

Case Evidence Organization Guide

Professional Document Management System



Contents

1	What This Guide Is (and What It Isn't)	4
2	Introduction	4
2.1	Purpose and Scope	4
2.2	Legal Disclaimers	4
3	Quick Start Implementation	4
3.1	Initial Setup Process	4
3.2	Core Documentation Requirements	5
3.2.1	Exhibit Index System	5
3.2.2	Chronological Timeline	5
3.2.3	Source Documentation	5
3.3	Common Organizational Failures	5
4	Document Naming Standards	5
4.1	Standardized Format Protocol	5
4.2	Practical Examples	5
4.3	Document Type Classifications	6
4.4	Version Control Standards	6
4.5	Date Uncertainty Handling	6
5	Exhibit Index Development	6
5.1	Index Structure Requirements	6
5.2	Professional Index Examples	6
5.3	Index Entry Components	7
6	Timeline Construction	7
6.1	Chronological Documentation Framework	7
6.2	Timeline Format Structure	7
6.3	Professional Timeline Examples	7
6.4	Timeline Construction Guidelines	7
7	Evidence Collection Protocols	7
7.1	Documentation Requirements Checklist	7
7.1.1	Basic Information Elements	8
7.1.2	Contextual Documentation	8
7.1.3	Technical Specifications	8
7.2	Evidence Categories	8
7.2.1	Communication Records	8
7.2.2	Visual Documentation	8
7.2.3	Financial Records	8
7.2.4	Official Documentation	8
7.2.5	Personal Documentation	9

8	Digital Evidence Preservation	9
8.1	Text Message Preservation	9
8.2	Email Preservation	9
8.3	Social Media Evidence	10
8.4	Cloud Storage and Shared Documents	10
8.5	Authentication Requirements	11
9	Working With Attorneys	11
9.1	How Organization Saves Legal Fees	11
9.2	Preparing for Attorney Meetings	11
9.3	Sharing Evidence Electronically	12
9.4	Limited Scope Representation	12
9.5	Evidence Acquisition Protocol	12
10	Court Package Assembly	13
10.1	Submission Package Structure	13
10.2	Professional Binding Standards	13
10.3	Format and Presentation Guidelines	13
10.4	Privacy and Redaction Requirements	13
11	Implementation and Maintenance	14
11.1	Initial Setup Timeline	14
11.2	Ongoing Maintenance Schedule	14
11.3	Self-Represented Litigant Considerations	15
11.4	Technology Tools Comparison	15
11.5	Professional Assistance Resources	16
11.6	System Effectiveness Principles	16
12	Bates Stamping Tutorial	16
12.1	What Are Bates Numbers?	16
12.2	Why Bates Stamping Matters	16
12.3	When to Apply Bates Numbers	16
12.4	Bates Stamping Methods	16
12.5	Bates Stamping Best Practices	17
12.6	Bates Number Log Template	17
13	Discovery Response Workflow	17
13.1	Understanding Discovery	17
13.2	Common Discovery Requests	17
13.3	Discovery Response Checklist	18
13.4	Discovery Response Folder Structure	18
13.5	Common Discovery Deadlines	18
14	Court Filing Checklist	19
14.1	Before You File: Document Preparation	19
14.2	Federal Court vs State Court Requirements	19
14.3	Filing Checklist	19
14.4	Common Filing Mistakes to Avoid	20

15 Common Mistakes to Avoid	20
15.1 The “Fatal Five” Organizational Errors	20
15.2 Recovery Strategies	20
16 Appendix: Quick Reference Templates	21
16.1 Exhibit Index Template	21
16.2 Timeline Template	21
16.3 File Naming Quick Reference	21
17 Conclusion: Your Path Forward	21
17.1 Key Takeaways	22
17.2 Your Implementation Checklist	22
17.3 Final Thoughts	22

1 What This Guide Is (and What It Isn't)

Before diving in, let's be clear about what you're getting:

This Guide HELPS You:

- Organize evidence professionally using systems paralegals and attorneys use
- Name files consistently so you never lose a document
- Create exhibit indexes the way courts expect
- Build timelines that tell your story chronologically
- Apply Bates stamping for discovery compliance
- Prepare court packages that look professional

This Guide Does NOT:

- Provide legal advice (consult an attorney for legal strategy)
- Tell you what arguments to make (that's case-specific)
- Replace a lawyer (complex cases need professional representation)
- Guarantee any outcome (organization helps but doesn't determine results)

2 Introduction

You are representing yourself in court. Your evidence package will determine whether you appear professional and credible or disorganized and unprepared. This guide provides a systematic approach to organizing legal documents that courts expect and respect.

