Under the Spotlight: Witness Examination and Cross-Examination

Student Workbook

Name:







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IMPORTANT NOTICE

The law changes. The information in this guide is up to date to January 2025.

This guide is meant as legal information, not legal advice. If you need advice on a specific situation, consult a lawyer or notary.

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Introduction

This Student Workbook explores the concepts of law useful for holding a mock trial in the classroom. It covers

- a few basic principles of criminal law in Canada,
- the major steps and the main people involved in criminal trials,
- the most important rules governing the **presentation of evidence** during a trial,
- the main rules of courtroom decorum.

Note that the information presented in this workbook relates to general criminal law as it applies to adults.

To learn more about certain topics, click on the hyperlinks in the boxes. They will redirect you to articles and videos on Éducaloi's website.

Happy reading and enjoy the mock trial!



Criminal Law

The goal of criminal law is to discourage behaviour that goes against our society's recognized values. For example, theft, murder and drug trafficking are prohibited by law: they are "criminal offences."

The law

Most criminal offences (or "crimes") are set out in a law called the **Criminal Code**, along with the possible sentences. Other laws add to the Criminal Code, for example, the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

The Criminal Code applies to all of Canada. Under the Canadian Constitution, and since 1867, the **federal government** has the power to pass criminal laws.

Important! The Criminal Code does not apply in exactly the same way to **minors**. Another federal law (the Youth Criminal Justice Act) sets out the procedure to follow, the specific sentences for youth, etc.

Important principles

The right to be presumed innocent until proven quilty

The **presumption of innocence** is a very important principle in criminal law. Anyone accused of a criminal offence is considered **innocent until found guilty** by a judge or jury.

Since a person is innocent until proven guilty, it is not up to the accused person to prove their innocence. Rather, it is up to the Prosecution to prove that the accused is guilty. The accused person can defend themselves and present proof of their innocence, but is not required to do so. They have the right to remain silent. The Prosecution has the "burden of proof."

The Prosecution is the government lawyer who works for the department of justice. This person prosecutes the accused person in a criminal trial.

The presumption of innocence is recognized under the Criminal Code, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Quebec's Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms.



To learn more!

Consult the article "Rights of a Person Accused of a Crime": https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/capsules/rights-of-a-person-accused-of-a-crime/

Guilty "beyond a reasonable doubt"

For the accused person to be found guilty at the end of the trial, the Prosecution must prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they are indeed guilty of the crime they have been accused of.

If the judge or jury have any doubt that the accused person did not commit the crime, the person must be **acquitted** (found not quilty). This doubt must be "reasonable," that is, based on common sense and evidence. It cannot simply be based on unfounded personal opinion.

Why is the task so heavy for the Prosecution? Because the consequences of a conviction are very serious. We want to avoid finding an innocent person guilty by mistake!

To learn more!

Watch the video "The Legal Burden of Proof": https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/publications/legal-burden-of-proof/



The Steps Before the Trial

Note that for the purposes of the mock trial, we have chosen not to present all of the steps leading up to the trial. For instance, we will not look at the bail hearing or the preliminary inquiry. The steps presented here are the most important ones for your understanding of the process.

1. The police intervention

Someone who thinks they've been a witness to or a victim of a crime can file a complaint with the police against another person who is believed to have committed the crime. There's no time limit for reporting a crime. It's possible to go to the police years after a crime was committed.

The police will gather the basic information regarding the incident, notably to decide whether the complaint should be pursued.

The police can also intervene in a situation without having received a complaint if they surprise someone in the midst of committing a crime.

2. The police investigation

The police retain a complaint and lead an investigation when they have reason to believe that a person has committed a crime. If there is enough **proof** against this person, the investigation file is handed over to the Prosecution.

3. The charges

The Prosecution then evaluates the police file. The Prosecution needs to make sure there is enough proof to justify a criminal prosecution.

If this is the case, the Prosecution can decide to lay charges. In a criminal trial, the State prosecutes the person suspected of the crime, not the victim. However, the victim is often an important witness during the trial. A summons is also sent to the person suspected of the crime to require they appear in court.

