

TEXAS YOUNG LAWYERS ASSOCIATION
AND STATE BAR OF TEXAS

HOW TO SUE IN
JUSTICE
— COURT —



HOW TO SUE IN JUSTICE — COURT —



Prepared and distributed as a public service by the
Texas Young Lawyers Association
and
the State Bar of Texas

This handbook is not a substitute for the advice of
a lawyer and is intended for general information
concerning how to sue in small claims court.

Originally published 1980.
©2000, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2013
Texas Young Lawyers Association

TABLE OF CONTENTS

What is Justice Court?	1
What type of case can be brought in Justice Court?	1
Who can sue in Justice Court?	3
Are there alternatives to Justice Court?	3
Should you check with a lawyer?	6
Whom do you sue?	7
Where do you file suit?	8
Have you waited too long to file suit?	9
How do you file suit?	9
How do you prepare your case?	12
What if you are sued?	15
What happens at the trial?	15
Mediating your case.	16
Choosing a jury.	17
Presenting your case.	18
Deciding your case.	20
What if I am unhappy with the decision?	20
What do I do after I win?	21
Is Justice Court right for you?	23
Important dates to remember.	24
Web Resources	25
Appendix	
Sample Notice Letter.	26
Appendix	
Justice Court Civil Case Information Sheet. . .	28

WHAT IS JUSTICE COURT?

Small claims court was known as the “People’s Court” and on August 31, 2013 it was abolished by the Texas Legislature. This does not mean you can no longer file your small claims case. Instead, you will file your small claims case in Justice Court. The Legislature created a specific set of rules for Justice Court that attempt to make it even easier for a non-lawyers to represent themselves.

Small claims court provided an informal, uncomplicated place to resolve disputes that do not involve enough money to warrant the expense of formal litigation. Most people who appeared in small claims court did not have a lawyer but represented themselves. These same principals apply in Justice Court. In Justice Court, the most you can recover is \$10,000, including any attorney fees.

If someone owes you money, and you cannot obtain payment, do not try to take the law into your own hands. Do not start a fight. If you cannot resolve the problem any other way, you may settle your differences by taking them to court.

WHAT TYPE OF CASE CAN BE BROUGHT IN JUSTICE COURT?

Not all disputes can be heard in Justice Court. Justice Court cannot hear disputes involving a claim for more than \$10,000. No matter how important the case is to you, and no matter whether you convince the judge that you deserve to recover more, the judge in Justice Court cannot rule on a dispute for more than \$10,000. This amount includes any attorney’s fees but does not include court costs and

statutory interest. If you wish to recover more than \$10,000 you must consider filing suit in another court with the assistance of an attorney. If your case is worth more than \$10,000, you cannot agree to recover less, just to sue in Justice Court.

Justice Court can award only money. It cannot order a mechanic to repair your car correctly. The court could only award you the monetary damages you suffered because your car was not repaired the way that was promised. The court cannot order a store to deliver the television you paid for, but never received. If you need an order to make someone do something or to stop doing something, other courts are available. If you win in Justice Court, you can win only a judgment for money.

Some examples of common types of disputes in Justice Court are:

1. You lend money to a friend, and now he refuses to pay you.
2. More than a month has passed since you moved from your apartment. You satisfied all the conditions of your lease and provided your correct forwarding address in writing when you moved. Now the landlord refuses to return your security deposit and will not provide you a statement of what they have done with your deposit.
3. You have your car repaired. After the car is returned, you discover that you have been charged for repairs that were not made.
4. A credit card company has sued you to recover an unpaid debt on the account.

WHO CAN SUE IN JUSTICE COURT ?

Any person over 18 years old can sue in Justice Court. A minor can use the court by having a parent, relative, or “next friend” who is over 18 years old accompany him to file a claim and attend the trial. The court may allow an individual representing himself to be assisted in court by a family member or another person who is not receiving compensation.

An association, partnership, limited liability company, or corporation may also file a claim in Justice Court. Unlike other courts, a legal entity like a corporation does not need an attorney to file a claim in Justice Court. A corporation may appear in Justice Court through an employee or officer, even if the person is not a lawyer.