2.1 Purpose and Scope

This guide teaches document organization techniques only. It does not provide legal advice, case strategy, or predictions about legal outcomes. The methods described herein are applicable to family law, civil litigation, and other court proceedings where evidence presentation is required.

2.2 Legal Disclaimers

- **NOT LEGAL ADVICE:** This guide provides organization techniques only. It does not provide legal advice, case strategy, or predictions about outcomes.
- **NO ENDORSEMENT:** Distribution by any program, court, or organization does not imply endorsement of any service or legal position.
- **PRIVACY PROTECTION:** Do not share sensitive information publicly. Always redact personal details before sharing documents with others.
- **LIMITED SCOPE:** This guide covers document organization only, not case strategy, legal arguments, or litigation tactics.

3 Quick Start Implementation

3.1 Initial Setup Process

Complete these steps within the first ten minutes to establish your evidence management system:

1. **Create primary case folder** on your computer or cloud storage system

2. **Collect ten most critical documents** from your current files
3. **Apply standardized naming convention** to these initial documents
4. **Create preliminary timeline entries** for five most recent significant events
5. **Begin exhibit index** with these foundational documents

3.2 Core Documentation Requirements

3.2.1 Exhibit Index System

A comprehensive catalog of all evidence items with unique identifiers, descriptions, and cross-references. Courts expect numbered or lettered exhibits that correspond to a master index.

3.2.2 Chronological Timeline

Sequential record of relevant events with dates, participants, and evidence references. Essential for presenting your case narrative in logical order.

3.2.3 Source Documentation

Metadata preservation including document origin, custody chain, and authenticity markers. Critical for establishing evidence credibility in court proceedings.

3.3 Common Organizational Failures

Avoid these patterns that undermine case presentation:

- **Unstructured evidence dumps:** Screenshots and documents without context or source identification
- **Inconsistent file naming:** Generic names like “Document1.pdf” or “IMG_1234.jpg”
- **Version control chaos:** Multiple versions with names like “final_FINAL3.pdf”
- **Missing evidentiary foundation:** Documents without clear relevance or authentication

4 Document Naming Standards

4.1 Standardized Format Protocol

Use this consistent format for all case-related files:

Format: YYYY-MM-DD__TYPE__DESCRIPTION__SOURCE__v01.pdf

4.2 Practical Examples

- 2025-01-15__EMAIL__ScheduleChangeRequest__ExSpouse__v01.pdf
- 2025-01-20__TEXT__VisitationCancellation__VerizonScreenshot__v01.pdf
- 2025-01-22__REPORT__SchoolBehaviorIncident__TeacherCorrespondence__v01.pdf
- 2025-01-25__PHOTO__InjuryDocumentation__CellPhoneCamera__v01.jpg

4.3 Document Type Classifications

- **EMAIL:** Electronic mail messages and screenshot captures
- **TEXT:** Text message screenshots and mobile communications
- **PHOTO:** Photographic evidence and image documentation
- **REPORT:** Official reports, institutional notices, medical records
- **FINANCIAL:** Bank statements, pay records, expense documentation
- **LEGAL:** Court documents, police reports, legal correspondence
- **AUDIO:** Voice recordings, voicemail captures
- **VIDEO:** Video evidence and recorded interactions

4.4 Version Control Standards

- **Sequential numbering:** v01, v02, v03 using two-digit format
- **Preservation requirement:** Never overwrite previous versions
- **Archive maintenance:** Retain all versions until case resolution

4.5 Date Uncertainty Handling

- **Estimated dates:** Use tilde prefix for approximations (~2025-01-15)
- **Receipt dating:** Use document receipt date when creation date unknown
- **Partial dating:** Use XX notation for unknown elements (2025-01-XX, 2025-XX-XX)

5 Exhibit Index Development

5.1 Index Structure Requirements

Create comprehensive evidence catalog using this format:

Exhibit	Date	Description	Source	Relevance
---------	------	-------------	--------	-----------

5.2 Professional Index Examples

Exhibit	Date	Description	Source	Relevance
A	2025-01-15	Schedule modification email	Ex-spouse	Pattern of last-minute changes
B	2025-01-20	Visitation cancellation text	Phone screenshot	Third cancellation in 30 days
C	2025-01-22	School incident report	Teacher email	Behavioral response to conflict

Note: The File Reference column (containing the actual filename) can be added as a sixth column in your working index, but may be omitted from court submissions for readability.

