

Civil Jury Instruction Template
Plaintiff v. Defendant, docket no. xxx
Jury Instructions

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INTRODUCTION

Jurors, thank you for serving on this jury. Jury service is a very important part of our democratic self-government. You are responsible to uphold the law and our principles of justice. That is what you promised to do at the start of this trial when you took your oath as a juror.

You must carefully consider all of the evidence, decide who and what to believe, and then answer specific questions that I will discuss with you.

[< *If not splitting the charge*> This final part of the trial will take place in two steps. The attorneys will make their closing arguments, where they will summarize the evidence and suggest conclusions you may reach. The defense attorney will argue first and the plaintiff's attorney will argue last.¹ After the closing arguments, I will provide you with final instructions. You will then work together to reach a verdict.]

< *IF NOT SPLITTING THE CHARGE, PAUSE HERE FOR CLOSING ARGUMENTS*>

[< *If splitting the charge*> This final part of the trial will take place in three steps. I will give you instructions about the law you must apply when deciding the questions we need you to answer to resolve this case. Then, the attorneys will make their closing arguments, where they will summarize the evidence and suggest conclusions you may reach. The defense attorney will argue first and the plaintiff's attorney will argue last. After the closing arguments, I will give you general instructions that apply in every case. You will then work together to reach a verdict.]

< *continue here whether splitting the charge or not*>

Please pay close attention to my instructions. All of my instructions are important, and you must follow all of them even if you do not agree with them.

¹ If plaintiff's counsel asks the jury to award a specific amount of damages, and did not disclose that amount in advance, some judges allow defense counsel to make a short response.

To make sure that I give you the instructions accurately, I will read them to you. You will also get a written copy so you can [read along if you wish and] refer to them in the jury room during your deliberations.

I will do my best to make sure that the instructions I give when speaking with you match the written instructions. If there is any difference between what I say aloud and what the written instructions say, please follow what I say aloud.

< *if recording provided* > I will also give you a recording of my oral instructions.² That way, when you deliberate you can listen again to any part of what I am about to tell you.

STANDARD OF PROOF

When a person [company/business] files a civil case, s/he/it has the burden of proof. That means that she/he/it must present enough evidence to prove his/her/its claims. What is enough evidence?

I will tell you in a minute each of the specific things that PLF must prove. PLF must show that each of these things is **more likely true than not true**. The lawyers or I may use the phrase “more probable than not,” and that means the same thing as “more likely true than not true.”³

Now, from time to time, I will refer to proof or to proving something. By this, I mean showing that PLF’s version of the facts is more likely true than

² *Commonwealth v. Baseler*, 419 Mass. 500, 505–506 (1995) (judge may provide jury with recording of entire oral charge without parties’ consent).

³ This model instruction does not use the phrase “preponderance of the evidence,” because such legal language often confuses jurors. Some judges may prefer to use that traditional phrase, either on the court’s own initiative, or in response to a party’s request or objection. If a party starts using that phrase in front of the jury, a judge may find it necessary to explain the meaning of “preponderance of the evidence,” instead of leaving the jury to wonder what it means. The judge may want to explain: “The parties may refer to proof by a ‘preponderance of the evidence,’ but that legal phrase simply means the same thing I have told you, namely proof that something is more likely true than not true.” See, e.g., *Sargent v. Mass. Accident Co.*, 307 Mass. 246, 250 (1940).

not true, based upon evidence and any reasonable conclusions from the evidence.

If you find that the evidence supporting PLF's version of the facts is more persuasive, then you must decide in favor of PLF. But if you find that the evidence supporting DFT's version of the facts is more persuasive, or that the evidence on the two sides is equally persuasive—50/50—then you must decide in favor of DFT.

<If D has the burden of proof on any issue> There are some issues on which DFT has the burden of proof, and I'll explain those later. But where DFT has the burden of proof on a particular issue, DFT similarly must show that something is more likely true than not true.

<Optional Comparison with criminal cases> Because this is a civil case, we do not use the rule that applies in a criminal case. In other words, PLF does not have to prove his/her/its claims beyond a reasonable doubt the way the government must in a criminal case. In civil cases like this one, even if you still have some doubts, and even if those doubts are reasonable, you can still decide in favor of PLF as long as s/he/it has presented the more persuasive evidence.

[*<Optional Illustration>* You are probably familiar with balance scales, like the scales of justice. PLF must provide proof that is convincing enough to tip the scales, however slightly, toward his/her/its claim(s) being true or correct, in your view as the jury. If the scales tip toward PLF, even a little bit, then PLF has proven the claim(s). But if the scales remain exactly balanced, not tending toward either side at all, or if they tip toward DFT at all, then PLF has not proven the claim(s).]

