

COURTROOM ETIQUETTE BASICS

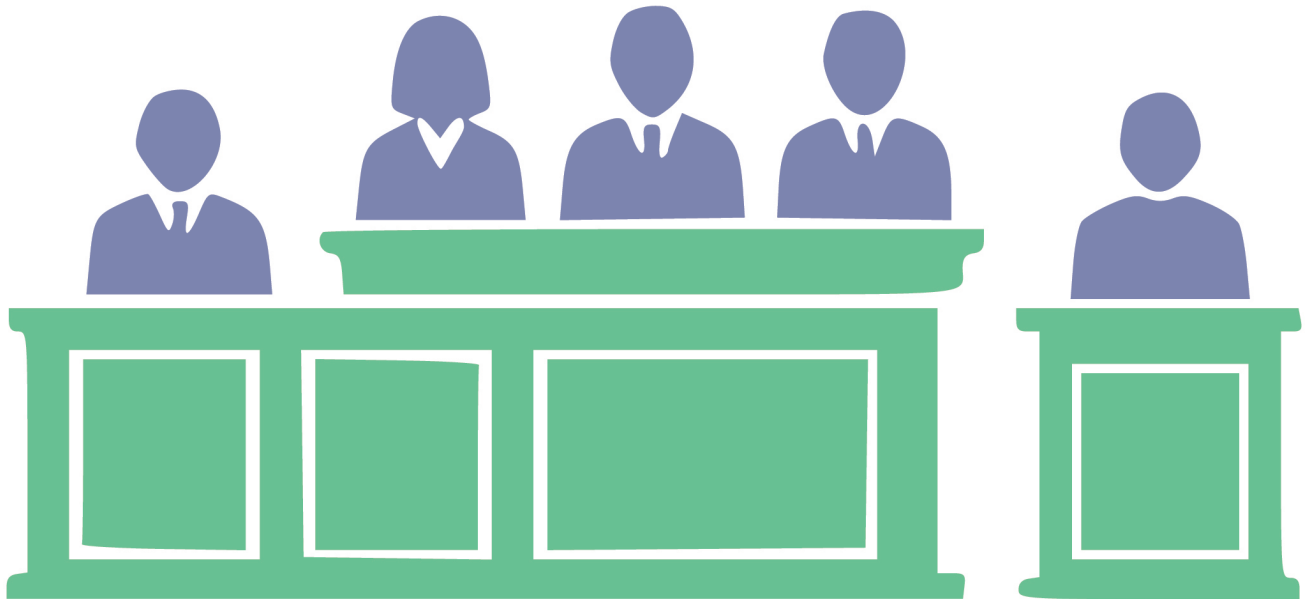


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COURTROOM ETIQUETTE BASICS

INTRODUCTION

Appearing in court for the first time can be a daunting experience, even for well-prepared attorneys. Although law school provides a strong foundation in substantive law and legal analysis, many new attorneys enter practice with limited exposure to the practical realities of courtroom advocacy and procedure.

This guide is designed to provide Michigan attorneys with a foundational understanding of courtroom procedure, professional etiquette, and the practical expectations associated with both in-person and virtual hearings. While courtroom practices, judicial preferences, and local procedures may vary by jurisdiction, professionalism, preparation, and respect for the court remain universal expectations.

BEFORE THE HEARING

KNOW YOUR COURT RULES

Before appearing in any Michigan court, attorneys should become familiar with the applicable court rules, local administrative orders, and individual judge's procedures governing the hearing or proceeding. The Michigan Court Rules provide the statewide framework for civil and criminal practice; many courts maintain additional local practices and scheduling requirements that attorneys are expected to know and follow.

READ THE JUDGE'S PROCEDURES IN ADVANCE

Attorneys should review the assigned judge's practice preferences in advance, including requirements related to motion practice, courtesy copies, proposed orders, exhibit submission, remote hearing procedures, and courtroom decorum. Many courts publish this information on their websites or through local administrative orders. Failure to comply with court-specific procedures may result in unnecessary delays, adjournments, or negative impressions before the court. These procedures often appear on the court's website. If you cannot locate them, call the court or courtroom clerk.