5.3 Index Entry Components

- **Exhibit Identifier:** Clear alphanumeric designation for court reference
- **Event Date:** Actual occurrence date, not discovery date
- **Content Description:** Concise summary comprehensible to judicial review
- **Source Attribution:** Document creator or originating entity
- **File Reference:** Exact filename for electronic retrieval
- **Relevance Notation:** Brief explanation of evidentiary significance

6 Timeline Construction

6.1 Chronological Documentation Framework

Develop comprehensive event timeline using systematic approach:

1. **Major event identification:** Court dates, significant incidents, status changes
2. **Supporting event integration:** Add corroborating occurrences and evidence
3. **Evidence cross-referencing:** Link timeline entries to exhibit documentation
4. **Factual accuracy maintenance:** Objective descriptions without emotional interpretation

6.2 Timeline Format Structure

Date	Time	Event Description	Participants	Evidence Reference	Notes
------	------	-------------------	--------------	--------------------	-------

6.3 Professional Timeline Examples

Date	Event	Exhibit	Notes
2025-01-15	Schedule change email	A	Less than 24hrs notice
2025-01-18	Visitation proceeded	—	Standard protocol
2025-01-20	Cancellation notification	B	Work emergency cited
2025-01-22	School incident report	C	Child distress after missed visit

Note: Participants and exact times can be added as additional columns in your working timeline.

6.4 Timeline Construction Guidelines

- **Chronological ordering:** Strict temporal sequence maintenance
- **Objective documentation:** Factual observations without subjective interpretation
- **Participant identification:** Complete listing of involved parties
- **Evidence correlation:** Systematic cross-referencing to exhibit documentation
- **Concise notation:** Brief, professional descriptions suitable for court review

7 Evidence Collection Protocols

7.1 Documentation Requirements Checklist

For each evidence item, capture the following information:

7.1.1 Basic Information Elements

- Document type identification
- Event occurrence date and time
- Participant identification
- Acquisition source and method

7.1.2 Contextual Documentation

- Evidentiary significance statement
- Connection to other evidence items
- Background circumstances description

7.1.3 Technical Specifications

- File format designation
- Source quality assessment
- Custody chain documentation

7.2 Evidence Categories

7.2.1 Communication Records

- Text message screenshots with timestamp visibility
- Email correspondence including header information
- Voicemail recordings and transcriptions
- Social media posts and private messages
- Written correspondence and handwritten notes

7.2.2 Visual Documentation

- Photographic evidence of conditions, injuries, or property
- Screenshot captures of online content or profiles
- Video recordings of interactions or incidents
- Document photography and scanning

7.2.3 Financial Records

- Banking statements and transaction histories
- Employment verification and pay documentation
- Expense receipts and billing statements
- Credit reporting and debt documentation
- Tax returns and financial disclosure statements

7.2.4 Official Documentation

- Law enforcement reports and case numbers
- Medical records and healthcare provider notes
- Educational institution reports and attendance records
- Court documents and legal correspondence

- Government agency communications

7.2.5 Personal Documentation

- Calendar entries and scheduling records
- Journal entries with factual notations
- Witness contact information and statements
- Professional evaluations and assessments

8 Digital Evidence Preservation

Modern family law cases increasingly involve digital evidence. Proper preservation is critical because digital content can be easily deleted, modified, or become inaccessible.