The number of witnesses or exhibits on each side is not necessarily important. The side with fewer witnesses or exhibits may be more convincing. It doesn't matter who called a witness, asked a particular question, or introduced an exhibit. What you are weighing is the persuasive force of the evidence.

REACHING A VERDICT

When you go to the jury room, you will need to answer a series of questions. Because this is a civil case, you may reach a verdict so long as 5/6 of you agree on the answer to a particular question. Since all 14 jurors are deliberating, 12 of you must agree on the answer to a particular question in order to reach a verdict. However, it does not have to be the same 12 jurors that agree on each answer. [*or 11/13, 10/12, 10/11, 9/10, 8/9, 7/8, 6/7, 5/6*]

QUESTIONS FOR THE JURY TO ANSWER

I will now explain to you the legal rules you must apply to decide each of the questions that we are asking you to answer in this case.

Q.1 <describe>.

<add instruction>

<If Splitting the Charge: (i) Sidebar with counsel, ask if any objections to substantive instructions; (ii) Correct or clarify instructions as necessary or appropriate; (iii) Pause here for Closing Arguments, then tell jurors you must give them some additional instructions >

ROLE OF THE JURY

Jurors, you have the most important role in this trial, because you are the ones who must decide who and what to believe, and answer each of the questions that I have discussed with you.

You must be completely fair and unbiased in your work as jurors. Do not let your emotions, any kind of prejudice, or your personal likes or dislikes influence you in any way. Consider the evidence calmly and carefully. Do not be influenced by the nature of the claim[s] or the possible consequences of your verdict. And do not let your personal feelings influence your decision.

EVALUATING THE EVIDENCE

You must decide this case based **only** on the evidence presented at the trial. You may not decide this case based on anything else. Do not consider anything you have read, heard, or seen outside of this courtroom. Those things are **not** evidence. And you may not base your verdict on suspicion, guesswork, or speculation.

What is Evidence

As I told you earlier, you must decide this case based only on the evidence presented at trial. The evidence consists of the testimony of witnesses, as you recall it, and the things that were marked as exhibits. You will have the exhibits with you in the jury room. *<explain any exception, such as dangerous materials>* [*<if relevant>* Things that were marked only for identification are not exhibits, and you will not be able to consider them.]

<If any Stipulation> In addition, as you heard during the trial, the plaintiff[s] and defendant[s] agreed that certain things are true. You must accept those things as true.⁴

<If any Redaction> As you review the exhibits, you may find that some information has been removed because it is not relevant. Please ignore that and don't try to guess what may have been removed or why.

Other things are not evidence and you may **not** consider them when deciding this case.

- Questions that a lawyer asked of a witness are not evidence. Only the answers are evidence. For example, if a lawyer asked "wasn't it raining outside" and the witness answered "no"—or said "well, it was cloudy"—the question is not evidence that it was raining.

⁴ See *Commonwealth v. Triplett*, 398 Mass. 561, 570 (1986) ("If controvertible facts are agreed to by stipulation, those facts no longer are at issue and must be accepted by the fact finder. A stipulation as to testimony, in contrast, leaves to the trier of fact its role of determining the facts based on the agreed evidence....").

- If a lawyer asked a question, and I sustained an objection and therefore the witness did not answer it, then neither the question nor the fact that the witness did not answer is evidence.
- If I struck, or told you to disregard, any part or all of an answer by a witness, then that part of the testimony is not evidence and you may not consider it.
- Anything that you may have seen or heard when the court was not in session is not evidence.
- The opening statements and the closing arguments of the lawyers are not evidence. And if your memory of the testimony differs from the attorneys', you should rely on your memory.
- Any notes that you have taken are not evidence. But you may use your notes to refresh your memory of the evidence.

Direct and Indirect Evidence

As you know, evidence can come in many forms. It can be testimony about what someone saw, heard, smelled, or felt. It can be someone's opinion. And it can be an exhibit.

Some evidence proves a fact directly. For example, if a witness testifies that she saw and felt it raining outside before she came into the courthouse, then that is direct evidence that it was raining.

Some evidence proves a fact indirectly. For example, let's say a witness testifies that he saw someone come into the courthouse wearing a wet raincoat and shaking water off an umbrella. That is indirect evidence that, if you believe it, might lead you to conclude that it was raining outside even though the witness did not see, hear, or feel the rain.

