

Representing Yourself in Court

A plain-language guide for people handling their own court case (also called being “self-represented” or “pro se”) — including important warnings about using AI tools and what happens if information or documents you file are wrong.

What Does “Self-Represented” Mean?

You have the right to handle your own court case without hiring a lawyer. This is called being **self-represented**, **pro se**, or a **pro se litigant**. Every year, thousands of people represent themselves in divorce, custody, small claims, eviction, debt, protective order, and other cases.

Representing yourself is allowed, but the court holds you to the **same rules, deadlines, and standards** as a licensed attorney. Judges and court staff cannot give you legal advice or do your case for you.

Where to Get Help

- **Self-Help Center** — Many state courts run a [Self-Help Center](#) with free general information, instructions, and sample forms for common case types (divorce, custody, small claims, eviction, protective orders, name changes, probate, and more).
- **Court forms** — Use the official court-approved forms for your case type whenever they exist. Using the wrong form, or an outdated version, can get your filing rejected or delay your case.
- **Guided interview tools** — Some courts offer step-by-step online tools that ask you questions and generate the correct forms for your case, so you fill in facts rather than draft legal language from scratch.
- **Court clerks** — Clerks can tell you about court procedures, filing fees, and deadlines, but by law they **cannot** tell you what to say in your case or which option to choose.
- **Legal aid and lawyer referral programs** — If you cannot afford a full attorney, look into [legal aid organizations](#), modest-means lawyer referral programs, and limited-scope (“unbundled”) legal help, where a lawyer helps with just part of your case.
- **Fee waivers** — If you cannot afford filing fees, you may be able to ask the court to waive them.





A Warning About Using AI Tools

AI chatbots and “AI legal help” tools can be useful for understanding basic concepts or organizing your thoughts, but they are **not lawyers** and were not built to give reliable legal advice for your specific case, state, or court.

AI tools frequently make up facts, laws, and court cases that do not exist (this is called “hallucinating”). AI-written text can sound confident and professional even when it is completely wrong.

This is not hypothetical: in a real Utah appeals case, attorneys were formally sanctioned by the Utah Court of Appeals after they filed a legal brief containing fake, AI-invented case citations. The court made clear that anyone filing documents — **attorney or self-represented** — is responsible for making sure everything in the filing is accurate. Courts around the country have issued similar warnings and sanctions to self-represented litigants for the same reason.

If You Use AI While Preparing Your Case, Treat It Only as a Starting Point

- Never copy legal citations, case names, statutes, or quotes from an AI tool into a filing without independently verifying them through the court's own forms, official statutes, or a real case-law database.
- Never assume an AI tool knows your state's rules, your specific court's local rules, or current deadlines — these change often and vary by jurisdiction.
- Use official court-provided forms and instructions instead of AI-drafted legal documents whenever official forms exist for your situation.
- Do not enter sensitive case details, especially about children, into public AI tools; not all of them keep information private.
- When in doubt, have the final document reviewed by a court Self-Help Center, legal aid attorney, or licensed attorney before you file it.

AI GENERATED

What Happens If You File Wrong Information or Documents

When you sign and file a document with the court — whether you wrote it yourself, got help from another person, or used an AI tool — you are personally certifying that it is accurate and filed in good faith. Getting it wrong can have real, sometimes serious, consequences:

• Delays and rejected filings

Incomplete, incorrect, or outdated forms are often rejected or returned, which can delay your case, cost you another filing fee, or cause you to miss a deadline.

• Case dismissal or default

If required documents are missing, wrong, or filed late, a judge can dismiss your case, deny your request, or enter judgment against you — sometimes without a hearing.

- **Loss of credibility with the judge**

Filing something inaccurate — *even accidentally* — can undermine your credibility on everything else you tell the court.

- **Sanctions and financial penalties**

Courts can order a party to pay the other side's costs or attorney fees, or impose other sanctions, for filing documents that contain false statements, fabricated citations, or claims with no basis in fact or law. This applies to self-represented litigants, not just attorneys.

- **Perjury and fraud consequences**

Many court documents are signed “under penalty of perjury.” Knowingly submitting false information in a sworn document can lead to serious legal consequences beyond your civil case.

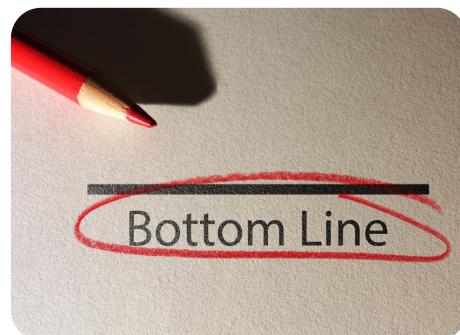
- **Harm to the other side of your case**

In family law, protective order, and custody cases especially, inaccurate filings can affect real decisions about children, safety, and finances. **Mistakes are not just paperwork problems.**

Tips for Filing Accurately

- Use the official court-approved form for your case type, and check that it is the current version.
- Read every question fully before answering. Don't guess if you're unsure what a term means.
- Double-check names, dates, case numbers, and addresses before you file.
- Keep copies of everything you file and everything you receive from the court or the other party.
- If a form or process is confusing, ask a court Self-Help Center or legal aid provider before you file — **not after.**
- When a deadline is unclear, file early rather than risk missing it.

Bottom line: You're welcome to represent yourself, and free help exists to guide you. AI tools can help you understand general concepts, but they cannot replace verified, court-specific information. **YOU, not the tool, are responsible for everything you sign and file.**



This guide is general educational information based on publicly available self-help court resources. It is not legal advice and does not replace instructions from your specific court, official court forms, or advice from a licensed attorney. Rules, forms, and procedures vary by state and by court. Always confirm requirements with your local court's self-help resources before filing.