Note that there's not always a victim when a person commits a crime. For example, simple possession of illegal drugs does not directly involve a victim.



4. The first appearance

The first appearance occurs before the trial. This is when the person suspected of the crime appears before the court for the first time and is officially accused.

The accused person must tell the judge whether they are pleading guilty or not guilty to each of the crimes they have been accused of. They are "entering their plea."

If the accused pleads not quilty

There will probably be a trial. The trial allows the judge or jury to determine if the accused person is guilty or not guilty of the crime they have been accused of.

If the accused pleads quilty

There will be no trial because the accused person has admitted to committing the crime (or crimes) they are accused of. The judge will decide on an appropriate sentence at a later time.

The Criminal Trial

Many people are involved in the different steps of a criminal trial. They each have an important role to play to ensure the trial goes smoothly.

The people involved in the trial

The Attorney General's prosecutor ("the Prosecutor")

In a criminal trial, the Prosecution is the lawyer who represents the

State and **prosecutes the accused person**. Their first mission is to ensure that the **fullest possible justice** is done.

At the trial stage, their mission is to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused person is guilty of the offence.

Important! The Prosecution does **not try to win the case at all costs**. For example, if they discover evidence that shows that the accused person is innocent, they must inform the judge as well as the defence and drop the charges.



The Prosecution cannot hide anything from the other party, with some exceptions. They must provide all evidence (list of witnesses, list of exhibits, etc.) before the start of the trial, and then as they receive new evidence, if any.



The defence lawyer ("the Defence")

This lawyer represents the accused person and gives them advice on how to defend themselves. If the Prosecution presents convincing evidence, the Defence can bring forward their own evidence. Their role is to raise a reasonable doubt on the guilt of the accused person, so that they can be acquitted.

The defence lawyer also ensures that the **rights of the accused person** are respected throughout the trial: throughout the trial, like their right to remain silent and their right to the help of an interpreter to understand everything that is going on in the trial.



Lastly, if the accused person is found guilty (or pleads guilty), their lawyer ensures that the sentence handed down by the judge is fair or appropriate in the circumstances.

The right to a lawyer is recognized under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. However, an accused person can decide to act on their own behalf and to not be represented.

To learn more!

Consult the article "Rights of a Person Accused of a Crime": https://.educaloi.gc.ca/en/capsules/rights-of-a-person-accused-of-a-crime/

The judge

A little like a referee on a hockey rink, the judge must ensure that the rules of the game are being followed in the courtroom.

The judge has the delicate task of **settling the issue or making a fair decision** that is in keeping with the law. To do so, they must remain perfectly **neutral**.





The jury

(not present at the mock trial)

In certain criminal trials, the jury decides if the accused person is guilty or not guilty. The accused person may choose a trial by jury, particularly if it's a serious crime, such as murder.

A jury is made up of 12 jurors who are randomly selected citizens. Jurors must come to a unanimous verdict, that is, everyone must agree on the guilt or innocence of the accused person.

Their decision must be based on the law and the evidence heard during the trial and not on their personal opinion. Of course, the judge is there to give them instructions and explain various legal concepts.

Certain people cannot become jurors, such as persons under 18 years of age, judges, lawyers or persons who have been found guilty of certain crimes.

To learn more!

Watch the video "The Jury's Role in a Court Trial": https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/publications/the-jurys-role-in-a-court-trial/



The witnesses

The witnesses are **chosen by the Prosecution and the Defence**. The witnesses must tell the court what they personally did, saw or heard. They must promise to tell the truth.

In a trial, there can also be expert witnesses. These people explain technical concepts to the judge. They are the only people who have the right to give their opinion. An expert can be a doctor, psychiatrist, scientist, etc.





The court clerk



"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" The person who administers this oath is called the court clerk. They also perform many other essential tasks during a hearing, such as taking detailed notes of what happens during the various steps in a hearing.

The court bailif

The court bailiff is responsible for ensuring that the hearing goes smoothly. Before the judge arrives, the court bailiff checks to make sure that everything is in place so that the hearing runs as it should. They accompany the judge as they enter and exit the courtroom and make sure that everyone present behaves appropriately. They also make the wellknown declaration:



"Silence! Please rise. The court is in session!"

