

Guide to Filing Prisoner Complaints Without a Lawyer In Federal District Court

Introduction

Welcome to the federal district courts.

This Guide is intended to help you write and file a complaint. Follow these steps and your litigation should run more smoothly.

The Guide comes with:

- A blank form for your complaint and an optional blank application to proceed in court without prepaying the filing fee. You are encouraged to use the form complaint. You are not required to do so, but using it will help your case move more quickly.
- Sample claims. These illustrations may help you write your own claim.

Before you begin, consider whether your case belongs in federal court.

- Federal district courts generally hear two types of cases: (1) violations of federal law; and (2) violations of state law where the parties are citizens of different states and the amount at stake is more than \$75,000.
- Federal district courts do not review the decisions of state courts. Do not sue in a federal district court just because you are unhappy with the ruling of a state court. (This rule does *not* apply to petitions for writs of habeas corpus. Do not use this Guide for such petitions.)

Contents of Your Complaint

Cases in federal court start with the complaint, and so does this guide. The complaint is an important legal document. If you draft it correctly, it will be short and will tell the court and the defendants exactly how you believe that your rights were violated.

What to put in your complaint:

Your complaint needs five things. These five parts correspond to the five sections that you see in the form complaint.

- A. **Caption and parties.** Your complaint must begin with a “caption.” The caption must include your name as the plaintiff and the names of the people you are suing (the defendants). (If the defendants harmed you while doing their jobs, tell the court the name and address of the employers, if known to you.) Also, name the federal court in which you will be filing your complaint. Do not fill in the case number. This will be done by the clerk when you file your complaint. From then on, you should put the case number on papers that you file with the court. This helps the court keep all the papers in each case together.
- B. **Statement of Claim.** The most important part of your complaint is the “statement of your claim.” Describe *briefly* the exact problem that you are complaining about. You should explain five things:
- (1) **Who** violated your rights. Tell the name of each person who injured you.
 - (2) **What** each defendant did. Tell what action each defendant took or failed to take that harmed you.
 - (3) **When** they did it. Tell when each defendant harmed you.
 - (4) **Where they did it.** Tell where each defendant harmed you.

(5) **Why they did it.** If you know, tell the court why each defendant harmed you.

Explain the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” and “why” clearly and simply. Tell the story as if you are telling it to someone who knows nothing about what happened to you, but put only the important facts in your statement of the claim.

A short and plain statement helps the judge to review your complaint quickly and move onto the next step of your case. A long complaint will take a judge longer to review and understand, and the judge may tell you to rewrite it. This will delay your case.

You may find it helpful to look at the examples of statements of a claim at the end of this Guide. Do not copy these examples or assume that the plaintiffs in these examples would win their cases. The examples show you how to write your claim, not what to say in your claim.

You may type or handwrite your complaint, so long as it’s readable.

If you cannot finish your statement in the complaint form, you may continue your statement of the claim on another sheet of paper.

C. **Why your case belongs in federal court (“Jurisdiction”).** State why a federal court can decide your case. There are two main possibilities.

(1) If your case involves a violation of federal law, a federal court can decide your case, and you should check the first box on the form. This box refers to a federal statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1331, the law that gives federal courts the power to decide cases involving the violation of federal law.

(2) If your case involves only a violation of state law, you may be able to check the second box. Generally, in order to check the

second box, all the defendants must be citizens of a state other than the one of which you (and any other plaintiffs) are a citizen. In addition, more than \$75,000 must be in dispute.

- D. **Relief Wanted.** Your complaint should include a request for relief—what you want from each defendant, such as money or some particular action.
- E. **Jury Demand.** If you want to have your case decided by a jury, check “Yes” in the box provided. If you want the judge to decide it, check the other box.