A person or corporation may be represented by an attorney.

Some entities, however, may not use Justice Court. Banks and other institutions that are in the business of lending money for interest cannot sue in Justice Court. A collection agency also cannot sue in Justice Court. But if you have a claim against a bank or a collection agency, you can file suit against them in Justice Court.

ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES TO JUSTICE COURT ?

You should always try to settle a dispute without suing.

Many cases are filed in Justice Court that could have been resolved without a lawsuit. If you file a

lawsuit, you will find that you must spend time preparing your case. You will also have to pay certain fees to have your case processed. A trial in Justice Court, although informal, can be a time-consuming and emotionally draining experience.

In many cases, there are alternatives to going to court. In a dispute with your landlord, you may be able to resolve the matter through your apartment association. In a dispute with a business, the Better Business Bureau may be helpful. The Dry Cleaners Association may be able to resolve a problem with your dry cleaner. In a dispute over wages or involving deceptive trade practices, a call to the attorney general's office may be worthwhile. Sometimes a local television station or newspaper will have a consumer action department. Occasionally, such departments are extremely effective in recovering money for consumers and are sometimes successful in recovering money where a suit in Justice Court would fail. Many cities also have neighborhood dispute resolution centers that may help you resolve your dispute without a lawsuit.

These steps may help you settle a dispute without going to court:

1. First, carefully analyze the nature and cost of the wrong and determine how much you have been damaged. How much money would it take to make you "whole" that is, how much money would it take to put you in the position where you would have been had the other party done what he or she promised to do? For example, if the laundry has ruined a piece of your clothing, estimate the value of the article ruined.

2. Once you know what you want, call the store or the person whom you feel is responsible. Speak to a person in authority, not a salesperson. Generally, a store manager or an officer with authority to make decisions is best.
3. Calmly explain your side of the story and how you feel you were wronged. NEVER become abusive or upset. A calm and logical approach will accomplish far more than raised voices and outrage. Yelling and shouting will not increase the amount that you are entitled to recover and will only create hard feelings. Be assertive, not aggressive.
4. Demand something specific. Ask the store or person to replace the garment, return your money, or some other specific compensation. Tell them exactly what you want to resolve the issue.
5. If the store manager or person in charge is unresponsive, or if you are unable to reach him by telephone, then write a letter explaining your complaint. Send the letter by certified mail, return receipt requested. Remember to keep a copy of the letter and the signed return receipt. Be sure you mail the letter to the correct address. The letter should be clear and concise. There is no need for long-winded discussions or fancy legal language. There is a sample letter at the end of this pamphlet.
6. If the phone call or letter is unsuccessful at resolving the dispute, and you have tried everything else within reason, you should seriously consider filing suit.

SHOULD YOU CHECK WITH A LAWYER?

If your attempts to settle the dispute are unsuccessful, you should determine whether or not you need an attorney.

If the amount involved is significant, or if you are not comfortable representing yourself, the assistance of an attorney may be a good idea. In other cases, you should be able to competently represent yourself in Justice Court. Remember, this really is the “People’s Court.”

In some cases, you will be entitled by law to recover attorney’s fees. In those cases, you may be able to hire a lawyer to represent you and charge you a contingency fee; that is, charge you a fee only if you win. This can open up other courts to you which otherwise you may not be able to use effectively without a lawyer representing you. Even in Justice Court, a lawyer can often increase your chance of winning or advise you of opportunities to collect additional damages. For example, in certain consumer and landlord tenant disputes you can recover three times your damages. An attorney may be able to advise you about these laws or refer you to other publications, such as the Texas Young Lawyers Association Tenants’ Rights Handbook, that can help you understand your rights. To find out more about available booklets call the State Bar of Texas at 1-800-204-2222, ext. 1800, or visit **www.texasbar.com**.

To find an attorney to assist you, talk with relatives and friends to see who they recommend. You may want to contact local referral services or call the State Bar of Texas lawyer referral service at 1-877-9TEXBAR (1-877-983-9227). Low-income individuals may also be eligible for free legal assis-

tance from local legal service offices or law school clinic programs.