UNDERSTAND THE COURT'S REQUIREMENTS

Preparation also includes confirming the hearing format, understanding filing deadlines, reviewing applicable evidentiary or procedural standards, and ensuring familiarity with the technology used for virtual proceedings. Taking the time to understand the court's expectations demonstrates professionalism, preparedness, and respect for the judicial process.

REVIEW THE FILE BEFORE APPEARING

Before entering the courtroom, review:

- the motion or pleading at issue,
- relevant case law, statute, and other governing laws and/or regulations;
- prior orders,
- the current status of the case,
- relevant deadlines,
- respective arguments of each party,
- and the exact relief being requested.

ARRIVE EARLY

As a general rule, arrive at least 15–20 minutes early for routine hearings, and earlier for unfamiliar courthouses or evidentiary proceedings.

- Arriving early allows time to:
- pass through security,
- locate the courtroom,
- check in,
- take out and review your materials,
- speak with opposing counsel,
- speak with your client,
- and address any unexpected issues.

Late arrivals may reflect poorly on an attorney's professionalism and disrupt the court's schedule.

ARRIVAL & CHECK-IN

DRESS PROFESSIONALLY

Professional business attire is expected in every Michigan courtroom. Appropriate courtroom attire generally includes suits, blazers, dress shirts, professional dresses, and dress slacks, and other formal business clothing that reflects professionalism and respect for the court.

Attorneys and court participants should avoid attire that is unprofessional, distracting, or overly casual, including:

- Clothing that is unclean, wrinkled, or otherwise unkempt;
- Casual or revealing clothing such as t-shirts, shorts, tank tops, sweatpants, jeans, or sweatshirts;
- Hats or head coverings not worn for religious or medical purposes;
- Excessive or distracting accessories; and
- Informal footwear including flipflops, sandals, or similar casual shoes.

Maintaining appropriate courtroom attire demonstrates professionalism and respect for the judicial process.

LOCATE THE COURTROOM CLERK

The courtroom clerk is typically seated near the judge and assists with:

- managing the docket,
- handling and identifying exhibits,
- administering oaths, and
- facilitating courtroom logistics.

Treat courtroom staff with professionalism, courtesy, and respect at all times. Court clerks, judicial assistants, bailiffs, and other courtroom personnel play an important role in managing courtroom operations, scheduling, and case administration. Professional interactions with court staff contribute to the efficient functioning of the court and reflect positively on counsel.

CHECK IN WITH COURT STAFF

Courtroom check-in procedures vary by judge and courtroom. For example, attorneys may be required to:

- Verbally check in with a designated staff member;
 - *Example: Attorney: "Samantha Smith checking in as counsel for Plaintiff on the Byers v. Wheeler matter." Clerk: "Thank you Ms. Smith, you and your client are checked in."*
- Sign in on a paper attendance sheet; or
- Check in using a buzzer or intercom system that connects to courtroom staff.

In other courtrooms, no formal check-in process is required, and the court simply calls the docket at the scheduled time.

If unsure of the applicable procedure, first look for posted instructions on the courtroom door or in the surrounding area. If no check-in information is available, politely ask courtroom staff to clarify the appropriate check-in process:

"Good morning, I'm appearing on behalf of the Plaintiff/Defendant in [case name]. Would you like me to check in?"

NAVIGATING CHAMBERS

The judge's chambers are typically located adjacent to or connected with the courtroom and serve as the private workspace for the judge and court staff. Chambers often include conference rooms or offices that attorneys may use for private discussions, preparing orders, or addressing administrative matters related to a case.

Access to the chambers area is generally restricted and is often marked with signage such as "Court Staff and Attorneys Only" or "No Public Access."

In some cases, attorneys may be invited into chambers by the judge to discuss case-related matters off the record and outside the presence of the parties or clients.

If you need to locate a member of the judge's staff (such as a judge's assistant) who is not seated in the courtroom, they are often located within the chambers area or the adjoining hallway.

DOCKET EXPECTATIONS

CONCURRENT CASE SCHEDULING

In many Michigan courts, multiple matters are scheduled for the same hearing time.

As a result, your case may not be called immediately at the scheduled start time. The court determines the order in which matters will be heard and may address shorter matters first. The court may also allow additional time for attorneys who are engaged in settlement discussions or otherwise working to resolve issues before the hearing.