What NOT to put in your complaint

DO NOT attach a lot of papers or long statements from witnesses. **If you want the judge to know about a fact, just write the fact in your complaint. The complaint is not the place for *proving* facts. When the judge needs proof, you will have a chance to submit it later.**

DO NOT include in your complaint lengthy quotations from statutes, laws, regulations, or cases. If you want, you may simply list the statute, law, or regulation that you believe the defendants violated. Later in the case, the defendants or the judge may ask you to explain in more detail why you think that the defendants have violated a law. You will then have an opportunity to quote from statutes, laws, regulations, or cases.

DO NOT include in your complaint unrelated claims against different defendants. You may bring the same claim against more than one defendant only if all of the named defendants played some part in the *same* situation that resulted in the alleged violation of your rights.

Note on the use of the prison’s grievance system:

Prisoners are generally required to submit their claims to the prison’s grievance system before filing a federal suit about those claims. If you do

not complete the prison's entire grievance process before filing suit, the defendants may ask the court to dismiss your case and the court may do so.

Filing Your Complaint

To file your complaint, you must pay a filing fee. Ask the prison librarian or call the clerk of court's office to find out the current fee. (Contact details are listed below; no collect calls, though.) Send a check or money order in this amount, payable to "The Clerk of the U.S. District Court."

If you cannot afford the fee, you may ask the court for permission to file without prepaying the full fee. Use the form "Request to Proceed in District Court without Prepaying the Filing Fee". You must also submit a certified copy of your prisoner trust account fund for the 6-month period before your filing. You should ask for this report from the jail or prison in which you are housed. Note that if you have already filed three suits that a court has dismissed, you may have lost your right to proceed without paying the full filing fee in advance.

BE SURE to keep for yourself an exact copy of your complaint and any other document you send to the court.

DO NOT mail a copy of your complaint directly to any defendant.

Mail (1) your complaint and (2) your check or money order (if you can afford to prepay the full filing fee) or your Request to Proceed in District Court without Prepaying the Filing Fee to: "Clerk of the U.S. District Court" at the appropriate address. Consult the attached map for help.

Northern District of Illinois

Chicago

Everett McKinley Dirksen U.S.Courthouse
219 South Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60604
(312) 435-5670

Rockford

Stanley J. Roszkowski U.S.Courthouse
327 South Church Street
Rockford, Illinois 61101
(815) 987-4354

Central District of Illinois

Peoria

309 U.S. Courthouse
100 N.E. Monroe Street
Peoria, IL 61602
309-671-7117

Urbana

218 U.S. Courthouse
201 S. Vine Street
Urbana, IL 61802
217-373-5830

Southern District of Illinois

Benton

301 West Main Street
Benton, IL 62812
(618) 439-7760

East St. Louis

750 Missouri Avenue
East St. Louis, IL 62201
(618) 482-9371

Northern District of Indiana

Fort Wayne

1300 S. Harrison St.
Fort Wayne, IN 46802
(260) 423-3000

Hammond

5400 Federal Plaza
Hammond, IN 46320
(219) 852-6500

Lafayette

Charles Halleck Federal Building
230 North Fourth Street
Lafayette, IN 47901
(765) 420-6250

South Bend

102 Federal Building
204 S Main St
South Bend, IN 46601
(574) 246-8000

Southern District of Indiana

Indianapolis

Birch Bayh Federal Bldg & U.S. Courthouse
46 East Ohio Street
Indianapolis, IN 46204
(317) 229-3700

Evansville

Winfield K. Denton Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse
101 Northwest Martin Luther King Boulevard
Evansville, IN 47708
(812) 434-6410

Terre Haute

U.S. Courthouse
921 Ohio Street
Terre Haute, IN 47807
(812) 231-1840

New Albany

Lee H. Hamilton Federal Building & U.S. Courthouse
121 West Spring Street
New Albany, IN 47150
(812) 542-4510

Eastern District of Wisconsin

Milwaukee

362 United States Courthouse
517 East Wisconsin Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53202
(414) 297-3372

Green Bay

Jefferson Court Building
125 S. Jefferson St., Rm. 102
Green Bay, WI 54301-4541
(920) 884-3720