To learn more!

Consult the "Legal Careers" section:

https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/categories/legal-careers/

Also consult the teaching guide «Inside the Courtroom: The Key Players and Steps of a Criminal Trial»: https://www.educationjuridique.ca/en/readytouse/ teachingquides/criminal-trials-actors-and-steps/

Important steps in the trial

A criminal trial is composed of many steps during which different people intervene.

1. Start of the trial

At the start of court proceedings, the court usher announces the judge's entrance. Everyone in the courtroom stands and remains standing until the judge takes their seat at the front of the room. The court clerk then announces the case to be heard. The trial begins with the lawyers introducing themselves.



2. Presenting the evidence

In a criminal trial, the goal is to shed light on the circumstances surrounding the crime. The Prosecution always presents their evidence first. Once they have presented all of their evidence, it's the Defence's turn.

To **persuade** the judge (or sometimes the jury), the lawyers present their evidence, such as witness testimonials, documents, videos, photos, objects, etc. The evidence provided must always be relevant.

The Prosecution is required to present all of the elements in the case in order to create a kind of "film" of the facts for the judge. The Defence is not required to present anything. In fact, sometimes the trial ends without the Defence presenting a single witness or any material evidence.

To learn more!

We have a series of short videos (in French) explaining the steps in a criminal trial. They are presented in a playlist on our YouTube channel.

The testimonial

Testimonials are a type of evidence. They take place during the trial as part of the **examination** during which the lawyers ask the witnesses questions.



Before the testimonial is given, each witness must identify themselves to the court. The court clerk then asks the witness to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

The witness must state what they **personally** did, saw, heard or felt. If, instead, they recount something someone else told them, the opposing lawyer could object. This is called **hearsay**.

The witness **cannot give their opinion**, except on very obvious elements. For example, they can give their opinion on the age or state of inebriation or a driver, or the speed of the car they were driving.

When a witness testifies, they must be respectful and cooperative. The witness must look at the judge. They must answer to the best of their knowledge, without exaggerating or downplaying the facts.



To learn more!

Consult the articles "The Role of Witnesses" and "Being a Witness: Rules and Restrictions":

https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/capsules/the-role-of-witnesses/ https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/capsules/being-a-witness-rules-and-restrictions/

The examination and cross-examination

During the examination, the lawyers ask the witnesses questions to present their version of events to the court. The witnesses must only answer the questions asked.

Once a witness has been examined by the lawyer who summoned them, the witness may be cross-examined by the opposing lawyer.

The goal of the cross-examination is to put into question aspects of the testimonial, reveal contradictions and reduce the witness's credibility.



So:

- The witnesses for the prosecution are examined by the Prosecution, then crossexamined by the Defence.
- Inversely, the witnesses for the defence are examined by the Defence, then crossexamined by the Prosecution.

Types of questions

During the **examination**, the lawyer must ask the witness **open questions** (Who? What? Where? When? How? Why? Etc.).

"Leading" questions ("yes" or "no" questions) are not permitted. Why? Because it's the witness who is testifying, not the Prosecution or Defence. In other words, we don't want the lawyer suggesting the answers in their questions. If this rule is not respected, the other lawyer can **object**.

During the cross-examination, however, it is **permitted** to ask the witness **leading** questions ("yes" or "no" questions). The lawyers can also try to attack the credibility of the witness, for example, if they made a vague or contradictory statement.



Examples and comparison of leading and open questions

Leading questions	Open questions
 Lawyer: Were you at the grocery store yesterday around 6 p.m.? Witness: Yes. Lawyer: Were you walking with your dog to the grocery store? Witness: Yes. 	 Lawyer: What did you do yesterday evening? Witness: I walked my dog and bought some groceries. Lawyer: What time did you get to the grocery store? Witness: Around 6 p.m.

The re-examination

(not part of the mock trial)

When the cross-examination is over, the party who called the witness has the right to re-examination.

The goal of the re-examination is mainly to explain certain answers that were given during the cross-examination. The witness has the opportunity to explain or clarify answers at the request of the lawyer who summoned them.

