

## TRYING A NON-CAPITAL CRIMINAL CASE: AN OUTLINE FOR THE SUPERIOR COURT JUDGE

Jessica Smith, UNC School of Government (Mar. 2015)

Updated by Shea Denning, UNC School of Government (June 2025)

### 1. Read the case file.

**2. Arraignment.** Unless the defendant has filed a written request for an arraignment, the court must enter a not guilty plea on the defendant's behalf in accordance with G.S. 15A-941. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(1a). See [Arraignment in Superior Court](#) in this Benchbook for more information.

### 3. Confirm jurisdiction.

- Make sure that the superior court has jurisdiction over the case.
  - The superior court has original jurisdiction over all felonies and over misdemeanors joined with felonies.
  - The superior court has original jurisdiction over misdemeanors initiated by presentment. G.S. 7A-271(a)(2).
  - The superior court has jurisdiction over misdemeanors appealed from the district court for trial de novo. G.S. 7A-271(b).
- Make sure that the type of charging instrument is appropriate for trial in superior court.
  - For cases initiated in superior court, the charging document must be an information or a bill of indictment. G.S. 15A-923(a).
  - A presentment from the grand jury may not serve as a pleading. G.S. 15A-923(a).
  - An indictment is required unless waived. However, an indictment may not be waived in a capital case or in a case in which the defendant is unrepresented. G.S. 15A-642(b). Waiver of the indictment must be in writing, signed by the defendant and his attorney, and attached to or executed on the bill of information. G.S. 15A-642(c). Note that the AOC form information—[AOC-CR-123](#)—includes a waiver of an indictment at the bottom of the form.
  - If the case is an appeal for trial de novo from district court, the charging document may be a citation, criminal summons, warrant for arrest, or magistrate's order. If the defendant objects to the sufficiency of a summons, warrant, or magistrate's order, the prosecution in certain circumstances may file a statement of charges.. G.S. 15A-922(e). An objection to trial on a citation is untimely if raised for the first time in superior court. *State v. Monroe*, 57 N.C. App. 597 (1982).
- Check the charging instrument for defects that may create jurisdictional issues.

### 4. Competency. Address any unresolved competency issues.

- Specifically, check for any unopened envelopes that might contain mental health evaluations.

- You may require counsel to represent defendants who are competent to stand trial but who suffer from severe mental illness to the extent that they are not competent to represent themselves at trial. See *Indiana v. Edwards*, 554 U.S. 164 (2008).

**5. Waiver of counsel.** If the defendant appears without an attorney, ensure that the defendant waived the right to counsel in superior court. If there is no record of the defendant having done so, conduct a waiver proceeding. See [Right to Counsel](#) in this Benchbook.

- If defendant is proceeding without counsel, consider appointing standby counsel. See 15A-1243.

**6. Recordation.** The judge must require the court reporter to make a record of all proceedings, except jury selection in non-capital cases, opening statements and final arguments to the jury, and the lawyers' arguments on questions of law. G.S. 15A-1241.

- Jury selection and/or opening and closing statements must be recorded if a motion to do so is made. *Id.*

## 7. Jurors – Preliminary Issues

- Determine that the jurors are qualified to serve. See [Jury Selection](#) in this Benchbook for information about juror qualifications.
- Address proffered excuses from jurors. See G.S. 9-6.
- Hear requests for deferral from those over 72 years old, as appropriate under G.S. 9-6.1.
- Give additional introductory remarks to prospective jurors in accordance with G.S. 15A-1213. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(2).
  - G.S. 15A-1213 provides: “[p]rior to selection of jurors, the judge must identify the parties and their counsel and briefly inform the prospective jurors, as to each defendant, of the charge, the date of the alleged offense, the name of any victim alleged in the pleading, the defendant's plea to the charge, and any affirmative defense of which the defendant has given pretrial notice as required.”
  - The trial judge may *not* read the pleadings to the jury. *Id.*

**8. Selecting and impaneling the jury.** The jury (including alternates(s)) is sworn, selected and impaneled in accordance with G.S. 15A-1211 through -1217. See G.S. 15A-1221(a)(3). For more detailed information on all aspects of jury selection, see [Jury Selection](#) in this Benchbook.