This kind of indirect evidence does not directly prove that something is true, but it is evidence from which you could logically conclude that it is. We call this "drawing an inference." We all draw inferences every day; we take some information that we know, we apply our intelligence and common sense, and then we reach a conclusion. But inferences must be

based on facts; they can't just be guesses that you make when you're not sure about something.⁵

Sometimes you can draw more than one inference. You have to decide which inferences are reasonable, and decide which seems more reasonable to you.⁶

It makes no difference whether evidence is direct or indirect. A party in a lawsuit may be able to prove that something happened with direct evidence, indirect evidence, or a combination of both.

Credibility

A very important part of your job as jurors is to decide who and what to believe. You may believe everything a witness says, part of it, or none of it.

Sometimes people do not tell the truth. You must decide whether a witness was being truthful, or was deliberately lying. If you conclude that a witness lied to you about something, then of course you should not believe that part of the testimony.

Sometimes people make an honest mistake. You must also decide whether a witness testified accurately, or whether the witness may have gotten something wrong without meaning to do so. A witness may recall seeing or hearing something, but actually be mistaken.

For example, the witness might not have paid close attention or might have misunderstood what was happening. Or a witness's memory of what happened could be incorrect.

⁵ See, e.g., *Commonwealth v. Dostie*, 425 Mass. 372, 376 (1995); see also *Commonwealth v. Marrero*, 427 Mass. 65, 73 (1998) (proof of inferences).

⁶ See, e.g., *Commonwealth v. Miranda*, 458 Mass. 100, 113 (2010); *Commonwealth v. Anderson*, 448 Mass. 548, 563 (2007); *Commonwealth v. Kelley*, 359 Mass. 77, 94 (1971).

If you conclude that a witness tried to be truthful but that some part of the person's testimony was not accurate, then you should not consider the inaccurate testimony.

How do you decide whether you believe particular statements by a witness?

Ask yourself:

- Did the testimony seem reasonable or probable?
- Did the witness have a good chance to observe what happened?
How much attention did the witness pay?
- Does the witness's memory seem accurate?
- Was the witness's testimony consistent with other evidence, or instead contradicted by other evidence?
- How did the witness behave and answer questions?
- Did the witness have any motive for testifying in a certain way or have any other bias that may have influenced the witness's testimony?

< *if prior conviction* > If you heard evidence that a witness was previously convicted of a crime, you may consider that evidence only in deciding whether you believe the witness. You may decide that a witness's prior conviction makes the witness's current testimony less believable. On the other hand, you may decide that the conviction does not change how much you believe the witness's testimony.

Importance or Significance of Evidence

It is also up to you to decide how important each part of the evidence is, whether it is testimony by a witness or an exhibit. Whether evidence is direct or indirect, you should give every piece of evidence whatever significance you think it deserves.

You are not required to believe something simply because it appears in an exhibit. It is up to you to decide how important any exhibit is.

You do not have to treat testimony by the witnesses as more or less significant than the exhibits. You may find that a witness's testimony is very important, or that an exhibit is more important. That is up to you.

Opinion Testimony⁷ <omit if not relevant>

Most of the testimony came from witnesses who saw or heard something. Some witnesses also told you about opinions or conclusions they reached based on some special training or experience. But even if a witness has some special training or experience, that does not necessarily make the witness's testimony any more believable or important than other testimony or exhibits.

You must decide whether you believe the witness, and how much importance to give to the witness's testimony. You should consider all the factors I have previously mentioned, including whether the witness had a motive to testify in a certain way or some other bias that could have influenced the witness's testimony.

In addition, as you evaluate a witness's opinions or conclusions, you should also ask:

- Was the witness's testimony supported by the facts of this case?
- Did the witness use guesswork or assumptions that you do not find to be convincing or are not consistent with the facts?
- Did the witness have sufficient education or experience?

You may decide to accept all, some, or none of the opinions or conclusions offered by a witness. But please remember that witnesses, even those with special training or experience, do not decide cases; juries do. It is up to you to decide this case, and to decide whether you accept or reject any opinion or conclusion that a witness offered during the trial.

⁷ Adapted from *Commonwealth v. Hinds*, 450 Mass. 1, 12 n.7 (2007).

Juror Notes

Many of you have taken notes during the trial. Your notes may help you remember the evidence, especially the testimony, but of course they are not an actual transcript or official record of what was said. So use your notes only to help you remember what you heard and saw during the trial. Whether you took notes or not, you must rely on your own memory of what the witnesses told you.

After the trial is over, and you have returned your verdict, a court officer will collect your notes and destroy them.

Objections During Trial

During this trial, the lawyers may have objected to questions posed to a witness. They may have moved to “strike,” or in essence erase, certain testimony. Whenever a lawyer believes that something would violate the rules of evidence, the lawyer is supposed to object or move to strike. That is part of the lawyer’s job.

