THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Courtroom Words Families Hear Most

Legal & Policy Literacy · Know the Language

A short glossary of hearing, sentencing, and supervision terms in plain language.

IN THIS GUIDE

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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

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THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

Sitting in a courtroom, or reading a court document, families are handed a wall of words that all sound important and mostly go unexplained: petitioner, respondent, docket, continuance, hearing, order. Nobody pauses to define them, because everyone else in the room already knows them.

Not knowing these words does not just feel uncomfortable — it can cost families real time and real outcomes. Missing a hearing because you did not understand that a "continuance" moved the date, or not realizing you were the "respondent" and needed to file a response, are common, avoidable problems.

This lesson defines the courtroom vocabulary families run into most often, in family court, probate court, and criminal court contexts. It is general education about what these words usually mean — it is not advice about your specific case, and court staff, self-help centers, and attorneys remain the accurate source for what a document or hearing means for you.

THE PEOPLE IN THE CASE

The petitioner (or plaintiff, in some courts) is the person who started the case by filing it. The respondent (or defendant) is the person the case is filed against or who is being asked to respond. In a criminal case, the state or government is generally the party bringing the case, and the person charged is the defendant.

Counsel simply means a lawyer. "Pro se" or "self-represented" describes a person handling their own case without a lawyer, which is common in family and probate court and is generally allowed, though it comes with real challenges given how technical the rules can be.

A guardian ad litem is a person, often a lawyer or trained volunteer, appointed by the court specifically to represent a child's interests in a case — this is a different role from an attorney representing a parent or caregiver, and a different role from a guardian of the child in the everyday sense.

THE PAPERWORK AND THE PROCESS

A petition is the document that starts a case, laying out what the person filing is asking the court to do. A motion is a request made to the court during an ongoing case, asking for a specific action — to change a hearing date, to compel a document, to modify an order.

A docket is essentially the court's schedule or case list; "the case is on the docket" means it has an assigned date, and a docket number is the identifying number for a specific case, useful to have on hand for every call you make about it.

An order is the court's written decision — the thing that actually has legal effect. A judgment is a court's final decision resolving a case. Until something is in a signed order, a verbal statement made in a hearing, even by a judge, is generally not yet the enforceable outcome — ask when the written order will be available and get a copy.

+ HEARINGS AND HOW THEY MOVE

A hearing is a scheduled court session where a judge hears from the parties and often makes a decision. A trial is a more extensive hearing, usually reserved for cases that could not be resolved earlier, where evidence and testimony are presented in full.

A continuance is a postponement of a scheduled hearing to a later date, requested by a party or ordered by the judge. If your hearing is continued, the case is not over and no decision has been made — you will need to find out and note the new date, since it is not automatic that you will be reminded.

A default (or default judgment) can happen when a party who was properly notified does not show up or does not respond by a deadline; the court may then decide the case without that person's input. This is one of the most consequential courtroom words for families to know, because missing a hearing or a filing deadline can end a case against you without your side ever being heard.

+ WORDS THAT SHOW UP SPECIFICALLY IN FAMILY AND CRIMINAL MATTERS

In family and probate matters, terms like best interest of the child, temporary order, and final order come up often. A temporary order is meant to hold things in place — who has the child, what contact looks like — while a case is pending, and is generally revisited when a final order is issued.

In criminal matters, families hear arraignment (the first hearing where charges are formally presented), plea (how the defendant responds to charges), sentencing (the hearing where a punishment is decided), and disposition (the case's outcome). These words describe stages of a criminal case, and each stage is a point where family circumstances — like who is caring for a child — can sometimes, though not always, be relevant to what the court considers.

Because criminal, family, and probate courts each have their own vocabulary layered on top of these general terms, the fastest way to understand a specific document is to ask the clerk's office or a self-help center to define the exact words used in your paperwork, in order.

+ ONE MISSED WORD, ONE MISSED HEARING

A grandmother received a court notice listing her as the respondent in a guardianship matter a relative had filed, contesting her informal care of her grandson. She read "respondent" as meaning she was somehow accused of wrongdoing and, frightened, avoided calling anyone about it.

She missed the deadline to file a written response. Because she had been properly notified and had not responded, the court proceeded without her input at the next hearing — closer to a default outcome than the contested hearing she could have had.

When she later spoke with a legal aid attorney, she learned that "respondent" simply meant the case had been filed against her position, not that she had done anything wrong, and that a timely written response was all that had been needed to be heard. She was able to ask the court to reopen the matter, but it cost her weeks and legal fees that a five-minute definition could have avoided.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Asking a court clerk to define terms on your own paperwork

“I received this document and I want to make sure I understand it correctly. Could you tell me what [specific word] means in this context, and what, if anything, I'm required to do by when?”

Asking what happens if you cannot attend a scheduled hearing

“I have a hearing scheduled on [date] and I'm concerned I may not be able to attend. What is the process for requesting a continuance, and what happens to the case if I don't appear and haven't asked for one?”

Asking for a decision in writing

Use after a hearing where a verbal decision was given.

“The judge mentioned a decision today — can you tell me when the written order will be available, and how I can get a copy of it?”

Asking a self-help center to walk through your document line by line

“I have a court document I don't fully understand. Would someone be able to go through it with me and explain what each part means and what, if anything, I need to do?”

+ GET COMFORTABLE WITH THE COURTROOM VOCABULARY

- [ ] Identify whether you are the petitioner, respondent, defendant, or another named party in any active case.
- [ ] Write down your case's docket number and keep it with every related document.
- [ ] Ask the clerk's office to define any word in your paperwork you don't fully understand.
- [ ] Confirm every hearing date directly, and ask what happens if you cannot attend.

- [ ] Ask when a verbal decision will be issued as a written order, and get a copy.
- [ ] Never assume a continuance means the case is finished.
- [ ] Ask what a default means for your specific case type before a deadline passes.
- [ ] Keep a running one-page glossary of terms specific to your case as you learn them.

+ REFLECT AND WRITE

Am I certain which role I hold in my case — petitioner, respondent, or another party?

Is there a word on a document I currently have that I have never actually had defined for me?

Have I ever assumed a court date was cancelled or resolved without confirming it directly?

Who is the one person — clerk, self-help center, attorney — I can ask to walk through my paperwork line by line?

+ YOUR NEXT STEP

> Write down the three terms you have heard most and look each one up.

+ WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Written by My Fairy GodParents — reviewed August 2026.
Official reference: U.S. Courts — linked for the official rules and forms, which MFGP does not set.
https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/court-role-and-structure
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