- The indictment may *not* be read to the jurors during jury selection or trial. G.S. 15A-1221(b).
- Have the clerk impanel the jury in accordance with G.S. 15A-1216.
  - If the trial will not begin until the following day and you are in a jurisdiction where you will have potential jurors in court the next day, you may want to delay impaneling until then. In places where there the panel will not return until later in the week, it may be best to select an alternate and have the jury impaneled before you recess for the evening.

**9. Admonitions to jurors.** Give appropriate admonitions to the jurors before every break and overnight recess. G.S. 15A-1236(a) provides that “[t]he judge at appropriate times must admonish the jurors that it is their duty”:

- Not to talk among themselves about the case except in the jury room after deliberations have begun.
- Not to talk to anyone else, or to allow anyone else to talk with them or in their presence about the case and that they must report to the judge immediately the attempt of anyone to communicate with them about the case.
- Not to form an opinion about the defendant’s guilt or innocence, or express any opinion about the case until they begin deliberations.
- To avoid reading, watching, or listening to accounts of the trial.
- Not to talk during trial to parties, witnesses, or counsel.

The statute further provides that “[t]he judge may also admonish them with respect to other matters which he considers appropriate.” G.S. 15A-1236(a). The North Carolina Pattern Jury Instructions contain two pattern instructions for admonitions to jurors at recesses: [N.C.P.I.- Crim. 100.31](#) (setting forth the admonition for the first recess after the jury is selected) and [N.C.P.I – Crim. 100.33](#) (setting for the admonition for subsequent recesses).

**10. Note taking by jurors.** Jurors may take notes during trial and may take those notes with them into the jury room during their deliberations unless the judge on his or her own motion or on motion of any party directs otherwise as to note taking in general or taking notes into the jury room. See G.S. 15A-1228; see also [Note Taking by the Jury](#) in this Benchbook.

**11. Trial in absentia.** For trial in the defendant’s absence, see [Trial in the Defendant’s Absence](#) in this Benchbook.

**12. Restraining the defendant during trial.** For a discussion of this issue, see [Restraining the Defendant during Trial](#) in this Benchbook.

**13. Sequestration of witnesses.** For a discussion of this issue, see [Sequestration of Witnesses](#) in this Benchbook.

**14. Limiting instructions.** Be prepared to give standard limiting instructions during trial. Common scenarios requiring such an instruction include:

- 404(b) prior bad acts evidence.
- Out of court statements being offered for corroboration or impeachment.
- Expert testimony about syndromes.

For sample instructions, see [Routine Limiting Instructions in Criminal Cases](#) in this Benchbook.

**15. Exhibits.** You may wish to create your own exhibit list during the trial.

- If so, your exhibit list should track the following information: exhibit number; description of exhibit; who authenticated the exhibit; whether the exhibit was offered in evidence; whether the exhibit was admitted in evidence; and the information discussed below regarding items that might contain biological evidence.
- Check regularly with the clerk regarding which exhibits have been admitted to ensure that your records and the parties' understandings are accurate.
- When physical evidence is offered or admitted into evidence in a criminal proceeding, you must ask the parties (a) to identify the collecting agency and (b) whether the evidence in question is reasonably likely to contain biological evidence and if that biological evidence is relevant to establishing the identity of the perpetrator. G.S. 15A-268(a3). If either party asserts that the evidence may have biological evidentiary value, and you so find, you must instruct that the evidence be so designated in the court's records and that the evidence be preserved pursuant to the G.S. 15A-268. *Id.* The Exhibits/Evidence Log Form (AOC-G-150) has fields for the courtroom clerk to record this information and the your finding.

#### 16. Jury instructions – thinking ahead

- Before the trial begins, consider asking the parties if they know which jury instructions they plan to request and ask them to provide advance copies of any such instructions.

**17. Opening statements.** Each party must be given the opportunity to make a brief opening statement. See G.S. 15A-1221(a)(4); Rules 9 & 10 of the General Rules of Practice for the Superior and District Courts.

