LAW CLASS  
How Courts Work

Steps in a Trial

Civil and Criminal Cases

The law deals with two kinds of cases. Civil cases involve conflicts between people or institutions such as businesses. A civil case usually begins when a person or organization determines that a problem can’t be solved without the intervention of the courts. In civil cases, one (or more) of these persons or organizations brings suit (i.e., files a complaint in court that begins a lawsuit).

Criminal cases involve enforcing public codes of behavior as set forth in the laws, with the government prosecuting individuals or institutions. In a criminal case, the government brings charges against the person alleged to have committed the crime.

What types of cases are civil? Divorce and related lawsuits (child support, custody, and similar cases) account for a very large number of civil cases. Cases involving contracts are also frequent. Automobile collisions account for many personal injury cases, another common kind of civil case. An auto collision gives rise to a civil case if one driver sues the other, or if a passenger in one of the cars sues either driver. An auto collision might also lead to a criminal case, if it involves allegations of a crime such as drunken driving or leaving the scene of an accident.