BE FAIR⁸

Let’s turn to another important issue that I raised with you at the beginning of this trial.

Our system of justice depends on judges like me and jurors like you being able and willing to make careful and fair decisions. All people deserve fair and equal treatment in our system of justice, regardless of their race, national origin, religion, age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, education, income level, or any other personal characteristic. You have agreed to be fair. I am sure that you want to be fair, but that is not always easy.

One difficulty comes from our own built-in expectations and assumptions. They exist even if we are not aware of them and even if we believe we do not have them. Some of you may have heard this called “implicit” bias and

⁸ See Supreme Judicial Court Model Jury Instructions on Implicit Bias.

that is what I'm talking about. We judges have as everyone else, so let me share a few strategies that we have found useful.

First, slow down; do not rush to a decision. Hasty decisions are more likely to reflect stereotypes or hidden biases. Take time to consider all the evidence.

Second, as you start to draw conclusions, consider what evidence, if any, supports the conclusions you are drawing and whether any evidence casts doubt on those conclusions. Double check whether you are actually using unsupported assumptions instead of the evidence.

Third, as you think about the people involved in this case, consider them as individuals, rather than as members of a particular group.

Fourth, I might ask myself: Would I view the evidence differently if the people were from different groups, such as different racial, ethnic, or gender identity groups?

Fifth, listen to your fellow jurors. They may have different points of view. If so, they may help you determine whether you are focusing on the facts or making assumptions, perhaps based on stereotypes. Of course, your fellow jurors could be influenced by their own unstated assumptions, so don't be shy or hesitate to speak up. You should participate actively, particularly if you think the other jurors are overlooking or undervaluing evidence you find important. In fact, when you explain your thoughts out loud to other jurors, you are also helping yourself to focus on the evidence, instead of assumptions.

If you use these strategies, then you will do your part to reach a decision that is as fair as humanly possible. That is your responsibility as jurors.

JURY DELIBERATIONS

I am now going to give you some instructions about how to conduct your deliberations.

Private Discussions

First of all, you must keep your deliberations secret. You should not tell anyone outside the jury room, not even me, anything about them. For example, please do not tell me or anyone else the results of any votes you may have taken before you all agree on a verdict. You must not tell anyone how your discussions are going or what any jurors said.

If you need to communicate with me before you reach a verdict, you should send me a written note, in a form you all agree on. It must be signed by your foreperson. I will discuss your note with the lawyers. Then I will either send you a response in writing or bring you into the courtroom and respond to you in person. If you do send me a note, it should not mention any votes you may have taken or anything else about your deliberations.

Do not talk about the case unless all of you are present and no one else is in the room. If one of you needs to leave for a moment, the rest of you should stop deliberating until that juror returns. If we break for the day before you reach a verdict, you must not communicate with other jurors about the case until the next day and only after we gather in the courtroom and I ask you to resume your deliberations.

As you work to decide this case, and until I accept your verdict, you must not communicate with anyone about the case, except each other. And you must not do any kind of research about this case. You may not do so in any way, including with an electronic device such as a cell phone or tablet.

[If applicable: This also applies to the alternate jurors.]

Alternate Jurors <omit if not relevant>

There are fourteen of you here, so in a few minutes our clerk will randomly select two of you to be alternate jurors. The other twelve of you will work

together to decide this case. We chose fourteen of you originally in case one or two of you gets sick or has some other unexpected emergency.

If you are chosen as an alternate, your continuing service is still very important and you must comply with all the rules I have given you. The alternate jurors will stay in another room and must not discuss the case with each other or with anyone else. If we lose a deliberating juror because of some personal emergency or sickness, then I will send one of the alternates into the jury room. If this happens, the deliberating jury will have to restart its discussions from the beginning.

Role of the Foreperson

One of you will serve as foreperson of the jury. We will discuss who will be the foreperson in just a moment. The foreperson will make sure that each of you has the chance to speak and that the other jurors listen to you respectfully. But the foreperson's opinion about the case is no more important than the opinions of all other jurors. Once you agree on a verdict, the foreperson will fill out the verdict slip[s] and will report your verdict in court.

Making Decisions as a Group

When you work together as a jury, you will be making a decision as a group. This kind of decision-making is very valuable. Why do I say that? When a jury hears and sees evidence, each juror acts as a safeguard for the others. For example, someone else may recall evidence that you missed. And each of you will have insights that will help the other jurors make sense of the evidence and reach a verdict.