WHOM DO YOU SUE?

You may not realize it, but suing the right person is not as easy as you think but is very important. Before you sue, you must determine the proper party against whom to file your claim. If your dispute is against a person in his or her individual capacity (not in a business capacity), simply file suit against individual. If your claim is against a business or legal entity, such as a sole proprietor, often a person working under a business name (“d/b/a”), partnership, association, limited liability company, or corporation, then you should consider the following.

To sue a sole proprietor, sue the person running the business, no matter what name that person is using. Suppose that Sara Smith opens a dress shop called “The Dress Shop.” Whom do you sue? The answer is Sara. To find out who “The Dress Shop” really is, check with the “assumed name” department in the county clerk’s office.

To sue a partnership, find the names of the partners. Under the law, each of the partners is responsible for the obligations of the partnership.

To sue an association, limited liability company, or corporation, sue the legal entity. To properly sue a legal entity such as a corporation you should first contact the Secretary of State and ask who the “agent for service” is so that you know whom to serve with the papers. Call 512.463.5555 or email corpinfo@sos.state.tx.us and ask if the business is listed. If it is, ask for the proper name of the business and the name of the registered agent

(or agent for service). This is the person you will serve with your legal papers.

Of course, if your dispute is against a person in his or her individual capacity (not in a business capacity), simply sue the individual.

Once you have determined the proper party to sue, make sure to obtain their accurate full name and address. A small error in spelling or an incorrect address could cost you months when your papers cannot be served.

WHERE DO YOU FILE SUIT?

You must generally file suit in the county where the party that is being sued (the defendant) lives, or where the services you are complaining about were performed. The justice of the peace in each county is the judge for Justice Court. The Justice Court will be listed in the telephone directory as justices of the peace. If your telephone book has government offices listed separately, look under the listings for justices of the peace in the appropriate county. You may also search for “Justice Courts” at www.courts.state.tx.us.

If there is more than one justice of the peace in a county, then your claim must be filed in the court whose precinct covers the area where the defendant resides.

Under some circumstances, more than one court can be used. For example, if the defendant lives in one county but contracted to perform services in another county, you can select either county as the place to bring suit. If there is more than one justice of the peace in the same city or in the same precinct,

you can file suit in either court. If you still have a question about which court to use, call or visit the office of the justice of the peace. Generally, if you call the justice of the peace's office with the address of the party you are filing suit against, the court can provide you with information that will help you determine where to file your claim.

HAVE YOU WAITED TOO LONG TO FILE SUIT?

There are limits on how long you can wait to file a lawsuit. Lawyers call these a "statute of limitations." To see if you have waited too long, determine how long it has been since you were injured or damaged.

In most cases, you must bring your lawsuit within two years of when the problem arises. For some cases, that limit is four years. It is recommended that you file suit within six months to a year after you have suffered a wrong. This will allow you ample time to try to settle the dispute before you bring your lawsuit. Do not let the matter grow stale, or you will lose your right to sue and recover your damages.

Legal time limits can become very complicated. If your claim arose more than two years ago, you should consult an attorney before you file your suit. The statute of limitations, however is what the law calls an "affirmative defense," and if the person you sue does not raise it, it will be waived.

HOW DO YOU FILE SUIT?

You have exhausted all reasonable steps to settle the dispute out of court. You have determined who you are going to sue and where to file suit. Now you

should prepare everything you need to bring with you to file your lawsuit in Justice Court. You should collect all the information that will be needed to start your lawsuit before you go to the courthouse. Otherwise, you will waste time going back and forth to complete the process. Collect your records, including copies of contracts and agreements. You should also collect the following information:

- a) Your complete name and address;
- b) The complete name and address of each person or business your claim is against. Correct names and addresses are vital to your case because the court cannot grant a judgment against a defendant who is improperly named in the complaint. Therefore, you must find out before you go to court the name and address of the person or business your claim is against.
- c) The amount you intend to claim in damages (this amount must be \$10,000 or less); and
- d) A brief statement of the basis for your claim, stated plainly and without technicalities, including the date the claim arose and any other relevant date. You should write this statement in advance.