8.1 Text Message Preservation

Text messages are among the most common evidence in family law cases. Follow these steps to preserve them properly:

Method 1: Screenshot Documentation

- Take full screenshots showing the entire conversation
- Ensure timestamps are visible in every screenshot
- Include the contact name or phone number in the screenshot
- Screenshot multiple consecutive screens to show conversation flow
- Export screenshots immediately to your evidence folders

Method 2: Native Export

iPhone Users: - Open the conversation you want to export - Tap the contact name at the top of the conversation - Scroll down and select “Export Chat” - Choose to export with or without media files - Save the exported file to your evidence folder

Android Users: - Most Android phones do not have native text export - Use third-party backup apps like SMS Backup and Restore - Consider carrier data requests for official records

Method 3: Carrier Records Request

For official documentation that may be required by the court: - Contact your cellular carrier’s legal compliance department - Submit a formal records request - Specify date ranges and phone numbers - Allow 2-4 weeks for processing - Note: Carriers typically only retain message metadata, not content

8.2 Email Preservation

Save Complete Email Chains

- Save emails as PDF or EML format, not just screenshots
- Include header information showing sender, recipient, date, and time
- Preserve the entire conversation thread, not just individual messages
- Do not forward emails to yourself as this changes metadata

Email Header Verification

Full email headers provide authentication that screenshots cannot: - View original/full headers in your email client - Headers show routing information and server timestamps - Include headers when printing emails for court submission

8.3 Social Media Evidence

Social media posts can be deleted at any time. Preserve evidence immediately upon discovery.

Preservation Best Practices

Platform	Preservation Method	Important Notes
Facebook	Screenshot + Data Download	Use “Download Your Information” feature
Instagram	Screenshot + Data Request	Posts can be edited - capture timestamps
Twitter/X	Screenshot + Archive	Include tweet URL in screenshot
TikTok	Screen recording + screenshot	Videos may be deleted quickly

What to Capture

- Full URL of the post
- Timestamp showing date and time of posting
- The username/account name clearly visible
- Any comments or reactions if relevant
- Your screenshot showing the current date

Warning Signs

If you notice the other party beginning to delete posts or change privacy settings, consider: - Taking immediate screenshots of all relevant content - Documenting the deletion pattern itself (this may be relevant as evidence of spoliation) - Consulting with an attorney about emergency preservation requests

8.4 Cloud Storage and Shared Documents

Many couples share cloud storage accounts (Google Drive, Dropbox, iCloud). Follow these protocols:

Before Separation:

- Do NOT delete shared documents unilaterally
- Make copies of important documents to your own account
- Document the folder structure and contents
- Take screenshots showing shared access permissions

Shared Account Considerations:

- Financial records stored in shared drives
- Family photos and videos
- Shared calendars showing scheduling patterns
- Shared notes or documents

Proper Procedure:

1. Make a complete backup to your own, separate account
2. Document what exists in the shared space
3. Do NOT modify original files
4. Consult with attorney before changing access permissions

8.5 Authentication Requirements

Courts may question whether digital evidence is authentic. Strengthen your evidence with:

Self-Authentication Factors:

- Complete file metadata (creation date, modification history)
- Unedited original files (not cropped or modified screenshots)
- Clear chain of custody documentation
- Witness testimony about when and how evidence was obtained

Things That Weaken Authentication:

- Heavily cropped images
- Screenshots without visible timestamps or URLs
- Modified filenames that don't reflect original names
- Unexplained gaps in conversation threads

9 Working With Attorneys

Whether you have full representation, limited scope representation, or are self-represented with occasional attorney consultation, your organizational system directly impacts your legal costs and case outcomes.

9.1 How Organization Saves Legal Fees

Attorneys typically charge by the hour. Every minute they spend searching for documents or organizing your evidence is time you're paying for. Well-organized clients consistently pay less in legal fees.

Cost Comparison Example:

Task	Organized Client	Disorganized Client
Initial document review	2 hours	6 hours
Discovery response prep	4 hours	12 hours
Trial preparation	8 hours	20 hours
Total attorney time	14 hours	38 hours
At \$300/hour	\$4,200	\$11,400

Savings from organization: \$7,200

9.2 Preparing for Attorney Meetings

Before any attorney meeting, prepare the following:

Documents to Bring:

- Your exhibit index (printed and organized)
- Your timeline (updated to present)
- Any new evidence since last meeting
- Questions written down

Information to Have Ready:

- All relevant dates and deadlines
- Names and contact info of all parties
- Case number and court information
- Summary of recent developments

9.3 Sharing Evidence Electronically

When your attorney requests documents:

Best Practices:

