LAW CLASS  
How Courts Work

Steps in a Trial

Pre-trial Procedures in Civil Cases

Lawsuits begin with the filing of a complaint in the proper court. The person filing the suit is often referred to as the **plaintiff** ; the person or entity against whom the case is filed is often referred to as the **defendant** . In some areas of law, such as domestic relations, the person filing the complaint is the **petitioner**, and the person against whom the case is filed is the **respondent**.

The complaint states the plaintiff's version of the facts, the legal theory under which the case is brought and asks for certain damages or other relief. The plaintiff also files with the court clerk a request that a summons (or notice) be issued to the defendant. In many jurisdictions, the summons will be served by a deputy sheriff or special process server. In other jurisdictions, it may be served by mail. It notifies the defendant that a lawsuit has been filed against him or her.

After being notified, the defendant has a certain period of time to file an answer admitting or denying the allegations made in the complaint.