

The Nine Boxes

A plain-English map of a typical evidentiary hearing. Roles can reverse who presents first; confirm your court's procedure.

1. Check-in What happens: Security, clerk check-in, then set up. Your one job: Arrive early with exhibits and binder in order. Avoid: One unsorted folder.	2. Preliminary matters What happens: The judge confirms people, exhibits, stipulations, and time. Your one job: Make each needed request in one sentence. Avoid: Arguing the whole case during housekeeping.	3. Openings What happens: Each side briefly frames the hearing; sometimes openings are skipped. Your one job: Name what the judge is deciding and one central idea. Avoid: Giving a speech.	4. Their case What happens: Their witnesses testify and their exhibits are offered. Your one job: Listen and write down useful admissions or contradictions. Avoid: Objecting so often that you stop listening.	5. Your cross What happens: You question each witness right after their direct testimony. Your one job: Ask short, leading, one-fact questions. Stop when the fact is locked. Avoid: Arguing with the witness.
6. They may call you What happens: The other side may question you during its case. Your one job: Give short, true answers to only what was asked. Avoid: Volunteering extra material.	7. Your case What happens: You present testimony, witnesses, and exhibits. Your one job: Tie each fact to a document and offer each document when you use it. Avoid: Talking about a document you never offered.	8. Their cross of you What happens: They question you about your testimony. Your one job: One sentence, then stop. Avoid: Getting defensive; save argument for closing.	9. Closing and ruling What happens: Each side sums up; the judge rules now or later in writing. Your one job: Return to one idea and say exactly what order you want. Avoid: Spending your reserved closing time earlier.	

The six-step exhibit ritual 1 “I’m showing what’s marked Exhibit ____.” Give copies to the clerk, witness, and other side. 2 “Do you recognize this? What is it?” Let the witness identify it. 3 “True and accurate copy?” Authentication is witness-specific. 4 “I offer Exhibit ____.” Nothing counts until it is offered and admitted. 5 Answer any objection in one sentence. Then stop and let the judge rule. 6 “Thank you, Your Honor.” Then USE it. Show the judge what the admitted exhibit proves.			If your mind goes blank “Your Honor, I need a moment to check my outline. The point I need to return to is what the court must decide today.” Find your next box. Structure survives interruption because you only need the next step—not every lost word. Nothing is auto-admitted. Authentication is witness-specific. A rule name is not its elements. Reserve closing time first.
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