LAW CLASS
How Courts Work

Steps in a Trial

Instructions to the Jury

The judge instructs the jury about the relevant laws that should guide its deliberations. (In some jurisdictions, the court may instruct the jury at any time after the close of evidence. This sometimes occurs before closing arguments.) The judge reads the instructions to the jury. This is commonly referred to as the judge's charge to the jury.

In giving the instructions, the judge will state the issues in the case and define any terms or words that may not be familiar to the jurors. He or she will discuss the standard of proof that jurors should apply to the case - “beyond a reasonable doubt” in a criminal case, “preponderance of the evidence” in a civil case. The judge may read sections of applicable laws.

The judge will advise the jury that it is the sole judge of the facts and of the credibility (believability) of witnesses. He or she will note that the jurors are to base their conclusions on the evidence as presented in the trial, and that the opening and closing arguments of the lawyers are not evidence. Sometimes judges will explain what basic facts are in dispute, and what facts do not matter to the case.

The judge will point out that his or her instructions contain the interpretation of the relevant laws that govern the case, and that jurors are required to adhere to these laws in making their decision, regardless of what the jurors believe the law is or ought to be. In short, the jurors determine the facts and reach a verdict, within the guidelines of the law as determined by the judge.

Many states allow the lawyers to request that certain instructions be given, but the judge makes the final decisions about them. Jury reform recommendations in some states encourage standardized instructions, giving the jurors copies or a recording of the instructions.