Once you are prepared, contact the proper justice of the peace to confirm that you will be going to the correct court, that you have all the necessary information, how much money you will need to pay the fees necessary to file your lawsuit, and the exact procedure you need to follow to file your claim. Ask the clerk if there is an instruction sheet that can be mailed or faxed to assist you in filing

your claim. Because procedures vary from court to court, and fees also are changed from time to time, a telephone call is worth the effort.

If you cannot afford the filing fees, you must file a sworn statement of inability to pay the fees. You can contact the court and request a “Pauper’s Affidavit” which you will need to have notarized and filed at the same time you file your petition. The person you are suing may contest your inability to pay and a hearing will be held. The Judge will then determine if you truly are unable to afford the fees.

You should personally go to the court to file your suit. Ask to see the clerk in charge of civil filings. You must complete a Justice Court Civil Case information sheet. (See Appendix).

You will have to pay the clerk the necessary fees. If you want a jury trial you must request one and pay an additional fee. These fees generally must be paid in cash, money order, or company check. Most courts do not accept personal checks. All of these costs may be added to the amount you recover at trial, if you win.

Tell the clerk the correct and complete address where the defendant can be found and the approximate time of day he or she is likely to be found at that location. This is important because the defendant must be served before the court can grant you any relief.

Ask the clerk how the court sets the trial date. Procedures may vary. In some courts, the Court may set the trial date, and you will be responsible for sending the defendant a letter giving him notice of the trial date. If your court follows this procedure,

you should send the letter to the defendant by certified mail, return receipt requested. Other courts may send notice of the trial date to you and the defendant.

Call the clerk after two weeks to make sure the defendant has been served and ask for the exact date he was served. This date is important because in most courts it is used to calculate the trial date. No matter what procedure the court follows, **always verify the trial date with the clerk. Remember this date and be in court at that time.** If the defendant was properly served and has not answered your suit, you will usually win by default simply because you were in court on the trial date.

Find out your case number. You need this number. Write it down.

Remember, you cannot recover anything unless citation has been served on the person or entity you are suing. The Justice Court cannot help you until the other party is served. After waiting two weeks, you may wish to start calling the sheriff or constable until they tell you that the citation has been served. If the defendant has not been served within 90 days, you should call the clerk and ask whether a new citation must be issued.

Remember to always be polite. Do not get the clerk, the judge, his staff, the sheriff, or the constable angry with you. Cooperation with these officials is a must. Your case is one of thousands of cases on file. These officials can only spend a limited amount of time on your case without neglecting other cases.

HOW DO YOU PREPARE YOUR CASE?

Once you have filed your lawsuit, you should begin to prepare your case for trial. You should

already have taken the first step by writing down a clear and concise statement of facts. If you have not yet written such a statement, do it now. Check all relevant dates. Compare your memory of events to any documents you may have. This statement will assist you in clarifying the facts of your claim. Remember, because you filed the lawsuit, you have the burden of proving all of the facts that establish that you should recover money because of the defendant's acts or failure to act. You must also prove the amount of your damages.

Next, gather all the original documentation you feel will have a bearing on the dispute. On the day of the trial, you should bring all: (1) records; (2) receipts; (3) canceled checks; (4) copies of contracts; (5) agreements; (6) photographs; and (7) any other items directly related to the case that will help you establish the facts of your story.

Most courts require that you bring two copies of all relevant evidence and estimates of your damage. Each document should support some part of your story. If there is any doubt, take the document to court. Do not forget to bring the subject matter of the dispute. If the laundry ruined your shirt, bring the shirt to court. If your car is damaged, have it in the parking lot. The best evidence you have is the damaged good.

At this point you also should determine if there are any witnesses who can attend court with you and help you tell your story. You should avoid witnesses who only know what they heard from someone else. Try to find witnesses who know facts because they were there. The value of witnesses' testimony depends upon intelligence, speaking ability, appearance, and the lack of bias and self-interest. The testimony of persons who might be biased, such as

relatives and people who benefit if you win the case, might not be given as much weight as the testimony of a disinterested person. Once you have determined who your witnesses are, contact them and ask them to relate the story to you as they would before the judge so that you will not be surprised by their testimony during the trial. If you feel the witnesses will help tell your story, ask them if they will assist you by testifying in court.