Important: Unless authorized by a judge, re-examination is not an opportunity for lawyers to ask questions they forgot during the examination of the witness. Instead, the questions in the re-examination must focus on new facts revealed during the cross-examination. The questions cannot be leading questions.

Objections

During examination or cross-examination, the lawyers may object if they consider the questions asked to be problematic for one of the following **reasons**:

- a) The question is not relevant.
- b) The question is leading (during the examination only).
- c) The witness gives their opinion.
- d) The witness reports the statements of another person (hearsay).



Important: A lawyer cannot object simply because they do not agree with what the witness says! If they note that one of the above situations has occurred, the opposing lawyer can object. To do so, they rise and state "Objection!" The lawyer must then explain the reason for their objection.

The judge then decides if they accept or reject the objection. If the objection is accepted, the evidence will be ignored, as if it were never presented!



The means of defence

The Defence can use one or more means of defence. Means of defence are used to demonstrate that the accused person is not responsible for the crime.

Ignorance of the law is no excuse

Ignorance of the law is never a means of defence. You can't tell the judge that you didn't know your action was illegal.

Here are some examples of means of defence:

Alibi

In this case we say that the accused person could not have committed the action in question because they were simply not at the scene of the crime. The lawyer tries to prove their "alibi."

Legitimate defence

An accused person who used force with the goal of defending themselves can claim legitimate defence.

For the defence to be accepted:

- he accused person must have had good reasons to believe they (or someone else) would be attacked,
- the accused person must have acted reasonably to defend themselves. For example: they had no other way to get out of the situation and did not use more force than necessary.





Duress

A person who commits a crime when being threatened with death or injury can claim defence of duress.

For the defence to be accepted:

- this person had to truly believe that the threats would be carried out,
- they had no other way to get out of the situation,
- the crime committed cannot be very violent (such as murder, sexual assault, assault that injures the victim or hostage-taking).

To learn more!

Consult our article "Ignorance of the Law Is No Excuse": https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/capsules/ignorance-of-the-law-is-no-excuse/

3. Oral arguments

Once the presentation of the evidence is finished, the oral arguments begin.

During the oral arguments, the lawyers address the **judge (or jury)** and present their arguments and means of defence, if any. The lawyers must always base their arguments on what was presented as evidence.

The oral arguments mark the **end of the trial**.



4. The verdict

The judge (or jury) renders their **verdict** after the trial, but not necessarily the same day. Their decision is based on an assessment of the strength of all of the evidence presented. They can decide that the accused person is quilty or not quilty.



In most cases, the accused person is found guilty or not guilty. However, if the judge thinks the evidence justifies it, a third verdict is possible: "not criminally responsible due to mental illness." This will not be explored in this Workbook.



5. What happens next?

If the accused person is **found guilty or pleaded** quilty, the judge will then decide on the sentence (fine, imprisonment, etc.). They will do this after hearing the arguments from the lawyers for the prosecution and the defence, but also from the victim.

If the Defence or the Prosecution believes that there is a mistake in the decision rendered, they can, in certain circumstances, ask a higher court to verify it. This is called "appealing" a decision.



Decorum

Usually, trials are open to the public. Anyone can attend. Here are the main rules that the public and the lawyers must respect.



Decorum: All of the rules that must be respected in the courtroom.

The people present in the courtroom must:

- remain silent,
- dress appropriately,
- turn off their cell phones, cameras and other devices,
- refrain from eating, drinking or chewing gum,
- always be respectful and follow the instructions,
- rise when the judge enters or exits the courtroom.

The lawyers must:

- rise to address the judge;
- address themselves to the judge, not the opposing party;
- always show respect;
- address themselves to the judge by saying: "Madam Justice" or "Mr. Justice" or "Your Honour";
- Avoid interrupting the judge or the opposing party (except to object).





To learn more!

Consult our article "Public Access to Courtrooms": https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/capsules/public-access-to-courtrooms/

A teaching guide on the criminal legal system for teenagers is available on Éducaloi's website: https://educationjuridique.ca/en/readytouse/teachingquides/ the-criminal-legal-system-for-teenagers/

The "Youth and the Criminal Process" section on our website also addresses this question: https://educaloi.gc.ca/en/categories/youth-and-the-criminal-process/

Steps in the Activity

Preparing the examination

- Read the scenario, paying close attention to the facts, the characters and the charges laid against the accused person.
- Your teacher will divide the class into two large teams, each representing a 2 party: the Prosecution or the Defence.

