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# Plain-Language Legal Glossary

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65+ Legal Terms Explained in Plain English — No Law Degree Required

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# Plain-Language Legal Glossary

Legal language was not designed to be understood by the people it most affects. This glossary translates the most common legal terms you'll encounter in criminal, civil, family, and domestic violence proceedings into plain, everyday English.

## A

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### **Affidavit**

A written statement made under oath. When you sign an affidavit, you are swearing that what you've written is true. Lying in an affidavit is perjury — a crime.

### **Arraignment**

Your first court appearance after being charged with a crime. You hear the formal charges against you and enter a plea. Most attorneys advise pleading "not guilty" at arraignment regardless of the facts, to preserve your options.

## B

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### **Bail / Bond**

Money paid to the court as a guarantee that you'll return for future court dates. If you appear at all hearings, the money is returned at the end of the case. A bail bondsman can post bail for you for a non-refundable fee (usually 10%).

### **Bench Trial**

A trial decided by a judge alone, without a jury. The defendant can choose this in most cases.

### **Beyond a Reasonable Doubt**

The standard of proof in criminal cases. The jury must be firmly convinced of guilt — not just think it's probable. This is the highest standard of proof in the legal system.

### **Brief**

A written legal argument submitted to the court explaining a party's position and the law that supports it.

## **Burden of Proof**

The obligation to prove your claims. In criminal cases, the prosecution bears the burden — the defendant doesn't have to prove innocence.

## **C**

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### **Cause of Action**

The legal basis for a lawsuit. "Negligence," "breach of contract," and "assault" are examples of causes of action.

### **Continuance**

A postponement of a court hearing to a later date. Either party can request one; the judge decides whether to grant it.

### **Contempt of Court**

Behavior that disrespects or disobeys the court or a court order. Can result in fines or jail time. Violating a protection order is contempt.

### **Conviction**

A formal finding of guilt — either by a jury verdict or a guilty plea.

### **Counterclaim**

When the defendant in a civil case files their own claim against the plaintiff.

### **Custody (Legal vs. Physical)**

Legal custody is the right to make major decisions for a child (school, medical, religion). Physical custody is where the child lives. Parents can share both, or one parent can have sole custody of either or both.

## **D**

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### **Default Judgment**

When one party fails to respond or appear, the court may rule in favor of the other party automatically.

### **Defendant**

In criminal court: the person charged with a crime. In civil court: the person being sued.

### **Deposition**

Sworn testimony given outside of court, usually in an attorney's office, recorded by a court reporter. Used during discovery to gather information before trial.

### **Discovery**

The pre-trial process where both sides share evidence and information with each other. Prevents surprises at trial and allows both sides to prepare.

### **Dismissal**

When a case is thrown out by the court. "With prejudice" means it can't be re-filed. "Without prejudice" means it can be re-filed.

### **Disposition**

The final outcome of a case — conviction, acquittal, dismissal, or plea.

### **Docket**

The court's official schedule of cases. Your case number and hearing dates are on the docket.

### **Due Process**

Your constitutional right to fair treatment in legal proceedings — including notice of charges, the right to be heard, and the right to an attorney.

## **E – F**

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### **Evidence**

Anything presented in court to prove or disprove a fact — documents, photos, physical objects, testimony, recordings.

### **Exhibit**

A specific piece of evidence formally introduced at trial and given a label (Exhibit A, Exhibit 1, etc.).

### **Felony**

A serious crime punishable by more than one year in prison. In Washington, felonies are Class A (most serious, up to life), Class B (up to 10 years), or Class C (up to 5 years).

## G – H

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### **Guardian ad Litem (GAL)**

A person appointed by the court to represent a child's best interests in family court proceedings. They investigate and make recommendations to the judge.

### **Habeas Corpus**

Latin for "you have the body." A legal action challenging unlawful imprisonment. If you're being held illegally, a habeas petition asks the court to order your release.

### **Hearsay**

An out-of-court statement offered to prove the truth of what it says. Generally not admissible as evidence, though there are many exceptions.

## I – J

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### **Indictment**

A formal criminal charge issued by a grand jury. Used in federal cases and some state cases for serious felonies.

### **Injunction**

A court order requiring someone to do something or stop doing something. Protective orders are a type of injunction.

### **Jurisdiction**

The authority of a court to hear a particular case. Depends on geography (where the crime occurred) and subject matter (what type of case it is).

### **Jury Instructions**

The legal rules the judge gives the jury before deliberations. They explain exactly what the prosecution must prove for each charge.

## L – M

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### Lesser Included Offense

A less serious crime that is automatically part of a more serious charge. For example, reckless endangerment is a lesser included offense of assault.