If a witness is important to your claim, but will not voluntarily attend court, you have the right to subpoena him and force him to attend. If a subpoena is necessary, go back to the court clerk as soon as you have a trial date and ask the clerk to issue the subpoena. You must provide the complete name for the witness and an address where the witness may be served with the subpoena. You may request that the subpoena also require the witness to bring to court any documents in his control that help prove your claim. You must pay an extra fee for a subpoena served on a witness.

Once you have organized your case by writing a statement, gathering documents, and selecting witnesses, then the exact issues in controversy will probably become clearer. You should then sit down and prepare what you will say when you are in court. You should also decide in what order you will present the evidence you have accumulated. List the questions you expect to ask each witness. Make an outline of what you want to say when you testify. Sometimes people forget to say things that are important to their case in a trial atmosphere. During trial, you should check off each item as you cover it. It is your job to present the case clearly to the judge or jury.

You should also determine whether you prefer the judge to hear the case or whether you want a trial by jury. You should make this decision based upon whether you think a jury will be more sympathetic to the case than the judge. If you request a jury, which must be requested no later than 14 days prior to your trial date and preferably when you file your lawsuit, you will have to pay a small jury fee. You may want to watch a Justice Court trial before making your decision. This will provide you an opportunity to familiarize yourself with how the judge conducts his or her court.

WHAT IF YOU ARE SUED?

If you are sued, you must file an answer within 14 days of the day you were served with the citation and the petition. The answer can be a simple denial of all the plaintiff's allegations. It must be in writing and filed with the court. You must also serve it on the plaintiff.

If you fail to file an answer within 14 days, a default judgment could be entered against you. A default judgment cannot be entered against you if you file an answer or otherwise appear in the case.

If you are sued, do not forget the date of your hearing. At the hearing, take any documents, witnesses, pictures, or other evidence that proves you are not responsible for the damages the other party claims you caused.

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE TRIAL?

In most courts, once the defendant is served with notice, the trial date will be set. In other

courts, the date may be set by order and you will be responsible for giving notice of the trial date to the defendant. Telephone the clerk and double check your trial date. Find out the time the court will hear your trial. Make sure you dress appropriately and are there a few minutes before the trial is scheduled to begin and be ready to present your case. If you are not on time, you may have your case dismissed. If you are there but not ready, your case may also be dismissed. Once the case is set for trial, only legal excuses for not attending trial will be accepted.

When you arrive, take a seat in the courtroom. Procedures vary from court to court. Usually, the court will go through a “docket call.” Answer when your case is called. Some judges will ask you whether you are ready to proceed with your case. You should answer “ready.” She will then ask the person you are suing the same question.

Most judges will briefly explain the procedure to be used in your trial. If you are confused about anything she says, or if you have other questions, do not be afraid to ask the judge.

MEDIATING YOUR CASE

At the time of filing, or on the day of trial, you may be asked by the court to mediate your dispute with the other party. There are no additional fees for attending mediation in the Justice Court. While mediation is not mandatory it is usually the last opportunity for the parties to settle their dispute without appearing before the court. During mediation a neutral person, the mediator, will discuss the case privately with both parties and will encourage communication between the parties in the hope of reaching an agreement. Each side will be asked to

share his story. You may discuss your case freely during mediation and you may share evidence. Anything you share during mediation is strictly confidential and cannot be revealed later during a trial. Remember to be calm and respectful to all parties during mediation.

The mediator is NOT a judge and cannot make any determination about your case or force you to settle. The mediator will simply assist both parties in negotiating the dispute. If you negotiate an agreement during mediation, the mediator will write down the terms of the agreement and ask both parties to sign. You will receive a copy of the agreement to keep for your records and a copy will be filed with the court. The agreement is essentially a written contract and is enforceable in a court of law. If the person you are suing does not follow the terms of the agreement, you can always return to court and ask the court to enforce the agreement. If you cannot come to a resolution during mediation the court will hear your case as planned.