- Share via secure cloud folder (not email attachments for large files)
- Use your established naming conventions
- Include your exhibit index as a guide
- Organize files by category or chronologically

Do NOT:

- Dump everything in one folder without organization
- Send dozens of individual emails with attachments
- Change file names from your system to something else
- Forget to include the index explaining what's there

9.4 Limited Scope Representation

If you cannot afford full representation, consider “unbundled” or limited scope legal services:

Tasks Attorneys Can Help With:

- Document review and strategy advice
- Drafting specific pleadings
- Court appearance for critical hearings
- Discovery response review

Tasks You Can Do Yourself (With Good Organization):

- Document collection and organization
- Filing routine paperwork
- Calendar management
- Evidence preservation

Your excellent organization makes limited scope representation more effective because the attorney can focus on legal strategy rather than sorting through paperwork.

9.5 Evidence Acquisition Protocol

Upon receiving new evidence:

1. **Immediate preservation** using proper naming conventions
2. **Index integration** within twenty-four hours of acquisition
3. **Timeline correlation** if evidence relates to documented events
4. **Contextual notation** while circumstances remain current in memory

10 Court Package Assembly

10.1 Submission Package Structure

Organize final court submission using standardized folder hierarchy:

```
Case_Evidence_Package/  
|-- 01_Exhibit_Index.pdf  
|-- 02_Chronological_Timeline.pdf  
|-- 03_Evidence_Exhibits/  
|   |-- Exhibit_A.pdf  
|   |-- Exhibit_B.pdf  
|   |-- Exhibit_C.pdf  
|   `-- [Additional exhibits...]  
`-- 04_Reference_Documentation/  
    |-- Original_file_archives/  
    `-- Source_verification_materials/
```

10.2 Professional Binding Standards

1. **Index positioning:** Exhibit index at document beginning
2. **Timeline placement:** Chronological overview following index
3. **Sequential organization:** Exhibits in alphanumeric order matching index
4. **Navigation aids:** Tabs and dividers for easy reference
5. **Page numbering:** Clear pagination throughout document

10.3 Format and Presentation Guidelines

- **Electronic submission:** PDF format with searchable text capability
- **Print specifications:** High-quality reproduction with legible fonts and clear images
- **Standard sizing:** 8.5x11 inch format unless court specifies alternatives
- **Binding method:** Three-ring binders or spiral binding for substantial packages
- **Copy requirements:** Multiple copies for court, opposing parties, and personal retention

10.4 Privacy and Redaction Requirements

Before document submission or sharing:

- Redact Social Security numbers completely
- Remove bank account numbers not relevant to case issues
- Protect minor children's personal identifying information
- Obscure sensitive medical details not pertinent to legal issues
- Delete financial account information not directly related to case matters

Redaction tools: Professional PDF editing software or permanent marker for printed documents

11 Implementation and Maintenance

11.1 Initial Setup Timeline

Complete these implementation steps within first week:

Day	Task	Time Required	Outcome
Day 1	Create folder structure	30 minutes	Basic organization in place
Day 1	Collect 10 most critical documents	1-2 hours	Foundation documents identified
Day 2	Apply naming conventions to files	1 hour	Standardized naming begins
Day 3	Create exhibit index (first draft)	1 hour	Initial catalog complete
Day 4	Build timeline (last 6 months)	2 hours	Chronology established
Day 5	Review and refine	1 hour	System operational

11.2 Ongoing Maintenance Schedule

Daily Tasks (5 minutes)

- Save any new evidence with proper naming
- Note any new events for timeline

Weekly Tasks (30 minutes)

- Update timeline with new events
- Add new documents to exhibit index
- Review discovery deadlines

Monthly Tasks (2 hours)

- Audit folder organization
- Update Bates stamp log
- Back up all files to secondary location
- Review upcoming court deadlines

Before Each Court Date (2-4 hours)

- Finalize exhibit package
- Print required copies
- Verify all exhibits are properly labeled
- Practice locating key documents quickly

11.3 Self-Represented Litigant Considerations

If you are representing yourself (appearing “pro se” or “pro per”), professional organization is even more critical because:

You Don’t Have Staff

Attorneys have paralegals and assistants who organize evidence. You are your own support team. Your organizational system must be robust enough that you can find any document within 30 seconds.