- Defense may reserve opening statement until it presents evidence. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(4), (a)(6).
- Consider discussing with counsel issues pertaining to opening and closing statements e.g., improper arguments, etc.
- Consider asking whether counsel will be making any admissions of guilt. See the section on *Harbison* claims on [Ineffective Assistance of Counsel](#) in this Benchbook.

**18. The State's case.** The State must present evidence. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(5).

- Before the close of the State's case, be sure to arraign the defendant on any prior convictions that elevate the offense as required by G.S. 15A-928(c). See [Arraignment](#) in this Benchbook for more information.

**19. Defense motion to dismiss.** At the conclusion of the State's case, rule on any motions to dismiss made under G.S. 15A-1227(a)(1).

**20. The defense case.** G.S. 15A-1221(a)(6).

- The defense is not required to put on evidence. *Id.*
- Consider informing the defendant, out of the presence of the jury, of his or her right to testify/not to testify.

- Sample colloquy regarding the right to testify/not to testify: “You have the right to testify or not to testify. The decision about whether or not to testify should not be made by your lawyer, the district attorney, me, your family members, or anyone else. That decision is yours and yours alone. If you choose not to testify, I will give an instruction to the jury saying that they are not to hold that against you. Do you have any questions about your right to testify or not to testify, or anything related to that right? What is your decision about whether you will testify in this case? Let the record reflect that I have had this conversation with the defendant in open court with [his/her] lawyer present, outside the presence of the jury, and that the defendant has decided that [he/she] [will/will not] testify in this case.”
- Alternate colloquy, for judges who do not wish to require a represented defendant to answer questions by the court: “You do not have to talk to me and you have the right to remain silent. Your lawyer tells me that you have decided [not to testify][to testify]. If this is correct, you do not need to say anything. However, this is not correct, now is the time to tell me.”
- If the defense has reserved opening statement, it may be given before the defense presents its case. *Id.*

#### **21. Rebuttal and additional evidence.**

- Each party may introduce rebuttal evidence in accordance with G.S. 15A-1226(a). See G.S. 15A-1221(a)(7).
- The judge, in his or her discretion, may permit any party to introduce additional evidence at any time before the verdict. G.S. 15A-1226(b).

**22. Absolute impasse.** As a general rule, some decisions in the course of a criminal trial are made by the defendant and others are made by defense counsel. A defendant decides, for example, whether to testify and whether to plead guilty. Counsel typically decides strategy issues, such as which jurors to strike, which witnesses to call, and whether and how to conduct cross-examination. However, in North Carolina, there is a doctrine of absolute impasse. Under this doctrine, when defense counsel and a fully informed criminal defendant reach an absolute impasse as to tactical decisions, the client's wishes must control. *State v. Ali*, 329 N.C. 394, 404 (1991). Reversible error occurs if an absolute impasse is brought to the trial judge's attention and the judge fails to require defense counsel to abide by the defendant's wishes. See, e.g., *State v. Freeman*, 202 N.C. App. 740 (2010). For more information on this issue, see [Absolute Impasse](#) in this Benchbook.

**23. Defense motion to dismiss.** At the close of all evidence, rule on any motions to dismiss made under G.S. 15A-1227(a)(2).

**24. Offers of proof.** Receive offers of proof outside the presence of the jury as they arise during the trial. See *generally* N.C.R. Evid. 103(a)(2). You may choose to hear these at lunch or at the end of the day.

**25. Charge Conference.** See *generally* G.S. 15A-1231; Rule 21 of the General Rules of Practice for the Superior and District Courts.

- A charge conference is mandatory. G.S. 15A-1231(b).