CHOOSING A JURY

If you want a jury trial, the same procedure described above will be followed, but before you begin telling your story, both you and the person you are suing will be given a list of the names of potential jury members. You will be allowed to question these people and then decide which of them you do not wish to be on the jury. This is called Voir Dire. You may disqualify three of them for any reason (called a “peremptory challenge”). You may disqualify others if you show the judge that there is some fact which by law disqualifies a person from serving as a juror or which convinces the judge that a person is unfit to be on the jury. For example, you may discover that one

of the potential jurors is a close relative of the person you are suing. This fact would normally be enough to disqualify this person and would not count as one of your three peremptory challenges. This procedure will be explained to you in more detail by the judge if you ask her.

PRESENTING YOUR CASE

When the trial begins, the judge will ask you and your witnesses to swear to tell the truth. The judge will also swear in the person you are suing before he tells his side of the controversy.

The Plaintiff, the party suing, will have the first chance to tell their story. Go through the statement you previously prepared. Call your witnesses one at a time to testify. If you have photographs, have someone testify about what each photograph shows. For example, if you have photographs of a damaged item, have someone testify that the photograph accurately depicts how the item looked at the time the damage occurred. If you have documents, have someone testify about what each document is. If you have brought anything with you, now is the time to show it to the court.

Be sure that you present facts to the court that establish the defendant owes you money and show how much money he owes you. The burden of proof is on you. Take your time so the judge can understand the points you are trying to make. If the judge does not understand you, or wants something made clearer, he may ask you some questions.

After both you and your witnesses have told the judge what you know, the person you are suing will explain why he thinks he should not have to pay

you any money. It may be his position that you are wrong in the way you say the events occurred. Or he may say that your story is correct but that you are demanding too much money. Listen respectfully and without interjecting. He also has a chance to tell his story without interruption. After he is finished, you can ask both him and his witnesses questions. The judge may also ask them questions.

You cannot make statements to the witnesses. You should ask them questions. You cannot argue with the witnesses about their testimony. If you think the person you are suing or his witnesses are not telling the truth, you should ask questions that would expose this fact to the judge. Do not get frustrated or upset if a witness does not agree with your version of the facts. Such disagreements are common. The judge or jury will determine who they believe.

Be polite and courteous to the witnesses, the person you are suing, and others in the courtroom. Obey the court's instructions. Be brief and to the point. State your position in a respectful tone.

Do not try to play Perry Mason. This is not the time to "object" to everything the other side says. A nonlawyer generally cannot back up objections with legal argument. In fact, in Justice Court the Rules of Evidence do not apply. You will probably find it better not to make objections during the trial of your case.

If the person you are suing does not appear in court at the appointed time, and he has received proper notice of this trial, then the judge will grant judgment in your favor for the amount you prove that you are due. This is called a default judgment.

DECIDING YOUR CASE

After the judge has heard the facts from both sides, including the witnesses, and everyone has asked all the questions he wants to ask, the judge will then decide who wins the case and the amount, if any, the winner should receive. She may want more time to think about the case. If so, she will probably tell you when you can expect a decision. If the judge does not decide the case while you are there, remember that you will need to know your “case number”. This number will enable the clerk to find the result quickly when you call later to find out the judge’s decision.

If you or the person you are suing has chosen to have a jury trial, the jury, and not the judge, will usually decide whether you have won your case. If the jury decides you have won, it will also decide the amount of money you should receive from the person you are suing.

WHAT IF I AM UNHAPPY WITH THE DECISION?

After the judge signs the order, either side has 14 days to file a motion for new trial. The party requesting a motion for new trial must serve all the parties with a copy of the motion no later than the next business day. The judge does not have to grant a new trial.

Either party has the right to appeal to a higher court if they are unhappy with the decision of the judge or the jury. If you want to appeal, you must file a bond, make a cash deposit, or file a sworn statement of inability to pay with the Justice Court

within 21 days after the judgment was signed or the motion for new trial was denied. A plaintiff has to file a \$500 bond and a defendant has to file a bond equal to twice the amount of the judgment. If you file a sworn statement of your inability to pay the opposing party could challenge your statement and you will have to attend another hearing. Ask the clerk of the Justice Court for help if you needed. The clerk at the county court will notify the plaintiff if the defendant has appealed.

