

The U.S. court system exists to interpret and apply the law. That is its core function. Courts do not write laws. That is the job of Congress. Courts do not enforce laws. That is the job of the executive branch (police, agencies, president). Courts interpret laws and decide disputes.

The United States has two major court systems: the federal court system and the state court systems. They operate separately but sometimes overlap. Federal courts handle cases involving federal law, constitutional issues, disputes between states, and certain other specific matters. State courts handle most criminal cases, family law, contracts, property disputes, and state law issues.

Start with structure.

The federal court system has three main levels: District Courts, Courts of Appeals, and the Supreme Court.

District Courts are trial courts. A trial court is where a case begins. This is where evidence is presented, witnesses testify, and facts are determined. There are 94 federal district courts across the country. If someone is charged with a federal crime — like federal drug trafficking or tax fraud — the trial happens in a district court.

A trial involves two sides: the plaintiff and the defendant in civil cases, or the government and the defendant in criminal cases. A civil case is a dispute between individuals or organizations over rights, money, or responsibilities. A criminal case is when the government charges someone with breaking a law.

In a district court, there may be a jury. A jury is a group of citizens selected to hear evidence and determine facts. The judge oversees the trial, ensures rules are followed, and may decide certain legal issues.

Above the District Courts are the Courts of Appeals, also called Circuit Courts. There are 13 federal appellate circuits. An appellate court does not retry the case. It does not hear new witnesses. It reviews the trial to determine whether legal errors occurred.

A legal error means the judge misapplied the law, allowed improper evidence, or violated constitutional rights. The appellate court can affirm the lower court (meaning it agrees), reverse it (meaning it disagrees), or remand it (meaning send it back for further action).

Above the Courts of Appeals is the Supreme Court of the United States. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the country. It has nine justices. A justice is a judge on the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court does not hear most cases automatically. It chooses which cases to review. This selection process is called granting certiorari. Certiorari means the Court

agrees to review the case. It takes four justices to grant review. This is known as the Rule of Four.

The Supreme Court mainly hears cases involving constitutional questions, federal law disputes, or conflicts between federal appellate courts.

Now we must talk about jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction means legal authority to hear a case. Not every court can hear every case. Federal courts have limited jurisdiction. They can only hear cases allowed by the Constitution or federal statute.

State courts have broader jurisdiction. Most legal disputes in America are handled in state courts.

Now we introduce judicial review.

Judicial review is the power of courts to declare laws unconstitutional. If a law violates the Constitution, the court can strike it down. This power was established in 1803 in a case called *Marbury v. Madison*. Judicial review is one of the most powerful tools in American government.

The Constitution is the highest law in the United States. If Congress passes a law that conflicts with the Constitution, the courts can invalidate it.

Now let's discuss the difference between civil and criminal law more clearly.

Criminal law involves offenses against society. The government prosecutes the accused. If convicted, the person may face jail, fines, or probation.

Civil law involves disputes between private parties. One person sues another for damages, contracts, injury, or property disputes. The result is usually monetary compensation or court orders.

Now we discuss standards of proof.

In criminal cases, the standard is "beyond a reasonable doubt." This means the jury must be almost certain of guilt. It is the highest standard in law because someone's liberty is at stake.

In civil cases, the standard is "preponderance of the evidence." This means more likely than not — over 50 percent likelihood.

Now let's talk about federal judges.

Federal judges are nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate. They serve for life, unless they resign, retire, or are impeached. Lifetime appointment is meant to

protect judicial independence. Judicial independence means judges can make decisions without fear of losing their job for political reasons.

Judges interpret statutes. A statute is a law passed by a legislative body. Judges also interpret constitutional provisions.

Interpretation styles vary. Some judges favor originalism, meaning interpreting the Constitution based on its original meaning at the time it was written. Others favor a living Constitution approach, meaning interpretation may adapt to modern circumstances.

Now we discuss checks and balances.

The judicial branch checks the legislative and executive branches by reviewing laws and executive actions. However, courts cannot enforce their rulings alone. They rely on the executive branch to carry out decisions.

Now let's talk about precedent.

Precedent means prior court decisions that guide future decisions. Courts follow precedent to maintain consistency. This principle is called *stare decisis*, which means "to stand by things decided."

If the Supreme Court overturns precedent, it changes legal interpretation for the entire country.

Now let's examine how a case reaches the Supreme Court.

A case starts at trial level. One side appeals to the appellate court. If they lose there, they can petition the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court accepts only a small percentage of cases — usually around 1 percent of petitions.

When the Supreme Court hears a case, both sides submit written arguments called briefs. Oral arguments are then presented. Afterward, the justices deliberate privately and issue a written opinion.

An opinion explains the Court's reasoning. The majority opinion reflects the view of at least five justices. A dissenting opinion disagrees with the majority. A concurring opinion agrees with the outcome but for different reasons.

Now let's zoom out.

The court system exists to resolve disputes peacefully under the rule of law. The rule of law means no one is above the law — not citizens, not presidents.

Courts protect constitutional rights. Rights include freedom of speech, religion, due process, equal protection, and more.

Due process means fair legal procedures before the government can deprive someone of life, liberty, or property.

Equal protection means the law must treat individuals fairly and not discriminate unjustly.

The U.S. court system is layered, structured, and slow by design. Slowness allows careful review and protects against rushed injustice.

At its core, U.S. courts serve three main functions: interpret laws, resolve disputes, and protect constitutional rights.

If you truly understand the structure — trial courts find facts, appellate courts review law, the Supreme Court settles major constitutional questions — you understand the backbone of American judicial power.