The Federal Court System

- In a civil case, a court settles a disagreement between two parties to recover damages or receive compensation.

- In a criminal case, a court determines whether a person accused of breaking the law is guilty or not guilty of a misdemeanor or a felony.

- The goal of the legal system is equal justice under the law.

- **The Federal Courts Pyramid**

  - **Exclusive Jurisdiction**:
    1. the Constitution
    2. violations of federal laws
    3. controversies between states
    4. disputes between parties from different states
    5. suits by or against the federal government
    6. foreign governments and treaties
    7. admiralty and maritime laws
    8. U.S. diplomats
How Federal Courts are Organized

- **District courts** are the federal courts where trials are held and lawsuits are begun.
  - All states have at least one. Virginia has two.
  - District courts have *original jurisdiction*, the authority to hear the case for the first time.
  - District courts hear both civil and criminal cases.
  - They are the only federal courts that involve witnesses and juries.

- People who lose in a district court often appeal to the next highest level – **U.S. Court of Appeals**.
  - Appeals courts review decisions made in lower district courts.
  - Appellate jurisdiction is the authority to hear a case appealed from a lower court.
  - Appeals courts do not hold trials.
  - Instead a panel of judges reviews the case records and listens to arguments from lawyers on both sides.
  - Appeals courts do not decide guilt or innocence or which side should win a suit.
  - They rule only on whether the original trial was fair and protected the person’s rights.
  - Most appeals court decisions are final.
  - A few cases are appealed to the Supreme Court.

- **U.S. Attorney**
  - A government lawyer who prosecutes people accused of breaking federal laws
  - Represents the U.S. in civil cases involving the government

The United States Supreme Court

- Supreme Court Jurisdiction – limited original and appellate
  - The Supreme Court has original jurisdiction only in cases involving foreign diplomats or a state.
  - All other cases come to the Court on appeal.

- The Supreme Court chooses the cases it hears.
- Eight associate justices and one chief justice make up the Supreme Court. (9 justices total)
- The Court’s main job is to decide whether laws and government actions are constitutional, or allowed by the Constitution.
- It does this through judicial review.
  - The Constitution does NOT give the Supreme Court the power of judicial review—the power to say whether any law or government action goes against the Constitution.
  - The Court CLAIMED the power when it decided the case of *Marbury v. Madison*. 
Deciding Cases at the Supreme Court

- Of the more than 7,000 applications each year, the Court agrees to hear fewer than 200.
- They usually select cases that involve important constitutional issues and cases that affect the entire nation.
- Reasons for Court Decisions:
  - The law is supposed to be the most important influence on a justice’s decision.
  - Justices consider how the language of the Constitution applies to the case.
  - They rely heavily on precedents, a ruling that is used as the basis for a judicial decision in a later, similar case.
  - By following precedents, courts make the law predictable and consistent.
  - At the same time, the law must be flexible to adapt to changing times.
  - The justices can overrule outdated precedents.
  - Social conditions also influence Court decisions.
  - When social conditions change, the Court may make new interpretations of the law.

Functions of Law

- Laws guarantee individual liberties because they are binding on everyone.
- To discourage criminal acts, laws set punishments and establish a justice system to enforce the laws.
- Laws also set rules to resolve civil disputes.
- To be effective, laws must be fair and treat all people equally.
- Ordinary people must be able to understand them, and government must be able to enforce them.
- Most people will obey reasonable laws.

Criminal and Civil Law

- Criminal laws seek to prevent people from deliberately or recklessly harming each other or each other’s property.
- Supporters claim that it is the best system to bring out the facts of a case.
- In criminal cases, the government is always the plaintiff—the party that brings charges against the defendant—the individual or group being sued.
- Most criminal cases are titled in terms of the state against the defendant.
- Felonies are serious crimes, such as murder, rape, and robbery.
- Misdemeanors are less serious offenses, such as vandalism or stealing inexpensive items.
- Misdemeanors are usually punished with a fine or jail sentence of less than one year.
• Civil cases involve disputes between people or groups, in which no criminal laws have been broken.
• A civil case is called a lawsuit—a legal action in which a person or group sues to collect damages for some harm done.
• In civil cases, the plaintiff believes the defendant is to blame for some damage or loss of something of value.
• The dispute may involve a contract in which one party believes the other did not fulfill the terms of the agreement.