Remain patient, attentive, and prepared to proceed until your matter is called.

ENTERING AN APPEARANCE

FORMALLY PLACE YOUR APPEARANCE

When your case is called:

- stand promptly,
- state your name,
- and state whom you represent.

Example:

"Good morning, Your Honor. Jane Doe, appearing on behalf of the Plaintiff."

Some courts may also require counsel to expressly state their P Number on the record when entering an appearance, even if it has already been provided in the case filings.

WHERE TO SIT & STAND

COUNSEL TABLES

In many Michigan courtrooms, the plaintiff or petitioner is customarily seated on the left side of the courtroom when facing the bench, while the defendant or respondent is seated on the right. However, courtroom configurations and individual judicial preferences may vary.

If you are uncertain where counsel should be seated, consult courtroom staff where before proceedings begin.

In courtrooms equipped for jury trials, the party bearing the burden of proof is often seated closest to the jury box.

ADDRESSING THE COURT

ADDRESS THE JUDGE APPROPRIATELY

Counsel and parties should address the Court respectfully and in accordance with the judge's preferences and local courtroom practice.

Appropriate ways to address the judge include:

- "Your Honor,"
- "Judge [Last Name]", where permitted or customary in that courtroom, or
- "The Court."
 - *Example: We ask The Court to consider the extenuating circumstances outlined in Defendant's motion when determining appropriate relief.*

PRESENTING YOUR ARGUMENT

The Court generally values advocacy that is organized, focused, and concise.

When presenting argument, counsel should clearly identify:

1. the relief requested;
2. the governing legal authority and applicable legal framework; and
3. and the material facts supporting the requested relief.

Avoid unnecessary repetition or extended argument on issues that have already been adequately addressed. If the Court requires clarification, additional information, or further legal analysis, it will request it.

STANDING TO ADDRESS THE COURT

In most Michigan courtrooms, attorneys are expected to stand when addressing the Court, presenting arguments, making objections, delivering opening or closing statements, and examining witnesses.

Some judges may also require counsel to conduct argument or witness examinations from the podium.

When in doubt, stand. Counsel should observe the Court's procedures and conform to established courtroom practices and expectations. If clarification is needed, consult courtroom staff before the proceedings.

ADDRESSING THE COURT, NOT OPPOSING COUNSEL

All arguments, objections, and remarks should be directed to the Court rather than to opposing counsel.

Counsel should always maintain a professional demeanor and avoid interrupting, speaking over, or engaging in direct exchanges with opposing counsel. Personal attacks, raised voices, dismissive gestures, visible displays of frustration, or other unprofessional conduct have no place in courtroom proceedings.

Disagreements should be presented respectfully through arguments addressed to the Court, which is responsible for resolving disputes between the parties.

APPROACHING THE BENCH

REQUEST PERMISSION BEFORE APPROACHING THE BENCH

Counsel should not approach the bench without first obtaining the Court's permission.

Appropriate requests include:

"May I approach, Your Honor?"

"Your Honor, may I provide a courtesy copy to the Court?"

COMMON REASONS FOR APPROACHING THE BENCH

- Providing exhibits;
- Submitting proposed orders or other documents; and
- Addressing confidential or sensitive matters that should not be discussed in open court or on the record.

Courtroom procedures and judicial preferences vary. Some judges prefer that documents be provided to the clerk or court staff rather than handed directly to the judge. Counsel should observe the Court's practices and follow any instructions provided by the judge or courtroom staff.

EXHIBITS & EVIDENCE

ORGANIZE EXHIBITS BEFORE COURT

For evidentiary hearings, motion hearings, and trials, counsel should ensure that all exhibits are organized and readily accessible before proceedings begin.

As appropriate and in accordance with local practice:

- Pre-mark exhibits by letter or number;
- Bring sufficient copies for the Court, opposing counsel, witnesses, and the clerk, if required; and
- Organize exhibits in binders or folders with tabs, indexes, or tables of contents as necessary.

Counsel should be prepared to locate and present any exhibit promptly when requested by the Court. Careful organization minimizes unnecessary delays.