### Mediation

A process where a neutral third party helps two parties reach a voluntary agreement. Common in family court and civil cases. Less expensive and adversarial than trial.

### Miranda Rights

Rights police must inform you of before custodial interrogation: the right to remain silent, that anything you say can be used against you, the right to an attorney, and the right to a court-appointed attorney if you can't afford one.

### Misdemeanor

A less serious crime than a felony. In Washington: gross misdemeanor (up to 364 days in jail) and simple misdemeanor (up to 90 days).

### Motion

A formal request asking the court to do something — suppress evidence, dismiss charges, continue a hearing, etc.

## N – O

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### No-Contact Order

A court order prohibiting one person from contacting another. Commonly issued in criminal DV cases as a condition of release or sentence. Violating it is a crime.

### Objection

A formal protest by an attorney that a question or piece of evidence is improper. The judge rules "sustained" (objection granted) or "overruled" (objection denied).

### Order to Show Cause

A court order requiring a party to appear and explain why they should not be held in contempt or why a certain action should not be taken.

## P

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### Parole

Early release from prison under supervision. The parolee must follow conditions (regular check-ins, no new crimes) or risk being returned to prison.

### Petition

A formal written request to the court asking for a specific action — like a protective order or custody modification.

### Plaintiff

The person who files a civil lawsuit — the person suing.

### Plea

A defendant's formal response to criminal charges: guilty, not guilty, or no contest (nolo contendere — you don't admit guilt but accept the punishment).

### Plea Bargain

An agreement between the prosecutor and defendant to resolve a case without trial. Usually involves a guilty plea to lesser charges or for a reduced sentence. About 90% of criminal cases end in plea bargains.

### Preliminary Hearing

A hearing in felony cases where a judge determines whether there is probable cause to proceed to trial. Lower standard than trial.

### Probable Cause

A reasonable basis to believe a crime has been committed or that a person committed it. Required for arrests, searches, and warrants. Lower standard than "beyond a reasonable doubt."

### Probation

A sentence served in the community under supervision instead of (or after) jail time. Conditions typically include regular check-ins, drug testing, and no new crimes.

### Pro Se

Latin for "for oneself." Representing yourself in court without an attorney. Also called "self-representation."

**Protective Order**

A civil court order protecting someone from harassment, abuse, or contact by another person. In Washington, can last up to 5 years and is renewable.

**R – S**

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**Restitution**

Money ordered by the court to be paid to a victim to compensate for losses caused by the crime.

**Restraining Order**

A court order requiring someone to stop certain behavior. Often used interchangeably with "protective order."

**Sentencing**

The phase after conviction where the judge imposes punishment — prison time, fines, probation, community service, restitution, etc.

**Service of Process**

The formal delivery of legal documents (like a complaint or summons) to the person being sued or charged. Must be done properly or the case can be dismissed.

**Statute of Limitations**

The deadline for filing a lawsuit or bringing criminal charges. After this time period, the case cannot proceed.

**Stay**

A court order temporarily stopping a legal proceeding or the enforcement of a judgment.

**Subpoena**

A court order requiring someone to appear in court or produce documents. Ignoring a subpoena can result in contempt of court.

**Summons**

A document notifying someone that they are being sued and must respond to the court.

## T – Z

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### Testimony

Statements made under oath by a witness in court or in a deposition. Lying under oath is perjury.

### Transcript

The official written record of everything said in court, prepared by the court reporter. Can be ordered for appeals.

### Trial

The formal court proceeding where evidence is presented and a judge or jury decides the outcome of a case.

### Venue

The geographic location where a case is heard. Usually the county where the crime occurred or where the parties live.

### Verdict

The decision of a jury (or judge in a bench trial) — guilty or not guilty in criminal cases; liable or not liable in civil cases.

### Voir Dire

The process of questioning potential jurors to select the jury for a trial. Attorneys can remove jurors "for cause" (proven bias) or using peremptory challenges (limited number, no reason required).

### Warrant

A court order authorizing police to make an arrest (arrest warrant) or conduct a search (search warrant). Must be based on probable cause and approved by a judge.

### Witness

A person who testifies in court about what they saw, heard, or know. An expert witness testifies about specialized knowledge (medicine, forensics, etc.).

### A Note from Us

Understanding the language of the legal system is the first step to navigating it. If you're dealing with a legal situation and need help making sense of what's happening, that's exactly what I'm here for.

These resources were created for people who were overwhelmed, confused, and alone in systems that weren't built to help them. You deserve better than that.

 Contact: [manifestdreamsconsulting.com](https://manifestdreamsconsulting.com) |  Book a free consult: [calendly.com](https://calendly.com)