Judges Have Limited Patience

Pro se litigants often frustrate courts by being unable to locate documents. When the judge asks “Do you have evidence of that?” you need to respond immediately with “Yes, Your Honor, that’s Exhibit C, pages 4-5.”

Opposing Counsel Will Be Organized

If the other party has an attorney, their evidence will be professionally presented. Your presentation needs to match their level of professionalism to be taken equally seriously.

Self-Representation Success Factors

Factor	Impact	How This Guide Helps
Organization	High	Complete filing system
Presentation	High	Professional formatting
Preparation	High	Checklists and templates
Credibility	High	Systematic documentation

11.4 Technology Tools Comparison

You don’t need expensive software, but some tools can help:

Free Options:

Tool	Purpose	Notes
Google Drive	Cloud storage and backup	Free up to 15GB
Microsoft OneDrive	Cloud storage	Free up to 5GB
PDF24 Tools	PDF editing and Bates stamping	Browser-based, free
Google Sheets	Exhibit index and timeline	Free spreadsheet

Paid Options (If Budget Allows):

Tool	Purpose	Cost
Adobe Acrobat Pro	Professional PDF editing	Approx \$15/month
Clio	Legal case management	Starting \$39/month
MyCase	Document management	Starting \$39/month

The Truth About Technology:

Expensive software cannot fix poor organization habits. A well-maintained folder system with consistent naming conventions on your basic computer is more valuable than sophisticated software you don’t use properly.

11.5 Professional Assistance Resources

When additional support is required:

- **Legal counsel:** Consult qualified attorney for case-specific legal advice
- **Court assistance:** Utilize court self-help centers for procedural guidance
- **Document services:** Access court-provided forms and template resources
- **Technical support:** Seek library or community assistance for technology needs

11.6 System Effectiveness Principles

This organizational system achieves maximum effectiveness through consistent application. Regular maintenance, even ten minutes weekly, prevents the chaos that undermines case credibility.

Professional evidence organization demonstrates to the court that you are prepared, credible, and respectful of judicial process. This foundation supports effective case presentation regardless of legal complexity.

12 Bates Stamping Tutorial

12.1 What Are Bates Numbers?

Bates numbers are sequential identifiers stamped on every page of legal documents. They serve as permanent page “addresses” that never change, enabling precise references during proceedings.

Format Example: SMITH-000001 through SMITH-000547

- Prefix identifies the case or party
- Sequential number (6+ digits) provides unique page identification

12.2 Why Bates Stamping Matters

Benefit	Description
Easy Reference	“See Bates 00127” is precise and unambiguous
Page Verification	Easy to confirm all pages are present
Court Citations	Standard format judges and attorneys expect
Discovery Compliance	Required format for document production
Tamper Evidence	Sequential numbering shows if pages are missing

12.3 When to Apply Bates Numbers

- Before producing documents in discovery
- When creating exhibit packages for court
- After document collection is complete (don’t stamp documents you’re still gathering)
- Before making copies (stamp the original, then copy)

12.4 Bates Stamping Methods

Method 1: Adobe Acrobat Pro

1. Open PDF in Acrobat Pro

2. Go to Tools then Edit PDF then Add Header and Footer
3. Insert page number with custom prefix
4. Apply to all pages

Method 2: Free Online Tools

- PDF24 Tools (pdf24.org) - Free, browser-based
- Sejda PDF (sejda.com) - Limited free version
- ILovePDF (ilovepdf.com) - Basic Bates numbering

Method 3: Professional Services

For large document productions, consider legal copy services that provide professional Bates stamping with quality control.

12.5 Bates Stamping Best Practices

Do	Don't
Use consistent prefix throughout case	Change prefixes mid-case
Start with enough leading zeros (6+)	Use SMITH-1, SMITH-2 (hard to sort)
Keep a Bates log of number ranges	Lose track of which numbers are used
Stamp BEFORE making copies	Stamp different copies separately
Include Bates range in exhibit index	Forget to cross-reference

12.6 Bates Number Log Template

Document	Date Stamped	Bates Range	Page Count	Notes
Email correspondence bundle	2025-02-15	SMITH-000001 to 000047	47	Initial production
Text message screenshots	2025-02-15	SMITH-000048 to 000089	42	Verizon export
Financial records	2025-02-20	SMITH-000090 to 000156	67	Bank statements 2024

13 Discovery Response Workflow

13.1 Understanding Discovery

Discovery is the formal process of exchanging information between parties in litigation. Proper organization is critical because discovery responses are legal documents with deadlines and consequences.

