

ALL LEGAL ENTITIES MUST FILE THROUGH AN ATTORNEY

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FILING AN ANSWER ON A CIVIL COMPLAINT

1. You have received a packet that contains the following documents:
 - * Flathead County Justice Court Civil Case Filing and Trial Procedure
 - * Answer Form
2. Please follow the directions for completing your Answer form in order to properly file your Answer.
3. **ANSWER (Original + copy for yourself + copy for Plaintiff)**
 1. The Plaintiff is the person or business suing you. Print or type the plaintiffs name or business name as it appears on the Complaint.
 2. You are the Defendant. Please print or type your name as it appears on the Complaint.
 3. Case No. is the number indicated on the Complaint. Please write the number that appears on the Complaint.
 4. Print or type your name as it appears in the Complaint.
 5. Print or type your answer to the Complaint. Your answer must contain a denial of any or all of the material facts stated in the complaint that you believe to be untrue and also a statement, in plain or direct manner, of any other facts that are in your defense.
 6. Sign your name
 7. Print or type your complete mailing address and phone number
 8. Print or type your name
 9. Indicate how you served a copy of the Answer to the Plaintiff (ie: U.S. Mail or Delivered in Person to the Plaintiff)
 10. Print or type the day you served the Answer to the Plaintiff. The law requires that you serve the Plaintiff with your Answer the same day you filed your Answer with the Court.
 11. Sign your name.
 12. **Your Answer must be filed no later than 20 days after the day you were served with the Complaint. You must pay a \$30.00 filing fee to the Court. You must file the original Answer, keep a copy for yourself, and mail a copy to the Plaintiff or Plaintiff(s) attorney on the same day you filed your Answer.**

**FLATHEAD COUNTY JUSTICES' COURT
CIVIL CASE FILING AND TRIAL PROCEDURE**

Carefully read this entire pamphlet before preparing your Complaint for filing, or before preparing your Answer if you have been sued. It contains important information which may determine the outcome of your case.

This guide is intended to assist all parties in the preparation, filing, answering and presentation of a lawsuit in court. It is not intended to provide legal advice. **THE JUDGES AND CLERKS OF COURT CANNOT GIVE EITHER SIDE LEGAL ADVICE!** The clerk can provide you with procedural information and certain forms. However, court staff cannot advise how the law may apply to your case, or tell you how to prepare forms based upon the circumstances of your case. If you have legal questions about your case you should seek the advice of an attorney or other qualified person. The following outlines the suggested procedure to be followed in preparing a case for filing, filing the Complaint, serving the Complaint, filing an Answer or a Counterclaim, preparing for trial, and presenting your case or defense at trial.

Filing A Complaint- You may file a lawsuit by preparing a written Complaint. The value of the damages or other relief you are seeking cannot exceed \$12,000.00. The person filing the lawsuit is the *plaintiff* and the person responding to the lawsuit is the *defendant*. You must include in your lawsuit anyone who may owe you the money or property you are seeking to recover. If your lawsuit involves, in any way, the legal title or ownership to real estate you must file your lawsuit in the District Court. Your Complaint must state the facts upon which your claim is based. Those facts must be stated with enough detail so that the other side is made aware of the nature and legal basis for the claim. If needed the clerk will assist in the preparation of the Complaint based on the information you provide. **IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE THE NECESSARY INFORMATION OR YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PRESENT IT AT THE TRIAL.** The filing fee for filing a Complaint is \$40.00 and must be paid at the time of filing. Once the case is filed you will be given the Complaint so that you can have it served on the defendant(s). You must have the Sheriff, a process server, or some other adult serve the papers and provide proof of service when they return the original Complaint to the Court. Each person sued must be personally served a copy of the Complaint! You cannot leave the papers with someone else or posted at their home. You must pay the cost of service. In the event you win the amount of the filing fee and cost of service will be included in the Judgment.