Either party can appeal and if this happens, be sure to appear at the second trial or the judge in the higher court may rule against you. It will be a trial “de novo.” This means you will have to retry the case all over again from beginning to end.

An appeal to higher court involves a much more formal proceeding than the one in Justice Court. In many cases, it will be necessary to have an attorney assist you with an appeal.

WHAT DO I DO AFTER I WIN?

If you have convinced the judge or jury that you are entitled to money from the person you sued, the judge will enter a judgment in your favor. This does not automatically mean you will be paid. Sometimes the hardest part of Justice Court is getting paid. In the some cases, the person you sued will simply pay you after you win. If he does not, you must take legal steps to try to enforce your judgment.

There are a number of legal devices you should consider after you have won in Justice Court. The first thing you should do is request the clerk to issue an “Abstract of Judgment.” This is the device that makes your judgment public record and gives

it legal effect. You may file this with the County Deed Records. It also provides you a “lien” on any real estate the person owns in the county where the lien is filed. For example, if they own any rental property, your abstract of judgment provides you a lien on that property and you could force its sale to satisfy your judgment. You cannot force the sale of someone’s homestead, however if the debtor sells his home while your abstract is on file, he must pay you out from the proceeds of the sale.

If the person does not own real estate, you should consider a “writ of garnishment.” If anyone owes any money to the Defendant, this device lets you collect that money to satisfy your judgment. A writ of garnishment is most commonly used to get money from the Defendant’s bank account. If you know which bank the Defendant uses, you can return to the clerk of the court and obtain a writ of garnishment to force the bank to turn over the money in the account to you.

You can also use a writ of garnishment to go after money owed to a person who is self-employed. For example, if you sue a contractor and he does not pay the judgment, you can use a writ of garnishment to obtain money owed to the contractor by other customers.

Texas law also allows you to obtain a “writ of execution.” This orders the constable to take the debtor’s personal property and sell it to pay your judgment. In Texas, however, much of what the average person owns is exempt. Exempt property includes most personal property, up to \$30,000 in value for a single person and \$60,000 for a married couple. If you sued a business, however, its property may not be exempt.

Finally, you could obtain a “turn-over order.” This permits the judge to order the person to turn over nonexempt property to you to satisfy the judgment. For example, if you know the person you sued is receiving a large sum of money from a construction job he is just completing, you can use a turn-over order to have the court order him to pay some of that money to you.

Texas law is very favorable to debtors and it can be hard to collect, even after you win. There are a number of legal ways to try and force even the most stubborn debtor to pay up. You should consider discussing your post-judgment remedies with a lawyer. In Texas, a judgment lien continues for 10 years following the date of recording and indexing the abstract, except if the judgment becomes dormant the lien ceases. Therefore, if you do not collect your money right away, be sure to take the proper steps to keep your judgment alive.

IS JUSTICE COURT RIGHT FOR YOU?

1. Have you tried to settle the dispute by contacting the other party? A lawsuit should be the last resort.
2. Will you represent yourself or seek the assistance of an attorney? This is a “People’s Court.”

Individuals and legal entities can represent themselves in Justice Court without the assistance of an attorney.

3. Do your damages exceed \$10,000? You can only recover up to \$10,000, plus court costs, in damages in Justice Court.

4. Do you need the court to enforce an action?
The Justice Court can only award money. It cannot force others to anything.
5. Where will you file? Generally, you must file your case in the county where the defendant resides or the county in which the defendant contracted to perform services.
6. Have you waited too long? There are time limits on your ability to file a lawsuit.

IMPORTANT DATES TO REMEMBER

1. Date the Incident occurred _____
2. Your cause number _____
3. Date the Defendant's Answer is due _____
4. Date, time, and location of your hearing _____
5. Deadline to file an appeal _____

WEB RESOURCES

Texas Young Lawyers Association

www.tyla.org

State Bar of Texas

www.texasbar.com

Secretary of State

www.sos.state.tx.us

State Comptroller

www.window.state.tx.us

Texas Courts Online

www.courts.state.tx.us

APPENDIX

[Sample]

Justice Court Notice Letter

Send your letter:

VIA CERTIFIED MAIL

RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED

[DATE]

Mr. Sam Smith

Smith Contracting Co.