13.2 Common Discovery Requests

Interrogatories: Written questions requiring written answers under oath

Requests for Production: Demands for documents, electronically stored information, or tangible items

Requests for Admission: Statements the other party must admit or deny

13.3 Discovery Response Checklist

Upon Receiving Discovery Requests:

- Note the deadline immediately (typically 30 days)
- Read each request carefully
- Identify which documents you have
- Identify which documents you need to obtain
- Note any objections (scope, relevance, privilege)

Preparing Your Response:

- Answer each request in order
- Be complete but don't volunteer extra information
- Apply Bates stamps to all documents being produced
- Create a production index
- Prepare privilege log if withholding documents

Quality Check Before Serving:

- All requests answered
- Bates numbers sequential and complete
- Privilege log prepared (if withholding documents)
- Signature and verification completed
- Proof of service prepared

13.4 Discovery Response Folder Structure

```
Discovery_Responses/
|-- 01_Incoming_Requests/
|   |-- 2025-02-01__Interrogatories_Set1.pdf
|   `-- 2025-02-01__RequestsForProduction_Set1.pdf
|-- 02_Response_Drafts/
|   |-- Interrogatory_Answers_DRAFT_v01.docx
|   `-- Interrogatory_Answers_DRAFT_v02.docx
|-- 03_Documents_To_Produce/
|   |-- Request_01_Documents/
|   |-- Request_02_Documents/
|   `-- Request_03_Documents/
|-- 04_Final_Responses/
|   |-- 2025-03-01__Interrogatory_Responses_FINAL.pdf
|   `-- 2025-03-01__Production_Response_FINAL.pdf
`-- 05_Proof_of_Service/
    `-- 2025-03-01__Certificate_of_Service.pdf
```

13.5 Common Discovery Deadlines

Jurisdiction	Standard Response Time	Notes
Federal Court	30 days	FRCP Rule 33, 34
Most State Courts	30 days	Check local rules
California	30 days (can extend to 35 by mail)	CCP 2030.260
Texas	30 days	TRCP 196-197

Important: Always verify deadlines with your specific court’s local rules.

14 Court Filing Checklist

14.1 Before You File: Document Preparation

- Document is in PDF format (most courts require this)
- Pages are numbered
- Text is legible and properly oriented
- Exhibits are clearly labeled
- Sensitive information is redacted (SSN, account numbers, minor children’s info)

14.2 Federal Court vs State Court Requirements

Requirement	Federal Court	State Court (varies)
Filing Method	CM/ECF electronic	Often paper or e-filing
Page Limits	Strict (check local rules)	Varies by jurisdiction
Font Requirements	Often 12pt, specific fonts	Varies
Margin Requirements	Usually 1 inch	Varies
Certificate of Service	Required	Required

14.3 Filing Checklist

The Document Itself:

- Correct case caption (names, case number)
- Proper title (Motion for..., Response to..., etc.)
- Page numbers on every page
- Signature (electronic or wet signature as required)
- Date

Required Attachments:

- Proposed order (if filing a motion)
- Certificate of service
- Exhibits with exhibit list
- Filing fee or fee waiver (if applicable)

Copies Required:

- Original for the court
- Copy for each opposing party
- Copy for yourself
- Extra copies for judge’s chambers (check local rules)

14.4 Common Filing Mistakes to Avoid

Mistake	Consequence	Prevention
Missing deadline	Motion denied or sanctions	Calendar all deadlines immediately
Wrong case number	Document filed in wrong case	Triple-check caption
Missing certificate of service	Filing rejected	Use checklist every time
Exhibits not attached	Court cannot consider evidence	Review before filing
Wrong number of copies	Filing rejected	Check local rules

15 Common Mistakes to Avoid

15.1 The “Fatal Five” Organizational Errors

These mistakes can seriously damage your credibility with the court:

1. Naming Mismatches

The Problem: Your exhibit index says “Exhibit A” but your document is labeled “Exhibit 1”

Prevention: Cross-check every exhibit label against your index before filing.