Filing An Answer- Once the defendant has been served a copy of the Complaint he or she has **twenty (20) days to file a written Answer** with the Court. The filing fee is \$30.00. The Answer must admit or deny the allegations in the Complaint and must set forth detailed facts upon which any denial is based. In the event you agree you owe the debt state that in the Answer. When the Answer is filed you must provide the clerk with a Certificate of Service indicating the Answer was served on the plaintiff. An Answer can be personally served or mailed to the address given to the clerk by the plaintiff.

Filing A Counterclaim- If you believe the plaintiff owes you money then you must file a Counterclaim in addition to your Answer. Your Counterclaim must involve the same facts or circumstances as those in the plaintiff's case against you. A Counterclaim is filed by appearing at the Justice Court and submitting a written statement containing the Counterclaim. The Counterclaim must be served on the plaintiff-either by mail or in person. If a Counterclaim is filed and served the plaintiff must respond to the claim by filing with the court a **Reply To Counterclaim within twenty (20) days** after the day it was served. The Reply must also be sent to the plaintiff and a Certificate of Service must be filed at the time the Reply is filed.

Other Pleadings- The Justices' Court is a court of limited jurisdiction with its own procedural rules. No other pleadings can be filed in the Justices' Court without receiving an order from the court in advance.

Discovery: Under the American civil justice system, and in Montana, neither party is allowed to surprise or "ambush" the other side at trial. Justice can only be done if everyone knows what the relevant evidence is and that evidence is presented

to the judge or jury so that the controlling law can be applied to that evidence. In the Justices' court you cannot engage in "formal" discovery without authorization from the judge. You can request from the other side copies of the evidence they are relying on as well as the names and contact information for any witnesses that are going to testify. If the other side will not provide you with the information you have requested you file with the court a written request to be allowed to conduct formal discovery so that you receive requested information prior to the trial and can better prepare.

Mediation- Flathead County Justice Court may require that your case be submitted to mediation prior to being scheduled for trial. When the defendant files an Answer and/or Counterclaim the file will be reviewed to determine whether mediation would be beneficial. Mediation is an informal process in which the parties meet with a mediator in an effort to resolve the dispute without the need to go through a trial. Mediation is a service provided by the court and there is no fee. However, if mediation is ordered by the judge it is mandatory. If your case is scheduled for mediation you will receive an Order to attend mediation at the Justice Center which is located at 920 South Main Street in Kalispell. You will meet with a mediator who will facilitate discussion in order to see if the dispute can be resolved without submitting it to a judge or jury. If mediation is not successful the case will be scheduled for trial. If the case is complicated the judge may order a pretrial conference before the date of the trial.

The Trial: You must be prepared at the time of trial to present all of your case, or Counterclaim, and any defense to a case filed against you. This means you must have all your witnesses present and ready to testify. You must also have two complete sets of copies of any documents or exhibits you intend to show to the Judge. Prior to start of the trial give one full set to the other party so they are familiar with them prior to trial. It is helpful to have the documents numbered. At the beginning of the trial the Plaintiff will present his or her case. You will be expected to present all of your evidence, including documents. **The Judge cannot hear or consider evidence which is not reliable and relevant to the subject of the case. You cannot rely on written statements or sworn affidavits to support your case. If you want the Judge to consider the testimony of someone other than yourself that person must be in the courtroom to testify.** Once the plaintiff's case has been presented the defendant will have an opportunity to present evidence in support of the Answer, as well as any Counterclaim. The plaintiff will then be given an opportunity to respond to this evidence before the Judge decides the case. **Remember it is your case and you are expected to be prepared.**

Evidence: Your case will be decided based upon the relevant evidence offered to the judge at the time of trial. The judge will not call people for you, or set another court date so that you can bring someone to court you should have brought to the trial. Only **relevant evidence** will be considered. Relevant evidence is documents or testimony that proves, or disproves, a fact that is legally important to the issues in the case. You must have all of your evidence with you at the time of the trial- this includes all of you witnesses. If you need a Subpoena to ensure the appearance of a witness let the clerk know well in advance of the trial date. You cannot use **hearsay evidence** to prove your case, or establish a defense. Hearsay evidence is generally evidence that has been generated out of the court room. For example, someone's statement made in the past and now offered in court as the truth. Unless the statement is the other party's it will not be allowed. While there are exceptions to this general rule, you should plan on having live testimony for every fact you intend to establish. Documents are statements of the person who prepared the document. If you did not prepare the document yourself you need to have the person who did in court to testify about their document. The records of a business can be introduced into evidence by someone from the business who maintains those records.

