

U.S. Court Systems

The United States court system is actually many court systems: a federal system and 50 state systems. Each has its own structures and procedures. All are multi-tiered. Legal cases begin in a lower court and sometimes work their way up to a higher court. Some cases begin in a state court system eventually end up in the federal court system.

State courts

Most legal problems are resolved in state trial courts, the courts at the lowest tier in a state's court system.

Most states have three levels of trial courts: trial courts with *limited jurisdiction*, *specific jurisdiction*, and trial courts with *general jurisdiction*. Jurisdiction simply refers to the types of cases a court can hear.

-For example, trial courts of *limited jurisdiction* - hear some kinds of civil cases, juvenile cases, minor criminal cases and traffic violations. Most legal problems are resolved in this kind of trial court.

-Many states also have *specialized trial courts* that hear cases related to a very specific area of the law. These courts can include probate courts, family law courts, juvenile courts, and small claims courts.

-Courts of *general jurisdiction* include circuit courts, superior courts, district courts, or courts of common pleas, depending on your state. They hear lawsuits that involve greater amounts of money or more serious types of crimes than the cases heard in trial courts of limited jurisdiction.

Next tier up in the typical state court system are the *appellate courts*. These courts don't hold trials but instead review the decisions and operations of the trial courts in their systems and either uphold or reverse their decisions or modify the amount of a financial reward. Sometimes appellate courts order retrials.

Federal courts

Most of the *federal court system* is divided into districts and circuits. There is at least one federal district in every state, but populous states can have several districts. Texas has northern, western, southern and eastern districts.

Generally, federal lawsuits start out at the district level in a federal court. Most are civil, not criminal, cases involving legal problems that are under the jurisdiction of the federal government, not state government. If a lawsuit deals with certain types of federal law, it is heard in a special federal court.

At the very top of the federal court system is the U.S. Supreme Court. Its legal explanations are *The Final Word* on the law in this country. The nine judges who sit on the Supreme Court are nominated by the President and approved by the U.S. Senate. They can remain on the court until their death or until they resign.

The U.S. Supreme Court hears only a very small number of cases. To get to that level, a case must usually work its way up through the lower tiers of a state court system and the federal system.

The Constitution only allows certain kinds of cases that can be heard in the federal courts. In general, these courts are limited to cases that involve the following:

- Problems of Constitutional law
- Certain problems between residents of different states
- Problems between U.S. citizens and foreigners
- Problems that involve both federal and state law

So that everyone has the same chances to win in a lawsuit, both sides are required to play by the same rules. This requirement helps to ensure the same conditions for both sides. So the both sides can be treated fairly. Attorneys learn these rules in law school.