

People in the court

People visit Minnesota's courts for many reasons. They might be involved in a case as a victim, witness, plaintiff or defendant, or they might be interested in the case because they know one of the persons involved in the trial, because the reason for the case (burglary, assault) is of personal interest, or because they want to better understand the functioning of the court system.

The persons who are responsible for managing the courts try to help all of these people by making the courtroom open to the public, enforcing the courtroom rules, publishing materials that explain the process, and hiring and training employees who perform the activities of the court.

If you visit court, things of concern to you will vary depending on your reason for your visit. For example, if you are a defendant, that is to say if you have been accused of a crime, you will want to make certain that the judge and jury will hear the evidence, that the jury or judge will not be persuaded by information not presented as evidence to them in the courtroom, that the jury understands the jury instructions, that all people in the courtroom obey the court's rules. You will want to make certain that you get your constitutionally guaranteed rights to a fair trial. See the 6th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Students will:

1. Understand the role of the persons who participate in the judicial system.
2. Understand the factors that might affect justice.
3. Understand the limitations of formal legal processes in settling disputes.

Materials needed: Copies of **Student Handout: PEOPLE IN THE COURT**
Copies of 6th Amendment

Time needed: 1 class period

Grade level: Grades 7-12

Procedure:

1. Discuss the introductory information with the students. Ask the students to skim the newspaper, circle stories about trials, and underline the people involved in the trial. Discuss the interests of these people. The interests will range from legal interest (wanting to win the case) to concerns about reputation, time, etc.
2. Have each student complete the **Student Handout: PEOPLE IN THE COURT**. This activity can also be a small group activity, either asking each group to consider all individuals or assigning one individual to each group.

Procedure cont.

3. Discuss the various and sometimes conflicting interests.
4. *Optional activity:* Ask the students to interview people who have been in the position of a person in the activity. Using the **Student Handout: PEOPLE IN THE COURT**, have the students add concerns they did not previously consider. Discuss the new concerns.
5. Complete this lesson by discussing the complex and often difficult role of the courts as it tries to help all people in the courtroom

Student Handout: PEOPLE IN THE COURT

Try to step into the shoes of the following persons in the courtroom. List the concerns you might have. Remember that each person has some different concerns.

1. You are the defendant. You have been accused of stealing a sweater in a local department store.
Concerns: 1.
 2.
 3.
 4.

2. Your sister was assaulted by a defendant. She has recovered enough to testify at the trial, but she is still healing.
Concerns: 1.
 2.
 3.
 4.

3. You are a respected member of the community. Recently, you were charged with driving under the influence of alcohol.
Concerns: 1.
 2.
 3.
 4.

4. A friend of yours is on trial in a highly publicized case. You want to attend the trial to provide your friend with moral support.
Concerns: 1.
 2.
 3.
 4.

5. You are a news reporter for the local newspaper. You have been assigned to cover the trial of a gruesome murder. You expect all the local media to be represented by reporters and many spectators to be in the courtroom.
Concerns: 1.
 2.
 3.
 4.

Student Handout: PEOPLE IN THE COURT cont.

6. You are the judge. You know it is your responsibility to make certain the courtroom is run according to the rules so that the defendant receives a fair trial. This is your most important duty. The case before you involves organized crime.
Concerns:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

7. You are a public defender. Your client has been accused of crack possession and cannot afford an attorney.
Concerns:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

8. You are a county attorney. It is your job to bring criminal charges against a defendant and to prosecute the case. As an elected official you represent the people. You are currently prosecuting a defendant charged with first-degree murder of a young girl in a public parking ramp.
Concerns:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

9. You have been severely injured in an automobile accident that was caused by brakes not designed safely. Your suit against the automobile manufacturer is going to trial.
Concerns:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

10. You are a member of the jury. The case you are hearing involves much complex information about the operation of a machine. You are self-employed as a landscape architect.
Concerns:
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.