

Title: On Your Court Date: Tips for Your Day in Court

Dress Appropriately and Speak Clearly
Treat Everyone with Respect
Let's Review

Most people only know about courts from what they see on TV where the courtroom is often portrayed as a dramatic place. It's really not like that. Go into any Maryland trial court, and you will see people just like yourself. Some will have lawyers, but many will not.

Going to court can be stressful. Are you feeling nervous or unsure about your case? Today, I hope to give you some tips to help put you at ease so you can make the best of your day in court.

Chapter Heading: Make the Best of Your Day in Court

First, be on time. Get started early. You will need to find a parking spot, go through security, figure out where your courtroom is, and have an opportunity to look through your notes one last time. If you are running late, call the clerk's office and ask them to let the judge know that you are running late and will be there soon. The court normally schedules many cases each day. If you are late, the judge may call your case and go on without you. You may miss your chance to be heard, and you may lose your case as a result.

Number two and number three on your list of things to do on your day in court: dress appropriately and speak clearly.

Chapter Heading: Dress Appropriately and Speak Clearly

Present yourself in a way that looks professional and not distracting. You want the judge to focus on your case, not your appearance. It's also important to speak clearly and concisely. Write down notes for yourself, and practice what you are going to say to the judge. Try to keep your side of the story short. Stick to the facts. While you may be upset with the other party, now is not the time to vent. Instead, only tell the judge facts that are relevant to THIS CASE.

Be sure to tell the judge clearly what you are requesting. Suggest a specific solution. For instance, instead of saying, "I want to see my kids more," say "I would like to see my kids one more day per week. I would like this day to be Tuesday, and I want to have every Labor Day weekend with my kids in addition to the other holidays we agreed upon." Remember, you know what works best for you, so it is up to you to ask for what you need. While the judge may or may not be able to say yes, they will at least know what you are requesting.

The fourth thing to keep in mind - treat everyone with respect.

Chapter Heading: Treat Everyone with Respect

When talking to court staff, be patient and polite. Use clean language in the courtroom and remain civil toward the other party. Use Mr. and Ms. instead of first names. Call the judge "Your Honor" and stand up when you speak to the judge.

Now this is very important: Practice active listening and do not talk over people who are speaking. This includes the judge, as well as the other side. The hearing is being recorded. If an official transcript will be made, it needs to be understandable, not full of interruptions. Even if the other side says something that infuriates you, or that you believe is untrue, write it down so you can remember to address it with the judge. Wait for your turn to talk. The judge must hear the entire story, and they will want to hear your side too. If you don't get a chance to say what you need to say, politely say, "Excuse me, your Honor" at an appropriate time.

Stay composed while the other side is speaking. Huffing and puffing is distracting and unbecoming. The judge may find this rude.

Finally, remember that you are under oath and that lying is a crime. If you say something and you know the judge thinks you meant something else, politely correct their misunderstanding.

Let's review what you have learned.

Chapter Heading: Let's Review

Here are some things to remember on your court day:

- Be on time
- Dress appropriately and professionally
- Speak clearly and concisely
- Treat everyone with respect, and
- Tell the truth

For more information, including the opportunity to speak to a lawyer for free about your case please visit mdcourts.gov/courthelp. Thanks for watching.