

Pre-Judgment: Basic Steps to Small Claims For SERVICE

This guide is provided by the Wisconsin court system to give you general information about Wisconsin small claims actions. Resources available in each county may be found at the link below:

<https://www.wicourts.gov/services/public/selfhelp/docs/countylegalresources.pdf>

For additional information, please see the Pre-Judgment and Post-Judgment Basic Steps Documents. These basic steps documents and any forms mentioned in this basic guide may be obtained from the clerk of court or online at:

<https://www.wicourts.gov/forms1/circuit.htm>.

In addition to the guidance in this handbook, follow local court rules or procedures:

[Wisconsin Circuit Court Rules](#)

NOTICE: Small Claims laws change often. The small claims forms are intended to be useful in many cases, but you may have to add or attach additional information as it applies to your case. Talk to a lawyer if you are unsure whether these forms are the most appropriate for your situation.

COURT STAFF CANNOT GIVE LEGAL ADVICE.

“Service” or “service of process” are the legal terms used to describe the act of giving notice of a lawsuit or court hearing to another party. There are several different methods and very specific time limits by which you must have the other party served. The type of service you are required to use depends on the type of forms you are filing. If you do not have the other party served properly (within the correct time limits and using the correct method), the court cannot hear or decide your case.

Notice: This packet describes only the most common methods of service available for use. Please seek legal assistance if you would like to explore additional/alternative methods or the forms you are filing are not listed.

Court Self-Help Form	Required Type of Service	Service Time Limits
Summons and Complaint Small Claims - Claim Under Dollar Limit/Replevin (SC-500) and (SC-500i)	Personal, substitute, publish or mail if allowed by court rule and defendant(s) resides in the county where complaint is filed.	Not less than eight (8) business days before the return date. Including extensions or resets that may occur, service may be made no longer than 90 calendar days from the date the summons and complaint was/were filed.
Summons for Consumer Replevin (SC-516)	Personal, certified mail, if mail permitted.	Not less than eight (8) business days before the return date. Including extensions or resets that may occur, service may be made no longer than 90 calendar days from the date the summons and complaint was/were filed.

Summons and Complaint Small Claims Eviction (SC-500) and (SC-500i)	Personal, substitute, certified mail (if mail permitted by local rule). Post and mail, only if unable to personally serve after reasonable diligence.	Not less than five (5) business days before the return date. Including extensions or resets that may occur, service may be made no longer than 90 calendar days from the date the summons and complaint was/were filed. Post a copy at least seven (7) business days prior to the return date, and mail a copy at least five (5) business days prior to the return date.
Summons and Complaint Small Claims Arbitration Award/ Return of Earnest Money (SC-500) and (SC-500i)	Personal, or mail if allowed by court rule and defendant(s) resides in the county where complaint is filed.	Not less than eight (8) business days before the return date. Including extensions or resets that may occur, service may be made no longer than 90 calendar days from the date the summons and complaint was/were filed.
Petition to Answer or Reopen Small Claims Actions with Mail Service (Under §799.14(1), Wis. Stats., only) (SC-511A) and (SC-511B) (never received mailed Summons and Complaint)	Mail	Not less than eight (8) business days before the hearing date.
Motion/Order to Reopen Small Claims Judgment (SC-515A) and (SC-515B) (good cause shown for not answering or appearing)	Mail	Not less than eight (8) business days before the motion date.
Demand for Trial and Instructions (SC-517)	Mail	Within ten (10) calendar days of the oral decision or within 15 calendar days of the written decision.
Motion/Order and Request for Hearing on Contempt (SC-507A) and (SC-507B)	Personal	Not less than five (5) business days before the date of the hearing.
Subpoena and Certificate of Appearance (GF-126A) and (GF-126B)	Personal	No specific statutory time limit; it is recommended you attempt service far enough in advance to assure the appearance of any witnesses.
Summons and Complaint Non-Earnings Garnishment Small Claims (SC-301)	Personal	Not less than eight (8) business days before the return date. You must serve both the garnishee and the debtor.
Earnings Garnishment (CV-422) Earnings Garnishment – Exemption Notice (CV-423) Earnings Garnishment - Debtor's Answer (CV-424) Garnishment Exemption Worksheet (CV-426) Poverty Guidelines for Earnings (CV-427)	Mail	Debtor must be served within seven (7) business days after the date of service on the garnishee and at least three (3) business days before the payday.

Motions filed for reasons other than those listed above (no specific court self-help forms).	Mail	Not less than eight (8) business days before the motion date.
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WARNING: Copies, NOT original documents, should be given to the other party. Once the other party is served you must file a copy of the proof of service with the court (attaching copies of what was served). You must maintain all originals.

Service

There are **five (5)** basic ways to have the other party served:

1. Private Process Server

You may make arrangements with a **private process server** to have the other party personally served. Contact individual companies for fees and procedural information. To find a private process server in your or the other party's area, you may look under "Process Service" using a phone or internet directory or by going to <http://www.iprocessservers.com>. Proof of service and a set of the documents which were served must be returned to court as soon as possible. Proof of service is what you get back from the process server and may be called Affidavit of Service, Certificate of Service, or Proof of Service. Remember to keep a copy for your records.

2. Sheriff's Department

The **Sheriff's Department** in the county in which the individual to be served resides may serve the other party. Proof of service and a set of the documents which were served must be filed with the court as soon as possible. Proof of service is what you get back from the sheriff and may be called Affidavit of Service, Certificate of Service, or Proof of Service. Remember to keep a copy for your records.