Within each team, the students will be divided into subgroups of two to three. Each subgroup will be assigned a witness.

- With your subgroup, analyze the facts related to the assigned witness by 3 completing the Witness Checklist on page X of this Workbook.
- With your subgroup, complete The Examination sheet on page X of the Workbook.
 - a) Summarize the information that is to the advantage of the party who called your witness to testify.



b) Write a minimum of 6 questions your witness could be asked during their examination and the expected answers.

Even if the witness assigned to you was not called by your team, the exercise of drafting examination questions will help you identify the strengths and weaknesses of your case. This will allow you to target the questions to ask during cross-examination to weaken the other side's arguments.

Once your subgroup's questions have been completed, one student from your subgroup will change places with a student in another subgroup with the same witness.

These students will play the role of a witness and must answer the questions invented by the other subgroup. The goal here is to test the quality of the questions and improve them, if necessary. When this practice session is finished, each student returns to their subgroup.

With your subgroup, complete The Cross-Examination sheet on page X of this Workbook.

Write a minimum of 4 questions and the expected answers. The questions can be leading during the cross-examination.

Once your subgroup's questions have been completed, exchange one student from your subgroup with a student from another subgroup with the same witness, as in Step 5, to test and improve your questions.





Preparing for the mock trial

- 1. As a class, decide who will play each of the roles during the mock trial. Here are the roles to be filled:
 - a) Witnesses for the prosecution
 - b) Witnesses for the defence
 - c) Lawyer for the prosecution (variation: several students can share the steps in the trial)
 - d) Lawyer for the defence (variation: several students can share the steps in the trial)
 - e) Judge (variation: several students can share the steps in the trial)
 - f) Court clerk (administers the oath to each witness)
 - g) Court bailiff (announces the judge's arrival in the courtroom)
 - h) **Public** (all of the students who do not have a specific role)

My role will be:	

The roles α) to α) will receive a script describing exactly what happens during the **Examination and Cross examination.**

- 2. With your subgroup, write down the best questions you came up with, in order of priority, on a new sheet of paper. During this step, the lawyers will come consult with you to help them choose the best questions. Once you have completed your compilation, give the sheet to the lawyer for your party (Prosecution or Defence).
- 3. The students with a specific role must prepare at home the day before the mock trial.
 - The witnesses must review the facts that pertain to them.
 - The lawyers must identify the questions they'll ask during the mock trial. They must also make sure to ask open questions during the examination, and to review the possible objections.
 - The judge must refer to the script to review the steps in the mock trial.
 - The court clerk must refer to the script to review their interventions.
 - The court bailiff must refer to the script to review their interventions.

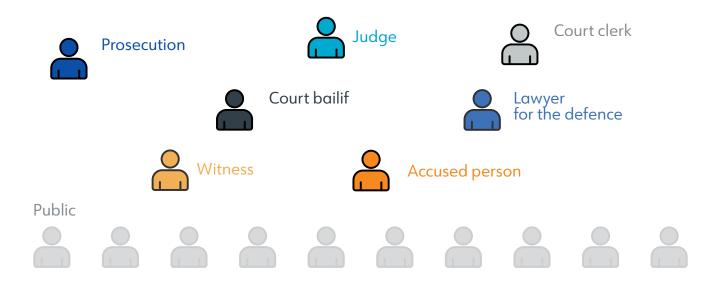




The day of the mock trial

The goal is to hold a mock trial that runs as smoothly as possible and is as similar to a real trial as possible. This requires each person to know their role and respect the rules.

- 1. Listen to the instructions of the teacher, who will explain the final preparations and remind everyone of their roles.
- 2. Help arrange the courtroom according to the layout below.