Western District of Wisconsin

Robert W. Kastenmeier U.S. Courthouse
120 N. Henry Street, Room 320
Madison, WI 53703
(608) 264-5156

**ILLINOIS
7th Circuit**



**INDIANA
7th Circuit**



**WISCONSIN
7th Circuit**



Statement of Claim (Example 1)

The plaintiff Peter Jackson is an inmate at *Stateville Correction Center in Joliet, Illinois*. During lunch on *July 15, 2013*, an inmate threatened to stab

Jackson. Jackson reported the threat to two guards, *Tom Perez and John*

White, but *they ignored the threat because they wanted to retaliate against Jackson*

for filing an earlier grievance. The next day, *the inmate stabbed Jackson in the*

neck, causing profuse bleeding. Jackson went to the infirmary, where

doctor *Timothy Jones* told him that stab wounds, if untreated, would likely

get infected. Yet the *Dr. Jones deliberately refused to treat Jackson, ignoring*

the risk of infection *for no reason*. Jackson seeks damages from the

Gonzalez and White for ignoring the threat of injury and from the doctor

for refusing to treat him.

Where

When

Who 1 and 2

What happened

Why it happened

What else happened

Who 3

What else happened

Why it happened

Statement of Claim (Example 2)

Plaintiff Luther Jackson is an inmate at *Stateville Correction Center in Joliet*

Where

Illinois. He suffers from asthma. Two guards, *Hector Gonzalez and Bradley*

Who 1 and 2

White, knew that he is asthmatic. On *January 15, 2014*, they put him in a cell

When

What happened

with a broken window. The open window cooled the cell down to 20 degrees

Why it happened

Fahrenheit. *Unconcerned with his well-being*, the guards knew that by putting

What else happened

him in a cell with freezing-cold air healthy breathing would be difficult for

What else happened

Jackson. The two guards also knew that *the cell had no running water*, further

increasing the risk of infection. Because of these circumstances, Jackson

What else happened

contracted *pneumonia and was hospitalized* for two weeks for which he seeks

damages.

Statement of Claim (Example 3)

Plaintiff Manny Jackson is an inmate at the *Wisconsin Secure Program*

Where

Facility in Boscobel, Wisconsin. He possessed two items, a newspaper article

When

and diary, both of which criticize the warden. On *August 10, 2013*, two

Who 1 and 2

What happened

guards, *Hector Gonzalez and Bradley White*, took these items from his cell and

What else happened

charged him with violating a rule of the Wisconsin Department of

Corrections that prohibits inmate "insubordination." The Department's

Who 3

Why it happened

Secretary, *Ed Smith*, requires that guards enforce this rule. A prison

disciplinary board found Jackson guilty of insubordination because he

What else happened

possessed these two items. It punished him with *three weeks' segregation*.

Who 4

Two months later, *Warden Timothy Jones* approved the board's discipline

What else happened

and *authorized the segregation*.

Jackson wants the guilty finding and punishment overturned, his items

returned to him, damages for the time that he spent in segregation, and a

ruling that prohibits the Department from banning written criticisms of the

warden.

Statement of Claim (Example 4)

Where

The plaintiff Guy Johnson is an inmate at *Stateville Correction Center in Joliet,*

Illinois. As he was working at his regular job in the prison library on

When

Who

February 18, 2014, Brian Whelan, a prison guard, approached him and

What happened

accused him of stealing a prison book. When Johnson denied the accusation,

What else happened

Whelan put Johnson into a choke-hold, kicked him in the groin several times,

and shoved him into a table where he cut his head and lost consciousness

Why it happened

Whelan said he did this because Johnson was disrespecting a prison guard

Johnson seeks damages from Whelan for the use of unnecessary and

excessive force and compensation for his injuries.