Legal Protections in the U.S. Constitution
• The Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments guarantee due process of law—the government may not take our lives, liberty, or property without the proper exercise of law.
  • Fifth Amendment = prohibits the federal government from acting in an unfair manner
  • Fourteenth Amendment = prohibits state and local governments from acting in an unfair manner
• The Supreme Court has extended the guarantees of the Bill of Rights, based upon the due process clause.

Rights of People Accused of Crimes
• The accused has a right to an impartial jury trial.
  • Impartial means that jury members must not know anyone involved in the case and must not have made up their minds before trial.
• Few criminal cases come to trial. Most are settled through plea bargaining.
  • The defense attorney and prosecutor negotiate.
  • The prosecutor offers the defendant a chance to plead guilty to a less serious crime in exchange for receiving a less severe penalty.
  • A judge must agree to the plea bargain.
• Bail is money an arrested person pays to a court to win release from jail while awaiting trial.
  • Its purpose is to guarantee that the person will return for trial.
  • After the trial, the person gets the money back.

Our Legal Responsibilities
• Americans have a duty to
  • serve on a jury and testify in court.
  • obey laws and cooperate with law enforcement officials.
• Americans have a responsibility to work peacefully to change unfair, outdated laws.
Types of Civil Lawsuits

- In civil cases the **plaintiff**—the party bringing a lawsuit—claims to have suffered a loss and usually seeks damages, an award of money from the defendant.
- The **defendant**—the party being sued—argues either that the loss did not occur or that the defendant is not responsible for it.

What Happens in a Civil Case?

- A lawsuit starts when the plaintiff’s lawyer files a **complaint**—a formal statement naming the plaintiff and the defendant and describing the nature of the suit.
- The court then sends the defendant a **summons**, a document telling him of the suit and requiring him to appear in court at a certain time.
- The defendant may respond by having his lawyer file an “answer” to the complaint.
- The answer may admit to the charges or deny responsibility.
- Most civil cases are settled before trial for several reasons.
  - Expensive, time-consuming, parties know the outcome, don’t have to wait years for a trial
- If the parties do not settle, the case goes to trial.
- If the losing side believes the judge made errors or some injustice occurred, it may appeal to a higher court.

The Steps in a Civil Lawsuit

1. Complaint is filed by plaintiff
2. Response by defendant
3. Trial
4. Appeals

Types of Criminal Cases

- In criminal law cases the government charges someone with a crime and is always the prosecution.
- The accused person is the defendant.
- A **crime** is an act that breaks a federal or state criminal law and causes harm to people or society in general.
- **Felonies** are serious crimes, and **misdemeanors** are minor violations.
What Happens in a Criminal Case?

- Arrest
- Jail/Bail
- Arraignment
  - Review of probable cause
  - Attorney appointed
  - Plea entered
- Court date set
- Trial
- Guilty verdict may be appealed

The Juvenile System

- Anyone under age 18 is considered a juvenile—not yet legally an adult.
- Our system treats young people who commit crimes—called juvenile delinquents—somewhat differently from adults.
- The main goal of juvenile courts is to try to rehabilitate, or correct a person’s behavior, rather than punish.
- Today, juvenile courts try to do whatever is best for the young person.
- The system tries to protect juveniles by keeping their identities and criminal records secret.
- In some cases, records may be erased when the offender becomes an adult.
- Juveniles have the right to counsel, the right to confront witnesses, and the right not to be forced to incriminate themselves.