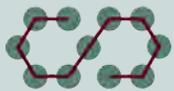# Document Preparation Worksheet and Checklist for ODR Programs

Created by:

RSI

Document Preparation Worksheet and Checklist for ODR Programs

This document is meant to be used in conjunction with our [Guide to Courts](). Use the worksheet to help you create or modify court documents for parties in cases that are eligible for ODR. We recommend you create a separate document for each party, plaintiffs and defendants, so you can customize the information and guidance. Once you are done, you can test documents with individuals who are similar to your target audience.

Document Worksheet

Step 1: Determine your audience

Who is your audience?
(For example, your audience could be plaintiffs or defendants, and they may be involved in small claims, debt collection, family cases, or another type of case.)

What are the characteristics of your audience?
(For example, your audience may be self-represented and have low literacy. They may not understand court processes and a majority may use mobile phones to access the internet)

Step 2. Decide what information your audience needs

What information would be helpful to include on the Notice of ODR?
Below is a list of essential information. You may want to include other information that is particular to your court or your program.

Explain what ODR is.
(Keep it short. Parties will not read long text.)

List the benefits of ODR.
(For example, the convenience of handling a case from home, instead of dealing with the hassles of appearing in court. And the cost of ODR may be reduced or free. You can do this with bullet points to draw your audience's attention.)

Provide instructions for people who have limited, or no, internet access.
(Include a way for parties to file for exemption from ODR that does not require getting online or using a computer.)

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Tell parties what their next step is.
(Make this prominent, using simple pictures or icons to draw your audience's eye and help them understand.)

Tell the parties what happens if they reach agreement.

Tell the parties what happens if they don't reach agreement.

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Give the parties contact information for court staff, in case they have questions.

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Direct the parties to more information.
(For example, you can provide them with a separate guide, a self-help desk, or a website address for more help, such as an ODR-dedicated webpage or an online legal kiosk.)

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What might you include in a guide for self-represented litigants?

Tell parties what steps they will need to take to start ODR.
(List these as concise instructions using plain language.)

Step 1. _____

Step 2. _____

Step 3. _____

Step 4. _____

Step 5. _____

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Prepare the parties for ODR by explaining what will happen.
(Always include how they will be communicating with the other party, whether there will be a neutral third party involved, whether their communications will be kept on record and how they will be kept private. Remember to use headers to separate concepts and use the formatting recommendations in the Guide.)

Provide resources for help.
(For example, give contact information for legal aid, financial aid, housing aid, and other community partners.)

Help parties prepare for negotiating with the other party.
(For example, you could list the documents they will need and prompt them with questions about what they will offer the the other party, or what they would be willing to accept as an offer.)

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Instruct them on how to negotiate.

(Tell the parties how to make an offer, how to respond to an offer, how to make a counter offer, and how to close their case if they do or do not settle. Add any other information you think would be helpful to them.)

Step 3: Determine the best format to deliver your information

- ☐ Use paragraphs when explanations are needed
- ☐ Use bullet points when you have more than three and less than seven items listed
- ☐ Use numbered lists when sequence is important
- ☐ Use tables for information that is too complex for a list, because they can show your audience the relationship between ideas
- ☐ Add simple photos or drawings to illustrate your content

Step 4: Organize your documents

- ☐ Include an official seal to verify the authenticity of your documents for your audience
- ☐ Separate your content by concept
- ☐ Avoid repeating information
- ☐ Consider adding a table of contents or overarching checklist

Document Preparation Checklist

After you have revised or created your document, use this short checklist to ensure that the document adheres to tested practices to increase readers' understanding.

Use this checklist and your document to evaluate your:
- overall organization,
- use of plain language,
- text formatting,
- header clarity, and
- added visuals.

Is your document organized to enhance understanding?

- ☐ Included a table of contents or roadmap for long documents
- ☐ Kept each paragraph to a single topic
- ☐ Focused all sentences on a single idea
- ☐ Added white space throughout
- ☐ Provided only necessary information
- ☐ Included contact information for additional questions or help
- ☐ Displayed important information in page headers and footers
  - Added page numbers ("Page X of Y")
  - Included information you wanted repeated (for example, a help contact)

Do you have clear headers?

- ☐ Bolded headers
- ☐ Avoided all caps
- ☐ Did not underline headers
- ☐ Formatted headers in sans serif font
- ☐ Triple spaced above and double spaced below headers
- ☐ Used question headers when it was clear what questions users have
- ☐ Used statement headers in statement when it was not clear what questions users have

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Is your text information presented effectively?

- ☐ Formatted text in 12-pt, serif font
- ☐ Double spaced text
- ☐ Used bullet points when listing between three and seven items
- ☐ Used numbered lists when order was important
- ☐ Used a table when the information is too complex for a list or if readers need to understand a relationship between ideas
- ☐ Used paragraphs when explaining a concept

Are you using plain language?

- ☐ Spoke directly to the reader
  - Used "you" when talking to the reader
  - Used "I" when the format included a question for the reader to answer
- ☐ Used active voice
  - Used "You must complete the document"
  - Did not use "The document must be completed"
- ☐ Changed legal terms to everyday language or defined them at first mention
- ☐ Spelled out acronyms
  - Or used terms like "the court" when applicable
  - Only used acronyms when they are more recognizable than spelling out the phrase ("NASA" or "FBI")
- ☐ Avoided abbreviations
- ☐ Kept using the same word consistently rather than using synonyms

Do your visuals contribute to your text?

- ☐ Used a simple graphic or drawing to illustrate important content
- ☐ Included an official seal to verify the authenticity of your document
- ☐ Used a QR code to send readers to online resources
- ☐ Labeled any QR code so readers know where it directs them
- ☐ Used high contrast colors to highlight important information

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