PROFESSIONALISM & COURTROOM DECORUM

MICHIGAN SUPREME COURT ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER NO. 2020-23 **(PROFESSIONALISM PRINCIPLES)**

Michigan Supreme Court Administrative Order No. 2020-23 establishes the Professionalism Principles for Lawyers and Judges in Michigan, emphasizing that effective advocacy must be conducted with civility, integrity, and respect for the administration of justice. The order recognizes that zealous representation is consistent with professional courtesy and that courtroom conduct should promote the fair, efficient, and dignified resolution of disputes. It further underscores the shared responsibility of judges and attorneys to maintain public confidence in the judicial system by avoiding behavior that is discourteous, disruptive, or obstructive to the proceedings.

SILENCE ELECTRONIC DEVICES

All telephones, smart watches, tablets, and laptops should be silenced prior to the commencement of court proceedings.

Audible notifications or device-related interruptions may disrupt proceedings and detract from the dignity and efficiency of the court.

AVOID SIDE CONVERSATIONS

Courtrooms are often quieter than anticipated. Even low-volume or whispered conversations may be overheard by the Court, staff, clients, opposing counsel, parties, or witnesses. Counsel should therefore refrain from side conversations and always maintain appropriate etiquette.

STAND WHEN THE JUDICIAL OFFICER ENTERS OR EXITS

As a matter of courtroom etiquette, counsel and parties are expected to stand when the judge enters or exits the courtroom, unless a physical limitation prevents them from doing so. After the judge takes the bench, the Court will indicate when individuals may be seated.

TEMPORARY ABSENCE FROM THE COURTROOM

If counsel or a party must briefly leave the courtroom while a matter is pending and has not yet been called, they should discreetly notify courtroom staff or the judge's clerk before exiting. This ensures that, if the matter is called in their absence, court personnel are aware of the temporary unavailability and can proceed accordingly.

PREPARING CLIENTS

BEFORE ENTERING THE COURTROOM

Prior to the hearing, counsel should ensure that the client understands courtroom procedures and expectations. This includes explaining:

- Where the client should sit during the proceedings;
- When and under what circumstances the client may speak;
- How the client should communicate with counsel during the hearing (for example, by using a notepad and pen to write questions or comments);
- Appropriate courtroom decorum and behavioral expectations; and
- That interruptions, emotional outbursts, or other disruptive conduct may adversely affect the case.

Clients should also be advised that communication with the judge generally occurs through counsel unless the court directs otherwise.

Finally, counsel should assure the client that a debriefing will occur after the hearing to address any questions, explain the proceedings, and clarify any issues the client may not have fully understood.

VIRTUAL HEARING ETIQUETTE & PROCEDURE

VIRTUAL HEARING ETIQUETTE

Virtual court proceedings require the same level of preparation and professionalism as in-person appearances. Attorneys in virtual hearings should conduct themselves in a manner that reflects the gravity of the judicial process.

When appearing remotely, attorneys should:

- Dress in professional courtroom attire;
- Participate from a private, quiet, and secure location;
- Minimize distractions and interruptions;
- Ensure that televisions, music, pets, children, and other background activity do not interfere with the proceedings; and
- Test technology in advance to ensure reliable audio and video quality.

Attorneys should avoid:

- Participating while operating a vehicle;
- Joining proceedings while walking through public or distracting environments;
- Eating during the hearing; or
- Appearing from locations that may be perceived as unprofessional or inappropriate for a court proceeding.

Maintaining a professional appearance and environment promotes effective advocacy, demonstrates respect for the court, and helps ensure that proceedings are conducted efficiently and without unnecessary disruption.

SET YOUR DISPLAY NAME PROPERLY

Many Michigan courts require attorneys to update their Zoom display name before entering a virtual hearing. A common format is:

Full Name, P#, Case Number

Example:

Jane Doe, P12345, 24-123456-DM

Attorneys should review all applicable courtroom procedures and standing orders, as individual judges may have specific naming requirements.

TEST TECHNOLOGY BEFORE THE HEARING

Prior to the hearing, confirm that all necessary technology is functioning properly. This includes:

- Testing your microphone and camera;
- Verifying that your internet connection is stable and reliable;
- Ensuring that Zoom and any required software are fully updated; and
- Confirming that you can access all necessary documents and exhibits electronically.

Technical difficulties can delay proceedings, disrupt the court's schedule, and reflect negatively on counsel's preparedness and professionalism.