3. Service by Another Person

Any other person who is age 18 or over, is a resident of Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, or Minnesota, and is not a party to the action, can also serve the other party.

- You:** complete the caption of the Declaration of Service ([SC-5100V](#), [SC-5110V](#) or [SC-5120V](#)) form.
- Other person:** The person serving the paperwork signs his or her name (for example, on the back or in any blank space) on the document(s) being served. That person must also indicate the time, date, place, manner of service, and upon whom service is being made and then gives the document(s) to the party being served.
- Other person:** Completes the bottom portion of the Declaration of Service.
- You:** return the Declaration of Service form and a set of the documents served, as soon as possible to the clerk of courts. Remember to keep a copy for your records.

4. Substitute Service

When personal service is required, but the defendant is unable to be found, certain other individuals may be served in his/her place. Reasonable diligence must first be attempted to personally serve the individual. If the defendant cannot be found, then the summons and complaint may be left at the defendant's usual place of abode:

- (1) In the presence of a competent member of the defendant's family who is at least 14 year of age, who shall be informed of the contents; or
- (2) In the presence of a competent adult, currently residing in the abode of the defendant, who shall be informed of the contents of the summons,
- (3) If the defendant resides out of state, pursuant to the law for substitute service of a summons or like process in courts of general jurisdiction in that state. You should receive one of the service documents referenced in paragraph 2 above from the individual who

effected the substitute service. File it with the clerk of courts office as soon as possible and keep a copy for your records.

5. **Posting and Mailing in Eviction Actions**

In eviction actions where the defendant cannot be personally served after reasonable diligence and substitute service was attempted and also not successful:

- You:** complete the caption of the Declaration of Service ([SC-5100V](#)) form.
- You/Process Server/Sheriff:** post a copy of the *Summons and Complaint* onto some part of the premises where it may be conveniently read at least seven (7) business days prior to the return date.

AND

- You/Process Server/Sheriff:** mail a copy of the Summons and Complaint at least five (5) business days prior to the return date, to the defendant at the last known address, even if it is the premises which are the subject of the action.

- The Sheriff's Department, a private process server, or another person:** will complete the bottom portion of the Declaration of Service ([SC-5100V](#)) form if they posted and mailed the summons and complaint.

OR

- You:** will complete the bottom portion of the Declaration of Service ([SC-5100V](#)) form if you posted and mailed the summons and complaint.

6. **Service by Mail**

Serving documents on the other party by mail is allowed for certain types of actions. Check the local rules. If service by mail is allowed, you must:

- Mail copies of the documents to the other party.
- Sign the Declaration of Mailing, ([SC-5130V](#)) form.
- File with the court as soon as possible the Declaration of Mailing, ([SC-5130V](#)) form and a set of the documents that were mailed to the other party. Keep the originals for your records.

LAST RESORT IN NON-EVICTION ACTIONS

Before attempting this last resort, you should consider seeking legal assistance. There are specific and complicated rules that must be followed to successfully serve a party by publication.

Service by Publication

Service by Publication is a **last resort** and can **only** be used if you failed to have the other party served by one of the methods above. You have a responsibility to make every effort to make personal service if possible, which includes gathering reasonably available information from family and friends to try and determine the other party's location.

The option of **Service by Publication** is only available to you if you can answer yes to **all** of the following:

- You have tried personal service through the Sheriff's Department, a private process server, or another person.
- You have given the Sheriff's Department, the private process server, or the other person as much information as possible to help them find the other party.
- The Sheriff's Department, private process server, or another person cannot find the other party after a diligent search and several service attempts.

- You have been given an Affidavit of Due Diligence/Not Found/Attempted Service by the Sheriff's Department, private process server, or the other person stating that the other party could not be found. Keep this affidavit.
- The Sheriff's Department or private process server, or the other person attempting to effect service has attempted substitute service and has been unsuccessful.

Procedural Checklist for Service by Publication

- 1. Prepare a cover letter like the following example:
[Date]

Defendant's Name
Last Known Address
City, State ZIP

RE: Case Title [Name of Plaintiff vs. Name of Defendant]
Case No.: Court Case Number [07SC123]

Dear [Defendant's Name]:

Enclosed please find a Publication Summons and Notice and a Summons and Complaint which I have filed in the _____ County Circuit Court.

Sincerely,

Your name
- 2. Make a copy of the cover letter for your records.
- 3. Mail to the defendant at his/her last known address the original cover letter and a copy of the Publication Summons and Notice and the Summons and Complaint. (If the mailing is returned to you, keep it for your court hearing.)
- 4. Complete the Declaration of Mailing, ([SC-5130V](#)) form.
- 5. Complete the Publication Summons and Notice, ([SC-5160V](#)) form and file with the clerk of court.
- 6. Take the Publication Summons and Notice to the newspaper in the municipality where the defendant currently lives, or where his/her last known address is located. There will be a fee, which cannot be waived by the court. The Publication Summons and Notice must be **published one time in the newspaper** and is considered served on the first day of publication.

Note: There are official newspapers in many municipalities, but generally you can use any newspaper regularly published at least once a week in the city, village, or town where the defendant lives, or you think he/she may live.
- 7. The newspaper will provide you with a document as proof of the publication and an invoice.
- 8. File the following documents with the clerk of court, as soon as possible or on the next court date (follow local court rules) and keep a copy for your records:

- *Affidavit of Due Diligence/Not Found/Attempted Service* provided by the Sheriff's Department or private process server; (If not done already)
- Your cover letter;
- *Declaration of Mailing* or certified/registered mail receipt;
- Proof of the *Service by Publication* from the newspaper; and
- Copy of the invoice from the newspaper.