No member of the jury is more or less qualified than any other juror to decide who and what to believe. You have all heard the same evidence, listened to the same witnesses, and looked at the same exhibits. And you have all taken the same oath, promising that you will "well and truly try the issue between the plaintiff and the defendant according to the evidence." So you are all equally qualified to reach a verdict.

I have a few suggestions that might help you as you work together.⁹

First, you should discuss and analyze the evidence before you take any vote about a verdict. Voting first could keep you from discussing the issues, and hearing other peoples' perspectives, before making up your own mind.

Second, I encourage you to discuss not only the evidence you think supports your view of the case, but also what evidence you think might lead you to make a different decision.

Third, as the other jurors talk about the evidence that they found important, please listen. In order for this process to work fairly, each of you should hear every other juror's insights and ideas. Please be open to them, since they might influence your thinking.

Fourth, don't be shy. As in any group, some of you will be more comfortable than others in sharing your thoughts. But you must have the benefit of everyone's input to help you reach a just verdict. For example, you may be the only one who remembers a particular piece of evidence or has a particular point of view. The more points of view that you all hear, the more effective your deliberations will be.

Fifth, don't be afraid to change your mind if the discussion persuades you that you should. But you should not accept a decision just because other jurors think it is the right one. In the end, you should vote based on your own assessment of the evidence, regardless of how other jurors have voted. Ultimately, you each must decide this case for yourself.

⁹ See Jury Committee of the American College of Trial Lawyers, "Improving Jury Deliberations Through Jury Instructions Based On Cognitive Science," at 19 (Feb. 2019), available at https://www.actl.com/docs/default-source/default-document-library/position-statements-and-white-papers/improving-jury-deliberations-final.pdf?sfvrsn=9a786c69_6.

< If not splitting the charge, Sidebar with Counsel—ask if any objections to instructions >

Jurors, before I conclude I need to pause and speak with the attorneys.

<after sidebar, and after correcting or clarifying jury instructions as necessary or appropriate, continue as follows >

SELECTING THE FOREPERSON [AND ALTERNATE JURORS]

< Option 1: All Jurors Deliberate, No Alternates >

I appoint the juror in seat number ___ to be the foreperson of the jury.

< Option 2: Judge Selects Foreperson, then Clerk chooses Alternates >

I appoint the juror in seat number ___ to be the foreperson of the jury. Our clerk will now randomly select *<insert number>* of you, from among all of the jurors except for the foreperson, to serve as alternate jurors.

< let clerk describe process, then choose & announce alternates >

< Option 3: Clerk Chooses Alternates, then Judge Selects Foreperson¹⁰ >

It is now time for our clerk to randomly select *<insert number>* of you to serve as alternate jurors.

< let clerk describe process, then choose & announce alternates >

¹⁰ “In the interest of fairness, judges will often draw the numbers of the alternate jurors *before* designating the foreperson, although the judge should secure the parties’ consent, because the statute contemplates selection of the foreperson before determining alternates.” P. Lauriat and D. Wilkins, Massachusetts Jury Trial Benchbook § 3.1 at 91 (4th ed. 2019); see also G.L. c. 234A, § 68 (to select alternate jurors, “the court shall direct the clerk to place the names of all of the available jurors except the foreperson into a box or drum and to select at random the names of the appropriate number of jurors necessary to reduce the jury”); cf. *Wilson v. Commissioner of Transitional Assistance*, 441 Mass. 846, 852–853 (2004) (in a statute or other rule of law, the word “shall” is construed as directory or permissive, rather than mandatory, “when necessary to comply with [the] dominant purpose” of the statute as a whole).

Now that our clerk has selected the alternate jurors, I appoint the juror in seat number ___ to be the foreperson of the jury.¹¹

< *ask the clerk to swear in the court officers* >

CONCLUSION

[The deliberating jurors] [You] will now go and start [their] [your] private discussions. Please have confidence in what you are about to do. By serving on this jury, you carry on a long and proud tradition of citizens serving in jury trials in Massachusetts. If you are honest, thoughtful, and fair, you will be able to reach a fair and just verdict.

¹¹ Some judges prefer to let the deliberating jurors select their own foreperson, if all parties agree. See Massachusetts Jury Trial Benchbook, *supra*, § 3.1.3 at 92–93, § 5.8.1 at 379–380. Under this approach, once the clerk has chosen the alternates the judge might instruct as follows:

Jurors, when you begin to meet in private, your first responsibility is to select one juror to serve as your foreperson. You may do so however you want. Once you have picked your foreperson, please send me a note—through the court officer—that tells us which one of you will be the foreperson. If for any reason you cannot quickly and easily select a foreperson, then send me a note asking me to do so instead.