

POINTS TO REMEMBER IN MAKING DECISIONS ABOUT EVIDENCE

Distinguish between the decision to admit evidence and the decision about the weight you give to evidence. In general, evidence is admissible and entitled to consideration if it is *relevant* to an issue in the case and *reliable* (that is, likely to be true).

Why?

- Small claims court is not subject to review on appeal in the same way other trial courts are, so whether evidence does or does not become part of the record is not relevant in the same way.
- Small claims cases never involve juries, and so the legal principles governing consideration of evidence that apply to trials before the judge without a jury are more relevant than are the rules used in jury trials.

Unless evidence is objected to, or unless you, the judge, feel that the evidence is such that it might improperly bias your decision, it should be freely admitted – and given appropriate weight.

When evidence is objected to, it is appropriate to rule on the objection by admitting the evidence but pointing out that its weight is to be determined.

When an attorney repeatedly objects—or when you anticipate that this may happen – it is proper to instruct the attorney to hold objections until the close of the evidence, at which point the attorney may be allowed to present arguments about its weight and admissibility.

What you might say:

“As you know, we are about to conduct a trial before the judge without a jury, and one of the parties is not represented by an attorney, which is often the case in this court. My policy in such situations is to be lenient in allowing evidence to be offered, so that parties may testify without interruption. At the close of the evidence, I will hear any argument the parties would like to offer about evidence that you believe I should not consider. After hearing your argument, I will carefully consider all the relevant admissible evidence and determine what weight I will give it before arriving at my decision.”

Factors to consider in assessing credibility:

Motive to lie	Corroborating evidence	Person in best position to observe
Demeanor	Ability to provide details	Which version seems more likely?

A Note on Dealing With Attorneys

~ Remember that attorneys have a different role, and thus a different agenda, than you in your role as a judge.

~Don't expect that an attorney will necessarily approve of or agree with your decisions, or the way you run your courtroom. Be respectful and polite, but be prepared to be assertive if necessary in maintaining control of the courtroom.

~ Like everyone else, attorneys vary in skill and ability. Don't assume that an attorney is more knowledgeable than you about the law, and don't accept general proclamations about what "the law says" at face value.

~ Let attorneys know that you will not rule in their favor unless they explain their argument clearly, in a way that everyone in the courtroom can understand. Communicate that you won't be intimidated into ruling favorably by a complicated jargon-laden legal argument made quickly and without regard for your ability to understand. This is an appropriate requirement, and one that an advocate should anticipate and respect.

~Never hesitate to require an attorney to establish the truth of his or her contentions by supplying a copy of a case or statute, granting a brief continuance if necessary for the attorney to obtain a copy or for you to read it carefully. Insist that copies of cases and statutes be complete, and specifically ask whether the law provided is current as of the date of trial if you have any reason to be doubtful.

~Be aware of procedural errors frequently made by attorneys unused to small claims practice.

~Particularly when confronted with an attorney who is disruptive or insists on interrupting the testimony of the unrepresented party, be prepared to cite GS Ch. 8C, Rule 611, which provides:

The court shall exercise reasonable control over the mode and order of interrogating witnesses and presenting evidence so as to (1) make the interrogation and presentation effective for the ascertainment of the truth, (2) avoid needless consumption of time, and (3) protect witnesses from harassment or undue embarrassment.

~Similarly, when confronted with an attorney who objects to your questioning of parties or contends that your participation is inappropriate because you are "helping," be prepared to cite Rule 614, which says

. . . The court may, on its own motion or at the suggestion of a party call witnesses, and all parties are entitled to cross-examine witnesses thus called. . . . The court may interrogate witnesses, whether called by itself or a party.

Four Rules of Evidence You Should Know

Business records exception to hearsay rule

Writing or records of acts, events, conditions, opinions, or diagnosis, made at or near the time by, or from information transmitted by, a person with knowledge are admissible if kept in the regular course of business and if it was the regular course of business to make that record, unless the source information or circumstances of preparation indicate a lack of trustworthiness.

G.S. 8-45: Verified statement of account

In an action on an account for goods sold, rents, services rendered, or labor performed, or any oral contract for money loaned, a verified itemized statement of the account is admissible into evidence and is deemed correct unless disputed by the defendant.

Verified: Accompanied by an affidavit from a person who (1) would be competent to testify at trial; (2) has personal knowledge of the particular account, or of the books and records of the business in general; and (3) swears that the account is correct and presently is owed by defendant to plaintiff.

Itemized: Describes each item with price and item number, if there is one.

Best Evidence Rule (paraphrased)

When an action by a party is based on a right created by a written contract, and the content of that contract is in dispute, the party must either produce the contract or adequately explain why he is unable to do so.

Parole Evidence Rule

When contract is in writing, parties may not introduce evidence of prior or contemporaneous oral agreement that varies the terms of the written contract

Note that the rule has no application in two circumstances:

- (1) When the evidence is offered to assist the court in determining the meaning of an ambiguous term in the contract; and
- (2) when the evidence offered relates to an oral agreement taking place after the written contract and thus in support of an allegation that the written contract was subsequently modified by a later oral agreement.