- It must be held out of the jury's presence. *Id.*
- It must be recorded. *Id.*
- Any party may tender written instructions. G.S. 15A-1231(a). Any party tendering written instructions to the judge must provide copies to the other parties. *Id.*
- Inform the parties of:
  - The offenses (and lesser included offenses) on which you will charge;
  - The affirmative defenses on which you will charge;
  - What, if any parts of the tendered instructions you will give; and
  - Any other instructions that you will give, if a party asks.G.S. 15A-1231(b).
- Include a final mandate in your instructions.
- Every charge conference should include discussion of the possible verdicts.
  - Always articulate how the verdict sheet should read.
  - Make sure that a verdict sheet is being prepared (usually by the clerk, although in some counties by the court reporter, lawyers, or judge).

**26. Closing arguments.** Closing arguments are done after all evidence has been presented. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(8); Rule 10 of the General Rules of Practice for the Superior and District Courts.

- For the order of closing arguments, see [Order & Limits on Closing Statements](#) in this Benchbook.
- Consider asking in advance of closing argument whether counsel will be making any admissions of guilt. See the section on *Harbison* claims in [Ineffective Assistance of Counsel](#) in this Benchbook.
- Consider reviewing with counsel the limits on closing arguments prescribed by G.S. 15A-1230.

### 27. Charge the jury.

- The judge must charge the jury. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(9); 15A-1231(c); 15A-1232.
- It is recommended that you follow the [North Carolina Pattern Jury Instructions](#) whenever possible.
- You must give an instruction informing the jury that in order to return a verdict, all 12 jurors must agree to a verdict of guilty or not guilty. G.S. 15A-1235(a).
- A trial court has inherent authority, in its discretion, to submit its instructions on the law to the jury in writing. *State v. McAvoy*, 331 N.C. 583, 591 (1992).

### 28. Alternate Jurors.

- Alternate juror(s) must be retained upon submission of the case to the jury for deliberations. G.S. 15A-1215(a). An alternate juror may be substituted for a regular juror before the jury begins its deliberations as well as after deliberations pursuant to N.C. Gen. § 15A-1215(a). An alternate juror also may serve as a juror in a bifurcated proceeding (e.g. habitual felon, or a jury sentencing hearing under G.S. 15A-1340.16(a1) or G.S. 20-179. Alternate jurors may not join regular jurors in the jury room for any portion of their deliberations unless and until they are substituted as regular jurors. They also may not be present in the courtroom for any non-jury proceedings in the case. The trial court should remind alternate jurors that they are not to

discuss the case among themselves or with anyone else while they are retained and that all other instructions governing their conduct remain in effect until they are released.

- For further discussion of substitution of alternate jurors, see [Jury Misconduct](#) in this Benchbook.

## 29. Jury deliberations. G.S. 15A-1221(a)(10).

- During your concluding instructions, instruct the jury: “Your first order of business when you retire to the jury room will be to select one of your members as foreperson to lead you in your deliberations, but do not begin your discussions of the case until you receive the verdict sheet from the bailiff. When you receive the verdict sheet, that will be your signal to begin your deliberations. Once you have agreed unanimously upon a verdict, your foreperson should mark that verdict, date and sign the verdict sheet, and then knock on the door of the jury room as a signal to us that you have arrived at a verdict. You will then be returned to the courtroom to announce your verdict.”
- After the jury leaves the courtroom, check with counsel about whether any additional instructions or corrections are needed.
- If issues are raised, announce your decision and return the jury to the courtroom for further instruction, if necessary.
- If no issues are raised send the verdict sheet to the jury, stating: “Please take the verdict sheet to the jurors. It is now \_\_\_\_\_ o'clock am/pm.”
- Jurors may take their notes into the jury room during deliberations unless the judge directs otherwise. See G.S. 15A-1228; see *also* [Note Taking by the Jury](#) in this Benchbook.
- Recess court proceedings in the case at hand during the jury deliberations.
- You may wish to take pleas, handle probation violations, or handle other non-jury matters while the jury is deliberating. At least one attorney representing the defendant must remain in the immediate area of the courtroom so as to be available at all times during deliberations. Rule 13 of the General Rules of Practice for the Superior and District Courts.
  - Suggested colloquy: “Court is at ease while the jury deliberates [or, if you are going to handle other matters—e.g., pleas in other cases—while the jury deliberates: Court is at ease in this case while the jury deliberates] but counsel should remain in the courtroom or right outside the door in case the jury has questions or if your presence is required for some other reason.”
- Address the jury’s requests for evidence and/or exhibits and/or questions as they arise. See *generally* G.S. 15A-1233 (review of testimony; use of evidence by the jury); [Jury Review of Evidence](#) in this Benchbook. Always address the entire jury on these issues, not just the jury foreperson.
  - Suggested procedure for dealing with questions from the jury:
    - Make sure any questions from the jury are presented in writing and are made part of the court file as “court exhibits.”
    - Present all questions on the record in open court, outside of the presence of the jury.
    - Get input from counsel and/or an unrepresented defendant about how to address the question.
    - Announce your decision before proceeding, allowing time for objections.