OBSERVE HEARINGS

Attorneys are encouraged to observe live-streamed court proceedings to become familiar with courtroom procedures, layout, and etiquette before appearing before a new judge. The [MiCourt Virtual Courtroom Directory](#) provides direct access to live streams from courtrooms throughout Michigan, offering an opportunity to observe a variety of courtroom settings and practices.

LOG IN EARLY

Attorneys should log into virtual hearings at least 10–15 minutes before the scheduled start time whenever possible. In many courts, cases in which all attorneys and parties are present and ready to proceed may be called before other scheduled matters. Early arrival also provides an opportunity to address any technical issues before the hearing begins.

PROMPTLY NOTIFY THE COURT OF TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES

If you or your client experience difficulties connecting to the hearing, being admitted from the waiting room, or maintaining a stable connection, immediately contact courtroom staff. Do not assume that the court is aware of the issue. Prompt communication demonstrates diligence and may help avoid unnecessary delays or adverse consequences.

WAITING IN THE ZOOM WAITING ROOM IS OFTEN NORMAL

Many judges utilize Zoom waiting rooms and admit participants into the active virtual courtroom one matter at a time.

As a result, attorneys and parties may remain in the virtual waiting room for a significant period after the scheduled hearing time.

While waiting remain attentive, available, and prepared to join proceeding immediately when admitted.

MAINTAIN A PROFESSIONAL CAMERA SETUP

Attorneys should ensure that their camera setup reflects the same level of professionalism expected in a physical courtroom. As a standard practice, attorneys should:

- Position the camera at eye level;
- Use adequate front-facing lighting;
- Appear from a quiet, private location; and
- Maintain a neutral and professional background.

Attorneys should avoid:

- Excessive movement or repositioning during the hearing;
- Participating from a vehicle;
- Walking while attending court;
- Holding a mobile device by hand;
- Placing the device on their lap; or
- Creating visual distractions.

REMAIN MUTED WHEN NOT SPEAKING

Attorneys should keep their microphone muted unless:

- Addressing the court;
- Examining or questioning a witness; or
- Otherwise directed to speak.

Background noise can interfere with the court record, disrupt proceedings, and distract participants.

PRACTICAL COURTROOM GUIDANCE

BRING ESSENTIAL DOCUMENTS

Attorneys should arrive prepared with copies of all documents that may become relevant during the hearing, including, for example:

- Motions and responses;
- Notices of hearing;
- Proposed orders;
- Exhibits;
- Recently filed pleadings; and
- Any prior orders related to the issues before the court.

Do not assume the court will have immediate access to every filing. Maintaining organized copies of key documents allows counsel to respond promptly and accurately to questions from the bench.

For example, if the court asks a question about a prior ruling, deadline, or provision contained in an earlier order, counsel should be prepared to provide an immediate and accurate response.

Example:

Counsel, remind me, was Defendant ordered to provide payment to Plaintiff within 21 or 30 days of the last hearing?

If counsel does not have the order on hand and cannot recall with certainty, counsel will be in the position of responding “I don’t know” in front of the client, opposing counsel and party, and the court.

BRING A LEGAL PAD AND PEN

Regardless of the technology available in the courtroom, attorneys should always have a reliable method for:

- Taking notes;
- Recording hearing dates and deadlines;
- Documenting rulings from the bench; and
- Tracking court instructions and follow-up responsibilities.

DO NOT INTERRUPT

THE COURT

Attorneys should not interrupt the court while the judge or judicial officer is speaking.

If counsel believes the court has misstated a fact, procedural history, or applicable date, counsel should wait for an appropriate pause and respectfully request an opportunity to clarify the record.

Example:

Your Honor, if I may briefly clarify the record. I believe the 6-month waiting period for this matter would expire on October 1 rather than September 1, as the complaint was filed on April 1 of this year.

COURT REPORTERS

Court reporters are responsible for creating a clear and accurate record of the proceedings. Attorneys should avoid speaking over others, talking too quickly, or continuing to speak after an objection has been raised unless directed to do so by the court.

OPPOSING COUNSEL

Both sides have an opportunity to speak. When opposing counsel is addressing the court, attorneys should refrain from interrupting except when making a proper objection.

