the public website: https://scra.dmdc.osd.mil/. This website will provide the current active military status of an individual.

Certificate of Last Known Address

The undersigned certifies that the last known mailing address of the Defendant against whom judgment is taken in this proceeding:

Defendant's Name:			
Defendant's Address:			
	Plaintiff		
	Attorney of Rec	ord for Plaintiff	
	Address		
	City	State	Zip
	Telephone numl	per	

This document is required to be filed when a judgment is taken by default so that the Court may notify the defendant of the entry of the default judgment.

The Service Members Civil Relief Act, 50 U.S.C. App 507 Et Seq, Passed December 19, 2003, requires the plaintiff in any civil proceeding in which the defendant does not make an appearance to file with the court an affidavit (A) stating whether or not the defendant is in the military service and showing necessary facts to support the affidavit; or (B) if the plaintiff is unable to determine whether or not the defendant is in the military service, stating that the plaintiff is unable to determine whether or not the defendant is in the military service.

PENALTY FOR MAKING OR USING A FALSE AFFIDAVIT: A person who makes or uses a military status affidavit, or statement, declaration, verification, or certificate, knowing it to be false, shall be fined as provided in title 18, United States Code, or imprisoned for not more than one year, or both.

Costs for an attorney ad litem may be assessed against the plaintiff as costs of court unless otherwise ordered by the court.



CIVIL FILING FEE SCHEDULE

Effective - January 1, 2022

Submit one original petition plus an additional copy for each defendant.

Fig. 10. 10. 10. 10. 10. 10. 10. 10. 10. 10	Harris Janes van Harris
FILING	
This will only initiate the lawsuit. Each defendant must be served before the	\$54.00
case will be set for trial or before you can procure a default judgment.	
O Small Claims, Debt Claim, Eviction, Repair & Remedy,	
Occupation Driver's License, Order of Retrieval	
SERVICE for each defendant in Frio County You must procure service of citation for defendants out of Frio County.	\$100.00
SUBPOENA	
Service for each witness to be served in Frio County, <i>plus</i>	\$100.00
Witness fee for each subpoena, or	\$10.00 cash
Production of documents fee for each subpoena	\$1.00 cash
CERTIFIED COPIES	
First page, plus	\$2.00
Each additional page	\$0.25
COPIES OF ALL OTHER DOCUMENTS	
First page, plus	\$1.00
Each additional page	\$0.25
JURY DEMAND	\$22.00
APPEAL	\$54.00
Transcript (required for Appeal to County Court)	\$10.00
ABSTRACT OF JUDGMENT	\$5.00
WRITS	
O Writ of Execution (2pg) Writ of Possession (5pg) Writ	
of Garnishment (2pg) Writ of Sequestration (2pg)	\$5.00
Issuance, (per page) plus	\$150.00
Service if judgment debtor is in Frio County	\$13 0.00

^{**} IF THE DEFENDANT'S ADDRESS IS NOT IN FRIO COUNTY, THE PLAINTIFF WILL BE CHARGED FOR FILING AND ISSUED THE CITATION FOR PROCESS. IT WILL BE THE PLAINTIFF'S RESPONSIBILITY TO FIND OUT WHAT COUNTY THE DEFENDANT'S ADDRESS IS IN AND THE SERVICE FEE FOR THAT COUNTY **

FEES PAYABBLE BY MONEY ORDERS ONLY TO THE PROPER COURT

J.P. COURT #1
HON. SHANNA GATES
500 E. SAN ANTONIO ST.
BOX 9
PEARSALL, TX, 78061
(830) 505-2995

J.P. COURT #2 HON. SANDRA WALDRUM P.O. BOX 751 PEARSALL, TX. 78061 (830) 505-7839 J.P. COURT #3 HON. SUSAN BELDING 500 E.SAN ANTONIO ST.BOX 13 PEARSALL, TX, 78061 (830) 505-7476

J.P. COURT #4 HON, JACK E. PROCTOR JR. 101 N. COMMERCE SUITE 101 DILLEY, TX. 78017 (830) 326-3250