

SS.7.C.3.11

Diagram the levels, functions, and powers of the courts at the state and federal levels.

Also Assesses

SS.7.C.2.6 - Simulate the trial process and the role of juries in the administration of justice.

SS.7.C.3.11 Benchmark Clarification 3: Students will compare appellate and trial processes.

The trial and appellate processes are very different. Below is a brief review of these two types of court proceedings.

Process of a Criminal Trial

When the police make an arrest, suspects are charged with a crime and informed of their rights (as a result of the 1966 Supreme Court case ***Miranda vs. Arizona***, see Benchmark 3.12). Suspects then go to court to hear the charges against them and to listen to the judge's decision on what will happen next. Suspects are asked to enter a plea. They can plead guilty, not guilty, or no contest (which means that the suspect does not disagree with the charge).

During a **criminal** trial, there are four general steps:

1. Step 1: Both the **prosecution** and the **defense** give their opening statements to tell the judge and the jury their side of the case. The prosecution always represents the government and the victim of the crime in a **criminal case**. The defense always represents the person charged with the crime.
2. Step 2: Each side calls witnesses to give testimony (answers given under oath) in the case. These witnesses are also **cross-examined** by the other side.
3. Step 3: Once all of the witnesses have been questioned, the prosecution and defense give their closing statements and ask the jury to rule in their favor.
4. Step 4: The **jury** members leave the courtroom to deliberate (discuss the evidence in the case). When they reach a unanimous decision (which means that everyone on the jury agrees), they announce their verdict (their decision on the case).

Process of a Civil Trial

Civil cases involve disputes between people or groups of people where no criminal laws have been broken. When a civil case goes to court, it is called a lawsuit, which is a legal action in which a person or group sues to collect damages (an award of money) for some harm that is done. The **plaintiff** in a civil trial is the individual or group that files the lawsuit, and the **defendant** is the individual or group that is being sued.

During a civil trial (lawsuit), there are four main steps:

1. Cases begin when a complaint is filed (a formal statement naming the people involved and describing the reason for the lawsuit).
2. Next, the court sends a summons (a document that tells defendants there is a lawsuit against them and orders them to appear in court). The defendant responds to the suit in a pleading that explains their side of the case.
3. Next is the discovery process. Discovery means that lawyers for the plaintiff and defendant check the facts and gather the evidence for the case.

4. Finally, the lawsuit is heard before a **judge** or jury. If there is a jury, it will make a decision based on the evidence and facts of the case. When the case is heard only by a judge, the judge's ruling is called a **summary judgment**.

The Appellate Process

Appeals courts have **appellate jurisdiction**, which means that they can review the rulings and decisions from lower courts if the people or groups involved believe the court acted unfairly. Appeals can occur if (1) the judge applied the law incorrectly, (2) the judge used the wrong procedures, (3) new evidence turns up, or (4) someone's rights were violated.

Depending on the type of case, the evidence, and the arguments from both sides, appeals courts decide which cases they will hear. Appeals courts do not hold trials. Instead they hear oral arguments made by two sides – the petitioner (the person who disagrees with the previous ruling) and the respondent (the person who agrees with the previous ruling). Then the judges may do one of three things: (1) uphold (agree with) the original decision, (2) reverse the decision (find in favor of the petitioner), or (3) return the case to the lower court.

Panels of three or more appellate judges review the case being appealed and make a decision by a majority vote. The appeals court decision is final unless it is appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. *Appeals court judges do not decide on guilt or innocence.* They decide if the petitioner's rights have been protected and if the petitioner has gotten a fair trial.

appellate jurisdiction - the power to hear appeals of cases that have been tried in lower courts

civil case - a case involving the rights of citizens

criminal case - a case involving someone who is accused of committing an illegal activity

cross-examination - the follow-up questioning of a witness by the side that did not call the witness to the stand

defendant - the person who answers the legal action of a plaintiff

defense - the person who answers the legal action of a prosecutor

judge - a public official who decides questions brought before a court

jury - a group of citizens sworn to give a true verdict according to the evidence presented in a court of law

Miranda v. Arizona - U.S. Supreme Court cases that upheld the Fifth Amendment protection from self-incrimination

plaintiff - the person who brings legal action against another person in a civil trial

prosecution - the person who brings legal action against another person in a criminal trial

summary judgment - a judgment decided by a trial court without the case going to trial; a summary judgment is an attempt to stop a case from going to trial