2. Missing Pages

The Problem: Page 3 of 5 is mysteriously absent from your exhibit

Prevention: Count pages after scanning/copying. Use Bates stamps to verify completeness.

3. Wrong Dates

The Problem: Your timeline says January 15 but the document is dated January 25

Prevention: Double-check dates against source documents. When uncertain, note the uncertainty.

4. Illegible Copies

The Problem: Your crucial text message screenshot is too blurry to read

Prevention: Test print or zoom before finalizing. Retype content if necessary (with notation that it’s a transcription).

5. No Organization System

The Problem: You can’t find the document the judge just asked about

Prevention: Use this guide’s system. Practice retrieving documents before hearings.

15.2 Recovery Strategies

If you discover an error:

- Before filing: Fix it immediately
- After filing but before hearing: File a correction or amended document
- During hearing: Acknowledge the error honestly, provide correct information

Judges appreciate honesty about mistakes far more than attempts to cover them up.

16 Appendix: Quick Reference Templates

16.1 Exhibit Index Template

Exhibit	Date	Description	Source	Bates Numbers
A	2025-01-15	Email re: schedule change	Opposing party	001-003
B	2025-01-20	Text - cancellation	Phone screenshot	004-005
C	2025-01-22	School incident report	School district	006-010
D	2025-02-01	Medical records	Dr. Smith	011-025
E	2025-02-15	Financial statement	Bank of America	026-030

16.2 Timeline Template

Date	Time	Event	Participants	Exhibit
2025-01-15	15:30	Received schedule change request	Self, Ex	A
2025-01-18	14:00	Regular visitation occurred	Self, Ex, Child	None
2025-01-20	11:45	Visitation cancelled (work emergency)	Self, Ex	B
2025-01-22	16:15	School reports behavioral concerns	Self, Teacher	C

16.3 File Naming Quick Reference

Format: YYYY-MM-DD__TYPE__DESCRIPTION__SOURCE__v01.ext

Common Types:

- EMAIL - Email correspondence
- TEXT - Text messages/SMS
- PHOTO - Photographs
- VIDEO - Video files
- REPORT - Official reports
- LEGAL - Legal documents
- FINANCIAL - Financial records
- MEDICAL - Medical records

Examples:

- 2025-01-15__EMAIL__CustodyScheduleRequest__ExSpouse__v01.pdf
- 2025-01-20__TEXT__VisitationCancellation__PhoneScreenshot__v01.png
- 2025-02-01__REPORT__PoliceIncident__LocalPD__v01.pdf

17 Conclusion: Your Path Forward

Effective document organization is not about creating the most elaborate system—it's about consistency, accuracy, and accessibility.

17.1 Key Takeaways

Organization is Credibility: Judges notice when parties are prepared. A well-organized case presentation signals that your claims are carefully considered and supported by evidence.

Start Simple, Stay Consistent: You don't need expensive software to organize your case. A consistent folder structure, logical naming conventions, and thorough indexing are more important than fancy tools.

The System Saves Time: The hours you invest now in organization will save many more hours during discovery, trial preparation, and court appearances.

Evidence Tells Stories: Your organized documents should tell a coherent story. Chronological timelines, clear exhibit labels, and professional Bates stamping transform scattered papers into persuasive evidence.

17.2 Your Implementation Checklist

Before your next court date, make sure you have:

- A consistent folder structure for all case documents
- A standardized file naming convention that you're actually using
- A complete exhibit index with descriptions
- A chronological timeline of key events
- Bates stamps on all documents being submitted
- At least one backup of all digital files

17.3 Final Thoughts

Systematic evidence organization forms the foundation of effective legal representation. Whether representing yourself or working with counsel, professional document management enhances case credibility and facilitates efficient legal proceedings.

The techniques outlined in this guide provide a framework for transforming disorganized evidence into a comprehensive, court-ready presentation. When you can instantly locate any document, cite any page by Bates number, and reference any event in your timeline, you demonstrate to the court that your case deserves serious consideration.

Remember: The goal is not perfection, but consistency. Start with the basics, maintain your system diligently, and build upon it as your case develops.

Good luck with your case.

About This Guide

This guide was created by PROPER.legal to help self-represented litigants and legal professionals organize case documentation effectively. For digital tools that implement these organizational principles automatically, visit proper.legal.

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