Appeals: Either party may appeal a Justices' Court decision to the District Court by filing a written Notice of Appeal with the Justice Court Clerk. The fee is \$20.00 which must be paid at the time the Notice of Appeal is filed. The Notice must also be served on the other party. In most cases a bond must also be filed to complete the appeal process. The clerk can provide you with a copy of the rules that relate to appeals. There is a \$20.00 judgment fee, to be paid by the prevailing party; excluding default judgments.

Judgments: A \$20.00 judgment fee is to be paid by prevailing party, excluding default judgments. A judgment issued by the Justices' Court is valid for ten (10) years and bears simple interest at the rate of ten percent (10%) per year. The judgment may be enforced anywhere in the State of Montana. Judgments may also be transcribed to the District Court at which time they have the same effect as a District Court judgment.

Collection of Judgments: The fact that you have obtained a Judgment does not guarantee that you will be paid. The Court cannot make the losing party pay the prevailing party. If the Judgment is not voluntarily paid by the losing party it can be enforced through the collection process. This includes the garnishment of wages and the seizure of personal property for sale. All collections must be done by a levy officer licensed by the State of Montana. A list of levy officers may be obtained from the Clerk. If you know where the name of the losing person's employer, or the name of their bank, you may request a Writ of Execution which will allow the levy officer to levy on the wages or bank account.

Voluntary Payment of Judgments: Often the parties in a lawsuit reach an agreement to pay the judgment amount, or some other sum, in voluntary payments according to a set schedule. This saves both sides money! Under some circumstances it may be agreed that the judgment is not docketed so that it does not appear on credit reports. The clerk can provide you with a form which will allow you to document the agreement you have reached with the other side. Make sure you file the original agreement with the court so that it is a part of the court record.

LEGAL RESOURCES

Self Help Law Center
Third Floor of Justice Center

- provides basic forms and procedural guidance
- provides access to on-line research and form preparation

Montana Law Help
www.MontanaLawHelp.org

- a project of the Montana Legal Services Association providing extensive on-line access to legal information and legal forms for use in Montana Courts

Montana State Law Library
1-800-710-9827
www.courts.mt.gov/library

- extensive collection of on-line legal resources including Montana Code Annotated, Administrative Rules, Court Rules
- On-line access to decisions of the Montana Supreme Court

Montana Legal Services Association
1-800-666-6124, www.mtlsa.org

- provides legal services to qualified low income people
- coordinates volunteer lawyer program with local bar

State Bar of Montana
Lawyer Referral Service
1-406-449-6577
www.montanabar.org

- provides lawyer referral service based on case type
- provides information and on-line links to other legal resources including self-help material

Montana Fair Housing
1-800-929-2611
www.montanafairhousing.org

- provides anti-discrimination housing information to owners and renters
- provides information on Montana law and links to other resources

**IN THE JUSTICE COURT
FLATHEAD COUNTY, MONTANA**

_____)	
_____)	Docket No. _____
Plaintiff(s))	
)	
v.)	ANSWER
)	
_____)	
_____)	
Defendant(s))	

Comes now the Defendant(s) _____, and for Answer to the Plaintiff's Complaint on file denies Plaintiff's allegations for the following reason:

WHEREFORE, having fully answered Plaintiff's Complaint on file, Defendant prays that the Complaint be dismissed and that the Defendant's costs be assessed against the Plaintiff.

Date: _____

Defendant's Signature

Defendant's Address and phone #

I _____, the Defendant certifies that I have served a copy of this Answer to the Plaintiff or the Plaintiff's Attorney by the following means:

US Mail ___ Address _____

Hand Delivered _____ Address _____

On the ___ day of _____, _____.

Defendant's Signature: _____