

Guide to the Complaint: Prayer for Relief

The Prayer for Relief (sometimes called a “Request for Relief”) is a section of the complaint that identifies what the plaintiff wants the court to order a defendant to do in a civil lawsuit. Governed by Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(3), a complaint must include a specific request for relief, but may also include alternative or multiple types of requests for relief.

Types of Relief in a Complaint

1. **Compensatory Damages:** Money damages that are intended to compensate a plaintiff for injury or loss. There are two types of compensatory damages:

A. Special Damages: Money damages that cover your calculable financial losses. These are documented with bills, pay stubs, and receipts. Each category of special damages must be demanded in the Prayer for Relief. Some example of special damages include:

- Medical expenses
- Lost Earnings
- Property Damage
- Other Out of Pocket Expenses



B. General Damages: Money damages that are not easily calculated because they are subjective in nature. Some examples of general damages include:

- Pain and Suffering
- Emotional Distress
- Loss of Enjoyment of Life



2. **Punitive Damages:** Money damages that are intended to punish the defendant’s behavior. These are usually awarded in addition to special and general damages, when the defendant’s behavior is especially malicious or negligent.

Sample Request for Relief

1 **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

2 WHEREFORE, Plaintiff prays for judgment as follows:

3 A. For compensatory damages, including lost past and future

4 wages, employee benefits, medical bills, mental and emotional distress,

5 and other special and general damages according to proof;

6 B. For punitive damages in an amount to be proved at trial on all

7 causes of action for which such damages are recoverable;

8 C. For such equitable relief as may be appropriate, including

9 injunctive relief;

10 D. For costs of suit incurred herein; and

11 E. For such additional and further relief which the court deems

12 just and proper.

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15 Respectfully submitted:

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17 DATED: July 13, 2026 BY: Jane Doe

18 Jane Doe

19 Plaintiff in Pro Per

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Complaint

The request for relief is usually included at the end of the complaint in a separate section.

If you have multiple defendants, consider separating your requests for relief for each claim or against each defendant.

3. **Injunctive Relief:** A court order forcing the defendant to stop or start a specific action.



Example A: A court may order the defendant to stop the transfer of trade secrets in an intellectual property lawsuit.



Example B: A court may force the return of physical property to the plaintiff in a breach of contract case.

4. **Declaratory Relief:** A court ruling that officially determines the rights and obligations of the parties, without ordering anyone to do anything or pay money. For example, a court may rule that a party has infringed on the other party's trademark in an intellectual property lawsuit.

5. **Attorney Fees:** A prevailing party may be entitled to attorney fees if a statute, contract between the parties, or a recognized common-law exception specifically permits it. If you believe that you are entitled to attorney fees, you can request them in your Prayer for Relief. Be aware, however, that pro se litigants who are not attorneys generally cannot recover attorney's fees, even under fee-shifting statutes.

6. **Costs:** A request that the defendant pay plaintiff's legal expenses, such as court filing fees, copying costs, and deposition costs. You can find more information about recoverable costs in Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 54(d) and the following statutes: 28 U.S.C. §§ 1821, 1827, 1828, and 1920-23.

7. **Catch-all Request:** Most Prayers for Relief include a catch-all request to cover any prayers not explicitly stated. An example of a catch-all request is the following sentence: "Such additional and further relief which the court deems just and proper."

Tips: What Kind of Relief to Ask for in Your Prayer?

- Consider the bigger picture - make a list of what to achieve by filing your lawsuit.
- Research whether the statutes you are suing under specify or limit the kind of relief you can request.



Example A: Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act generally limits private plaintiffs to injunctive relief and attorney's fees, but not compensatory damages.



Example B: A claim brought under the Federal Tort Claims Act limits a plaintiff to no more than the money damages asked for in the plaintiff's original administrative tort claim to the agency responsible for the harm.

- Calculate all of your special damages. Do this by gathering all of your receipts, bills, and any other paperwork that documents your financial losses.
- Identify whether you have any general damages in categories such as pain and suffering, mental anguish, humiliation, emotional distress, impairment of reputation, personal humiliation, loss of enjoyment of life, and (in death cases) loss of life damages.

If you have a reasonable estimate of your general damages, include it in the Prayer for Relief. If not, consider include the following statement in your Prayer for Relief: “General damages in an amount to be proven at trial.”

- Consider whether you are entitled to declaratory relief, injunctive relief, punitive damages, or any costs.
- Consider including a catch-all request in your Prayer for Relief.