



# Before You File

## A California Legal Self-Help Checklist

Use this checklist before you file anything with a California court. Work top to bottom — each step prevents a common, costly mistake.

- Identify your matter and the right forms**  
Know exactly what you're filing (e.g., divorce, eviction answer, small claims). California uses specific Judicial Council forms for each — download them free at [courts.ca.gov](https://courts.ca.gov).
- Confirm the correct court and county**  
File in the right county (usually where the person lives or where the matter happened). Use our free California Court Directory to find addresses and contacts.
- Calendar every deadline**  
Response windows are short and unforgiving — 5 days for an eviction answer, 30 days for most civil complaints. Missing one can mean losing by default.
- Gather your documents and evidence**  
Collect contracts, notices, photos, messages, receipts, and anything that supports your position. Organize copies before you start.
- Check filing fees and fee waivers**  
Court filing fees are separate from any prep cost. If you can't afford them, file a fee waiver (FW-001) — many people qualify.
- Complete every form accurately**  
No blanks, consistent names and dates, correct case caption. Small errors get packets rejected and cost you weeks.
- Serve the other party correctly**  
Most filings must be formally served by a non-party, then proven with a proof of service. You usually cannot serve the papers yourself.
- Keep copies and track dates**  
Always keep stamped copies of everything you file, and note your hearing and follow-up dates.
- Know where to get help**  
For legal advice, talk to a licensed attorney. For getting the paperwork prepared correctly and affordably, that's what we do.

**Don't want to do it yourself?** Curbside Legal prepares your court-ready documents — every form, organized and filing-ready, 40-70% below attorney rates. Visit [curbsidelegal.com](https://curbsidelegal.com) or call **213-200-6066**. Se habla español.