- Bring the jury into the courtroom, addressing all questions on the record, in open court.
- Never send messages back and forth to the jury room or communicate solely with the jury foreperson.
- If exhibits are sent back to the jury room, ensure safekeeping during breaks and/or overnight recesses.
- If the jury asks for a transcript of testimony, rule on that request “in your discretion.”
- See G.S. 15A-1234 regarding additional instructions that may be given to a deliberating jury.
- If the jury fails to arrive at a verdict before the conclusion of the first day, provide jurors with the recess instructions in N.C.P.I. – Crime 100.33 and set a time for their return.

**30. Extending the session.** If the trial or deliberations require you to extend the session, see [Extending the Session](#) in this Benchbook for more information about entry of an extension order.

**31. Verdict/deadlocked jury.**

- For guidance on how to handle a potential or actual jury deadlock, see [Jury Deadlock](#) in this Benchbook.
- For guidance on the form of the verdict, taking a verdict and polling the jury, see [Jury Verdict](#) in this Benchbook.

**32. Discharge the jury.** Thank jurors for their service and discharge the jury.

**33. Discharge or sentence the defendant.**

- If all of the verdicts are not guilty, discharge the defendant.
- If defendant has been found guilty of one or more offenses:
  - Rule on any motions to dismiss made under G.S. 15A-1227(a)(3).
  - Move to any additional proceeding (e.g., habitual felon, or jury sentencing hearing under G.S. 15A-1340.16(a1)).
  - Sentence the defendant in open court
    - If the defendant is not present, enter a Prayer for Judgment Continued. See [Trial in the Defendant's Absence](#) and [Prayer for Judgment Continued](#) in this Benchbook
  - Determine whether defendant should be committed to custody or released on conditions pending appeal pursuant to G.S. 15A-536.

**34. Judgment.**

- Review the judgment for accuracy.
- Sign the judgment.

**35. Fee Applications.** For indigent defendants who have not waived the right to appointed counsel, ask the lawyer for his or her fee application ([AOC-CR-225](#)) and complete both sides of the form. The front side includes an order for payment to counsel. The back side includes a judgment requiring the defendant to repay the state for counsel

expenses if convicted. If counsel has not completed the application, ask counsel for an oral statement of the number of hours for which counsel will seek compensation. Before entering a judgment for an attorney fee award, ask the defendant personally (not through counsel) whether the defendant wishes to be heard on the issue. See e.g., *State v. Patterson*, 269 N.C. App. 640 (2020) (vacating civil judgment for attorney fees based on insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the defendant “received notice, was aware of the opportunity to be heard on the attorney fees issue, or chose not to be heard”); see generally Jamie Markham, *Proper Notice and Hearing on Judgment for Attorney Fees*, N.C. CRIMINAL L., UNC SCH. OF GOV'T BLOG (Feb. 5, 2020) (reviewing the requirement that a defendant be given notice and an opportunity to be heard before entry of a judgment for attorney fees).

### **36. Adjourn or recess court.**

© 2025 School of Government. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Use of this publication for commercial purposes or without acknowledgment of its source is prohibited. Reproducing, distributing, or otherwise making available to a nonpurchaser the entire publication, or a substantial portion of it, without express permission, is prohibited. For permissions questions or requests, email the School of Government at [copyright\\_permissions@sog.unc.edu](mailto:copyright_permissions@sog.unc.edu).