4141 First Street

Anycity, Texas 77777

Dear Mr. Smith:

On January 20 of this year, I hired you to build a deck in my backyard. The agreement we both signed states that it will be completed “on or about February 15.” I paid you a deposit of \$700.00 and agreed to pay an additional \$1,400.00 upon completion.

Immediately after taking my money, you tore up the old deck and left a mess in my backyard. I have called you on numerous occasions to find out when you will finish the work and you have either made excuses or failed to return my calls. It has now been more than three months and you have not returned to complete the work.

This letter is to inform you that I expect you to immediately contact me and tell me when you intend on completing the project. If I do not hear

from you soon, and if the work is not promptly finished, I will have no alternative but to file a claim in Justice Court to recover what I have paid you. I also intend to ask for an additional amount to compensate me for the fact that I have been unable to use my backyard for nearly four months.

I feel I have been most patient in this matter and hope that it can be resolved without the additional time and expense of a lawsuit. Please call me at 555.555.5555 to arrange for the completion of the project.

Sincerely,

Susan Peters

896 Best Ave. Somewhere, Texas 77777

APPENDIX

Justice Court Civil Case information sheet as required by Tex. R. Civ. P. 502.

JUSTICE COURT CIVIL CASE

CAUSE NUMBER (FOR CLERK USE ONLY): _____

STYLED _____

(e.g., John Smith v. All American Insurance Co; In re Mary Smith)

A civil case information sheet must be completed and submitted when an affidavit is filed. The sheet must be the best available at the time of filing. This sheet, required by Rule of Civil Procedure 502, is for statistical purposes only. It neither replaces nor supplements the filings of a civil case. This sheet does not constitute a discovery request, response, or supplementation.

1. Contact information for person completing case information sheet:

Name:

Telephone:

Address:

Fax:

City/State/Zip:

State Bar No:

Email:

Signature:

3. Indicate case type, or identify the most important issue:

☐ **Debt Claim:** A debt claim case is a lawsuit brought to recover a debt by an assignee of a claim, a debt collector or collection agency, a financial institution, or a person or entity primarily engaged in the business of lending money at interest. The claim can be for no more than \$10,000, excluding statutory interest and court costs but including attorney fees, if any.

☐ **Repair and Remedy:** A repair and remedy case is a lawsuit filed by a residential tenant under Chapter 92, Subchapter B of the Texas Property Code to enforce the landlord's duty to repair or remedy a condition materially affecting the physical health or safety of an ordinary tenant. The relief sought can be for no more than \$10,000, excluding statutory interest and court costs but including attorney fees, if any.

CASE INFORMATION SHEET (4/13)

by Ann Jones; In the Matter of the Estate of George Jackson)

original petition is filed to initiate a new suit. The information should be the
il Procedure 502, is intended to collect information that will be used for
or service of pleading or other documents as required by law or rule. The
n, and it is not admissible at trial.

Information	2. Names of parties in case:
	Plaintiff(s): _____ _____ Defendant(s): _____ _____ _____ [Attach additional page as necessary to list all parties]
in the case (select only 1):	
☐ Eviction: An eviction case is a lawsuit brought to recover possession of real property, often by a landlord against a tenant. A claim for rent may be joined with an eviction case if the amount of rent due and unpaid is not more than \$10,000, excluding statutory interest and court costs but including attorney fees, if any.	
☐ Small Claims: A small claims case is a lawsuit brought for the recovery of money damages, civil penalties, personal property, or other relief allowed by law. The claim can be for no more than \$10,000, excluding statutory interest and court costs but including attorney fees, if any.	

NOTES

For Additional Copies Please Contact:

Public Information Department

State Bar of Texas

P.O. Box 12487

Austin, Texas 78711-2487

(800) 204-2222, Ext. 1800

www.texasbar.com