

Especially for kids and their families



The Mini Page

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By BETTY DEBNAM

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Let's Go to Court

What's it like to go to court? Let's follow one type of case and see.

Perry vs. Dewey

(The "vs." stands for "versus," meaning against.)



① Mr. Perry and Mr. Dewey are involved in a car accident.



② Mr. Perry is injured. His car is damaged. Mr. Dewey and his car aren't hurt at all.

Mr. Perry thinks that the accident was not his fault and that Mr. Dewey should pay him for the damages.



③ Mr. Dewey thinks that Mr. Perry's reckless driving caused the accident.



④ Mr. Perry decides to go to court. A disagreement brought to court is a case, or a **suit**.



⑤ Mr. Perry sees a lawyer. The lawyer files a **complaint**, or sends a written statement about the accident, to the clerk of court.

A clerk of court helps make certain that cases come before the court in an orderly manner.



⑥ The clerk of court attaches a **summons** to a copy of the complaint. The

summons is a paper saying that a person must answer the complaint within a certain number of days. Mr. Dewey receives the summons through the mail. Sometimes a summons is hand-delivered.



⑦ Mr. Dewey sees a lawyer to get help to **file an answer**, or give his written

version of what has happened.



The complaint and the answer to the complaint are called the **pleadings** in the case.



Mr. Dewey and Mr. Perry are called **parties** in the suit, or case.



Mr. Perry is now the **plaintiff**, since he is the injured person who is complaining.



Mr. Dewey is now the **defendant**, since he is defending himself.



⑧ Each side goes through a **discovery** period to prepare. The lawyers look for evidence and talk to witnesses to get as much information as possible.



⑨ The judge and the lawyers go to a **pre-trial conference**, or meeting before the trial, to discuss

matters that are important to the case.

The case is called, or comes before, the court.

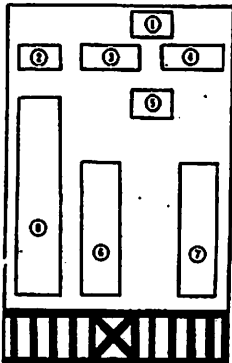


⑩ The jury is selected from a group of people who have been ordered to come to court. The judge then questions them to make certain they will be fair.

After the jury has been sworn in, the trial begins.

Who's Who in the Court?

Not all courts are alike, but here are some of the people you are most likely to see. This shows how a courtroom might be set up.



- ① Judge
- ② Witness
- ③ Court reporter
- ④ Courtroom deputy
- ⑤ Lawyer
- ⑥ Plaintiff
- ⑦ Defendant
- ⑧ Jury

A fence and a gate separate these people listed above from the spectators in the court. The area where the plaintiffs and defendants sit is called the well.



① The judge sits behind a desk that is on a higher platform. Some of his duties are to:

- keep order.
- decide if the evidence that the parties want to present is legal or not.
- instruct or tell the jury about the laws and how they apply to this case.



② The witnesses testify, or give their version of what happened. They sit in the witness stand facing the courtroom.



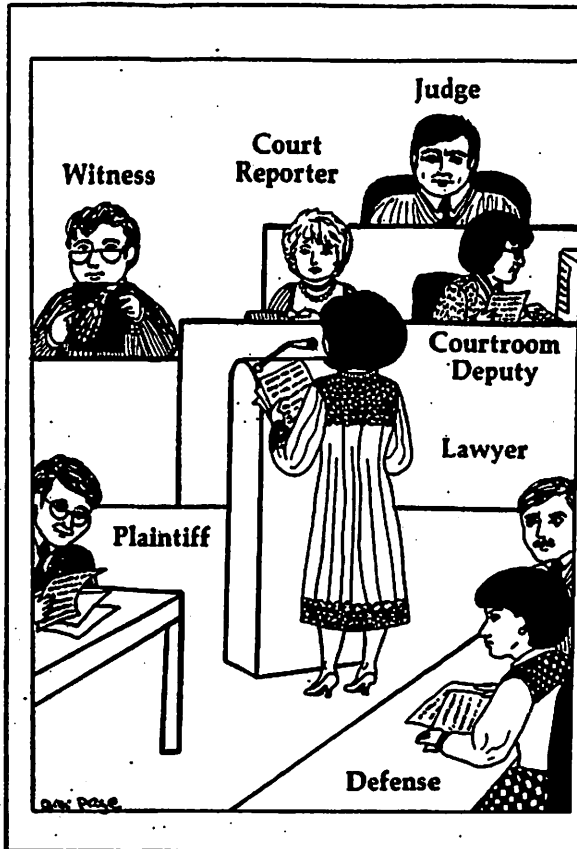
③ The courtroom deputy sits near the judge and works for the clerk of court. A few duties are to:

- swear in witnesses.
- mark exhibits.
- make certain that all of the necessary people are present.



④ The court reporter sits near the witness stand and types on a shorthand machine. The machine enables him or her to

quickly type each word as it is spoken.



Legal words

COUNSEL — a lawyer or a group of lawyers.

CROSS EXAMINATION — questions asked by lawyers of witnesses called by the side they are opposing.

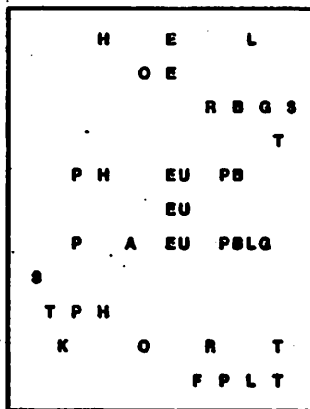
FELONY — a crime that carries a penalty of more than a year in prison.

MISDEMEANOR — (MIS-de-MEAN-or) — an offense that is a less serious crime than a felony. It usually carries a penalty of less than a year in prison.

VERDICT — a jury's decision.

The Mini Page thanks the Information Services Office of the Federal Judicial Center for help with this issue.

This is an example of how the words "Hello, The Mini Page is in court" would look on the paper tape from the shorthand machine before it is edited on a computer.



Some court reporters repeat each word that is said into a stenomask that is connected to a tape recorder. The tape will be transcribed, or written, later.

Some court reporters record what is said on a tape-recording machine.



⑤ The lawyers try to bring out the facts that put their case in the best light. They usually sit with their clients at long tables. They also ask questions from a speaker's stand in front of the judge.



⑥ The plaintiff and his lawyers always sit at the long table closest to the jury.



⑦ The defendant and his lawyers sit at another table.



⑧ The jury is a group of people seated in a boxed area. They decide if the defendant is guilty. In some cases, there are 12 jurors. In others there are only six.