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The legal system



English  
or French

**WHAT LANGUAGE  
CAN YOU USE IN COURT  
IN QUEBEC?**



Setting  
the  
Scene

What if you're involved  
in a court case, or are a witness,  
and you don't speak  
or understand the language  
used in court?

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- Accessing services in English based on who you are
- language in the workplace
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## The General Rule

In Quebec, you have the right to use either English or French during hearings and in official court and tribunal documents.

However, the rules are different if you communicate with the office of a court or tribunal, like when you want to ask a question or open a file. You can speak English or French, but they must generally respond to you in French. You must meet [certain requirements](#) for them to be able to respond to you in English.

To learn more about the requirements, see Éducaloi's article, "Access to Provincial and Municipal Services in English", on [educaloi.qc.ca/en](http://educaloi.qc.ca/en).

## Criminal Cases

In a criminal case, a person is taken to court because they are accused of a crime.

### Right to Choose

If you're accused of a crime, you can choose English or French for important parts of your case, such as the trial.

Let the following people know about your preferred language as soon as possible:

- your lawyer, if you have one,
- the court office,
- the first judge you see.

## In Court and Documents

Important documents, such as the one saying what you're accused of, must be available in English or French, depending on the language you choose.

Your lawyer and the prosecutor must also use that language. The prosecutor is the government lawyer who brings your case to court.

The judge and the jury members must also speak that language.

Not everything that happens in your case will be in your chosen language. For example, some witnesses might speak their maternal language.

You can have an interpreter for the parts of the case that are in another language. The government pays for the interpreter's services.

### Judge's Decision

You must get the judge's final decision in your chosen language.



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## Civil Cases

Non-criminal cases are called civil cases. They deal with problems between people or companies, such as family problems or conflicts over a contract.

### In Court and Documents

You can use English or French in court and for documents you give to the court.

Other people involved in the case don't have to use the same language. For example, the judge and the other side's lawyer might use French even if you use English.

You can have an interpreter. You usually must pay for the interpreter, but the judge can order the losing side to pay.

### Judge's Decision

Judges can give their decisions in English or French.

You have the right to request a free translation if the decision isn't in your preferred language.

## Administrative tribunals

Administrative tribunals deal with specific types of problems. For example, Quebec's housing court, the Tribunal administratif du logement (TAL), deals with problems related to rental housing.

The rules for civil cases also apply to administrative tribunals. You can use English or French.

## Indigenous Languages

Some Crees, Inuit and Naskapis are covered by these land claims agreements:

- James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement
- Northeastern Quebec Agreement

Crees, Inuit and Naskapis have these rights in all court cases in the regions covered by the agreements:

- speak their own language with the help of an interpreter
- free simultaneous interpretation
- free translations of the judge's written decisions
- be a juror in a criminal trial of another Cree, Inuit or Naskapi even if they don't speak English or French (English or French is usually required for people on juries)

## Witness Testimony

If you are called as a witness, you will be asked to speak before the court and provide valuable information to the judge or jury. You can be a witness in a criminal, civil or administrative case.

As a witness, you are free to speak English or French. If you don't speak English or French well enough, you can speak another language with the help of an interpreter.