

A Tiny Chat Companion: Instructions

If you work in the courts, you live this stuff day in and day out, but don't forget that for many court users this is their first time attempting to use the court system. Here are some things to keep in mind when writing new instructions or reviewing what currently exists on your website, forms, and handouts.

Good written instructions require:

- Clear, simple writing;
- A thorough understanding of what is required, in all of its technical details; and
- The ability to put yourself in the place of the court users (especially SRL, who may not be well who will use these instructions).

Before writing instructions, think about what you are trying to instruct someone to do. Before launching into the specifics, think about the big picture. How long do you anticipate this procedure will take? 15-20 minutes? Three hours? What are the materials you will need to complete the task? Some examples might include a working email address, access to a computer, printer and/or scanner, specific kinds of documents for that case type (*e.g.*, birth certificate, voluntary acknowledgment of paternity, marriage license, RAP sheet, deed to home, etc.).

Are there multiple tasks? Or a succession of activities within a single task? This is the difference between, for example, changing the oil in a car (one or two related steps in the procedure) versus assembling a table from IKEA (lots of steps/tasks within the procedure).

When you write the actual steps in the procedure, be deliberate about the structure and format of the steps and what supplementary information might be needed.

For procedures with multiple tasks, think about breaking down the instructions based on sub-tasks, to make it less daunting.

Normally, we think of sets of instructions as being formatted with a number of step-by-step instructions. But think about whether that's the clearest way to convey the process at issue; and/or whether there are so many steps that it would seem overwhelming to get instructions with pages and pages of prompts.

Breaking things down into steps and sub-tasks within steps may make this easier to follow. If, for example, you are trying to instruct someone how to file a complaint with a court, you might think about sub-tasks, like finding a form, payment of court fees/apply for filing fee waiver, filing the forms with the court (e-filing or in-person), etc. And then, each subtask (finding a form or payment of fees) would have its own clear header and set of instructions.

You may want to break down sub-tasks even more; and as such, to “nest” individual steps within each sub-task together to convey the relationship between these steps to successfully complete this phase of the task. To do this, you may want to sequence such steps, labelling them as a, b and c.

There may be other steps in a process where alternate steps may be a better way to instruct, especially in situations where there are two or more ways to accomplish the same task. For example, to effectuate service of process, you may use a private process server, a member of law enforcement or involve someone over 18 who is not involved in the case. For these kinds of options, consider bulleted lists with “OR” inserted between the alternatives.

Consider graphics, screenshot, clear headers and lots of white space. You want the instructions to be easy to read and follow.

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