

Litigating in **Multiple California Counties:** a Local Court Survival Guide

It's a nightmare as old as the practice of law. Those painstaking hours you spent preparing a filing for your client in another county? Wasted because you didn't know the judge's preferences. Your motion? Rejected at the eleventh hour because of an obscure local rule buried in an unfamiliar county's procedural guidelines.

Litigating across California's 58 counties can feel like navigating a labyrinth with shifting walls and a floor that can drop out at any minute. While [statewide rules](#) establish the foundations for how filings, hearings and other procedural steps are handled, each county layers its specific requirements on top, creating major variations. A motion rejected in Contra Costa County might be accepted in Los Angeles — and that's without accounting for differences in how judges prefer to manage cases and operate their courtrooms.

More than inconveniences, these hurdles pose serious risks for California litigators — particularly in high-stakes matters where accuracy and timing are crucial. Without county-specific guidance, filings can be delayed, hearings mismanaged and critical deadlines missed, all of which can put a case in jeopardy.

Here are the key questions to ask before filing in a new county, including practical strategies for navigating California's patchwork of local court rules and county-specific guidance.

1 What are the county's filing requirements?

Not all counties treat filings the same way, and this can trigger costly mistakes if you don't thoroughly research the requirements beforehand. Start by determining whether the county mandates electronic filing or still accepts paper submissions. Larger counties, such as Los Angeles and San Diego, might have more robust e-filing systems than smaller or rural counties.

Once you know the filing format, consider:

- **Formatting rules:** Check for requirements such as font size, line spacing, margins, cover pages or colored backing sheets.
- **Attachments and exhibits:** Some counties require attorneys to attach declarations, exhibits or additional forms in a particular order or format. Missing even one required attachment could result in your filing being rejected.
- **Submission deadlines:** Filing cutoff times can vary widely. Some counties might have strict 5 p.m. deadlines while others might allow filings until midnight.
- **Recent updates:** Relying on outdated information can be just as dangerous as overlooking the rules altogether. Always double-check the court's local rules and website for any new procedures, deadlines or forms.





2 Are there unique rules for hearings?

Individual counties — and even courts — often have their own rules and preferences for hearings. These rules can cover multiple procedures, including how appearances are made and how evidence is presented. Wrapping your arms around these requirements ahead of time can make or break your courtroom strategy.

County-specific hearing rules can include:

- **Remote vs. in-person:** Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many counties have adopted hybrid systems allowing litigants to appear via video conferencing platforms, but some courts may still require in-person attendance for certain hearings. Verify the format in advance of the hearing to ensure both you and your client can get there if necessary or that you have the required software for a hassle-free video appearance, as well as the ability to submit evidence digitally.
- **Exhibit submission rules:** Some counties require exhibit binders to be submitted a few days before a hearing, while others accept them on the same day but impose strict formatting rules. If the judge expects to see binders with numbered exhibits in a particular order, showing up without them could delay the hearing or result in your evidence being excluded.
- **Technology use:** Courts are increasingly integrating technology into hearings, with some mandating digital copies of evidence and relying on particular platforms for presenting it. Familiarize yourself with the court's IT setup and check for any procedures around displaying exhibits, using specific file types, following image resolution requirements or uploading exhibits.
- **Time limits and etiquette:** Oral arguments in certain counties come with strict time limits. Knowing how much time you have to present your case — and ensuring you're respecting the court's time — is crucial.

3 Does the judge have special preferences?

No court is a monolith; every judge has their own style and preferences, and it's worth getting to know what they are. Judges will often issue standing orders or individual courtroom rules, which can run the gamut from formatting particularities to oral argument guidelines and technological preferences. Some judges prefer formal, structured presentations, while others permit more flexibility in how arguments are made. Likewise, one judge might expect formal courtroom etiquette, such as requiring attorneys to stand when addressing the court, while another tends to take a more relaxed approach.

Grasping these nuances before appearing in their courtroom not only lowers the risk of procedural setbacks but also helps build a positive rapport with the judge. Before appearing in a judge's courtroom, take the time to review their standing orders or courtroom rules. If they're not available online, contact court staff or local counsel to confirm any expectations.

4 What service-of-process requirements apply?

While California has statewide guidelines for service to ensure defendants have a fair opportunity to respond to allegations against them, many counties impose additional rules or have different deadlines. Overlooking these discrepancies can be a costly mistake, triggering delays, missed deadlines and even dismissal of a case.

Key considerations include:

- **Deadlines and timing:** Some counties have stricter timelines for serving documents and might also expect proof of service to be filed immediately or within a certain number of days.
- **Proof of service requirements:** Deadlines aside, the rules for how and when proof of service must be submitted can differ by county. For some courts, proof of service must be filed with the initial pleading or within a few days of service, but others might allow it to be filed later in a case.
- **Mode of service:** Personal service tends to be the preferred approach, but some counties allow service by mail, publication or other methods under specific conditions. The rules around how and when these methods can be used will differ, so it's essential to review them before attempting to serve a lawsuit.
- **Serving particular parties:** The rules can also vary depending on who's being served. If the defendant is a government agency, for example, there will likely be additional steps or specific individuals to serve – a process for which each county might have different forms or protocols.
- **Case-specific requirements:** Some practice areas have their own set of service-of-process rules. Family law cases, for instance, can involve specific rules about serving temporary restraining orders, while eviction cases often include rules around notice periods and formats.

5 The CEB Practitioner advantage

Juggling cases in multiple counties can be daunting, but developing a system for tracking local rules and procedures is half the battle. While many platforms track court procedures on a national scale, not all have state and county information baked in. [CEB's OnLAW® Pro + Practitioner](#) gets granular with hyper-local insights for California's 20 most populous counties — where the vast majority of litigation occurs — as well as guides for district courts across the state.

If you're litigating a trusts and estates case in Alameda County, for example, Practitioner includes county-specific explainers for [managing discovery](#), scheduling and preparing for [case management conferences](#), navigating [trusts and estates litigation rules](#) and obtaining a [default judgment](#).

If you regularly practice in multiple counties, consider creating a tailored checklist for each one to track procedural differences and streamline your preparation. When filing in an unfamiliar county for the first time, don't forget about the straightforward but effective approach of reaching out to the clerk's office for clarity and consulting with local counsel for on-the-ground insights.

Mastering California's microjurisdictions

Depending on the county where it's filed, the same motion can meet drastically different fates, and intricate procedural differences can trip up even the most seasoned attorneys. In a profession where precision and preparation are everything, the risks of operating without a clear understanding of local rules are too great — and avoidable — to ignore. By prioritizing preparation, tapping into resources and tracking local requirements and judge-specific preferences, you can turn a potential nightmare into a manageable process.

Enlist CEB to help you juggle litigation in multiple California counties by requesting a [free trial](#) or [scheduling a quick demo](#).



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