- 3. During the mock trial:
 - a) Respect courtroom decorum.
 - b) Everyone plays their role sticking as close as possible to the script.
 - c) The lawyers ask the witnesses the most relevant questions.
 - d) The witnesses play their role as best as possible and answer the questions with the facts set out on their Witness Reference Sheet.
 - e) The lawyers raise relevant and justified objections.
 - f) The public watches the trial without disrupting it.
 - g) Everyone takes notes on the most noteworthy evidence brought up during the trial.
- 4. Complete The Verdict sheet on the last page of this Workbook.
- 5. Participate in the conclusion by talking about your experience and observations. Explain your opinion on the verdict.

Witness Reference Sheet



Name:	Group:

Summarize the information on the Witness Sheet in the appropriate boxes. It's not necessary to write everything down. Simply note what's most important, in the form of bulleted lists. The same information may be relevant for several boxes.

General circumstances

Who? What? When? Where? Etc. What happened before and after the incident in question.

At the time of the incident

What happened at the time of the alleged act? Who did what?

Witness's name

The character

Specific Specific features of this witness. What you need to remember about the witness (e.g., age, relationship with the accused, attitude, unable to recall certain details, etc.)

Important points for the witness

Elements that the witness should declare during the examination to help their party's case (e.g., a convincing fact against the accused, a means of defence, etc.).



Members of the subgroup:
Group:
The Examination Exercise
Name of the witness:
A. Carefully read the Witness Sheet for your assigned witness.
B. 1. If the witness was called by the party your team represents: What are the key facts in the Witness Sheet that work in your favour? These represent the version of events you want to highlight through your questions during the examination.
2. If the witness was called by the opposing party: What are the key facts in the Witness Sheet that benefit the opposing party? These represent the version of events you will aim to challenge during the cross examination. Summarize the key facts below:
C. Without a specific order, draft at least six questions that could be asked to the witness during the examination, using the Witness Sheet as your guide. For each question, write down the answer the witness is likely to give.
Important! During the examination, the party that called the witness must gather as much useful information as possible, as the judge can only rely on what was seen and heard during the trial. Your questions should also be open-ended, relevant, and focused on facts that the witness personally saw or heard. Refer to your Student Workbook on pages 13 and 14 for guidance.

If the witness was called by the opposing party, drafting examination questions will help you identify the strengths and weaknesses of your own case. This will allow you to target specific questions during the cross-examination to undermine the opposing

party's arguments.



Questions (Q)	Expected answers (A)
Example: What were you doing Saturday night?	A: I was at the Night Owl Bar with my friends.
Q1:	A1:
Q2:	A2:
Q3:	A3:
Q4:	A4:
Q5:	A5:
Q6:	A6:
Additional questions:	Answers:

D. Practise the examination with a student from another subgroup who will act as a witness. Ask them the questions you prepared as if you were at the trial. Then revise the questions that did not work as planned! As soon as your questions are written, move on to the cross-examination questions.



Members of the subgroup:	
Group:	
The Cross-Examination	Exercise
Name of the witness:	
E. Write a minimum of 4 questions that could examination, using the Witness Sheet as y answer you think they'll give.	l be asked to the witness during cross- your guide. For each question, write down the
•	estions may be leading and used to challenge so be relevant and focused on facts that the
Questions (Q)	Expected answers (A)
Example: Is it true that you do not have a good relationship with the accused/victim?	A: Yes, but we don't cross paths very often.
Q1:	A1:
Q2:	A2:
Q3:	A3:
Q4:	A4:



Questions (Q)	Expected answers (A)
Additional questions:	Answers:

- F. Practise the cross-examination with a student from another subgroup who will serve as a witness. Improve your questions, if necessary.
- G. After all roles have been assigned, write down the questions you think are the most relevant for the examination or cross examination (according to the party you represent) of your assigned witness on another sheet of paper. Write them in order of priority. Then give your sheet to the lawyer for your party (Prosecution or Defence).



Name:
Group:
The Verdict Exercise
During the mock trial, note down the main evidence presented by the Prosecution or Defence.
The Prosecution's evidence
The Defence's evidence
The judge's verdict
Summarize the judge's verdict in a few sentences.



Your verdict

Describe in a few sentences your own verdict by describing the evidence that you find the most relevant.		