Likewise, when opposing counsel raises an objection, counsel should cease speaking immediately unless instructed otherwise by the court.

ANSWER QUESTIONS DIRECTLY

When responding to a question from the court, answer the question before providing additional explanation or context.

Direct and responsive answers assist the court and demonstrate professionalism and credibility. Counsel should avoid evasive or unnecessarily lengthy responses.

SPEAK CLEARLY AND DELIBERATELY

Court proceedings are recorded and may later be transcribed.

Attorneys should speak clearly, at a measured pace, and with sufficient volume to be heard by the court and court reporter. Avoid mumbling, speaking while looking down, or speaking so quickly that the record becomes difficult to follow.

Because statements made in court may later appear in transcripts, counsel should communicate thoughtfully, professionally, precisely, and respectfully. Taking a brief moment to formulate a response is often preferable to providing an incomplete or imprecise answer.

MAINTAIN PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

If you have not previously met opposing counsel, introduce yourself before the hearing begins.

Professionalism and collegiality are important components of effective advocacy. A respectful working relationship with opposing counsel can facilitate communication, reduce unnecessary disputes, and contribute to more efficient case resolution. Attorneys can advocate zealously for their clients while remaining courteous and professional toward one another.

COMMUNICATE WITH OPPOSING COUNSEL BEFORE THE HEARING

Whenever possible, counsel should confer with opposing counsel before appearing in court to:

- Discuss outstanding issues;
- Explore potential stipulations;
- Exchange relevant documents; and
- Identify matters that may be resolved without court intervention.

Courts generally appreciate attorneys who demonstrate professionalism and cooperation. Counsel should avoid presenting documents or raising issues at a hearing that not first been shared with opposing counsel when advance disclosure is reasonably possible.

DO NOT ASSUME THE COURT HAS REVIEWED EVERY FILING

Even when extensive briefing has been submitted, attorneys should be prepared to provide a concise summary of the relevant facts, procedural history, and requested relief.

Focus on the most important issues before the court rather than attempting to restate the contents of written submissions.

MAINTAIN CREDIBILITY

Credibility is among an attorney's most valuable professional assets.

If you do not know the answer to a question, acknowledge that fact candidly and, when appropriate, offer to provide supplemental information.

Attorneys should never speculate, exaggerate, or misrepresent facts, procedural history, or legal authority. A reputation for accuracy and candor benefits both counsel and client through the course of litigation.

DEADLINES & SCHEDULING

CLARIFY DEADLINES BEFORE LEAVING COURT

If the court's instructions regarding filing deadlines, briefing schedules, hearing dates, or other obligations are unclear, politely request clarification before proceedings conclude.

Example:

"Your Honor, to clarify, is the supplemental brief due 14 days before the next hearing?"

Seeking clarification helps ensure compliance with court's directions and creates a clear record of the court's instructions.

ADVISE THE COURT OF SCHEDULING CONFLICTS

If the court proposes a hearing date that conflicts with another obligation, such as a scheduled medical procedure or conflicting hearing, counsel may respectfully request that the court consider an alternate date.

Example:

“Your Honor, I have a previously scheduled trial in another matter on that date. If possible, I would respectfully request an alternative hearing date.”

While accommodations are not guaranteed, courts generally appreciate prompt notice of legitimate scheduling conflicts.

Addressing conflicts on the record may also eliminate the need for subsequent motions or stipulated requests for adjournment.

CALENDAR DEADLINES IMMEDIATELY

Following every hearing, attorneys should promptly calendar all:

- Filing deadlines;
- Hearing dates;
- Discovery deadlines; and
- Other court-ordered deadlines.

Timely calendaring helps prevent missed deadlines and promotes effective case management.

AFTER THE HEARING

PREPARING AND SUBMITTING ORDERS

Following many hearings, an order must be entered to memorialize the court’s ruling.

Depending on the court and the nature of the proceeding, the judge may prepare the order personally or direct counsel to do so. In motion practice, responsibility for preparing the order falls to the prevailing or moving party. If the court has not specified who will prepare the order, counsel should seek clarification before leaving the courtroom.

Attorneys should also familiarize themselves with the judge’s preferred procedures for submitting orders. Some judges prefer physical orders for signature, while others routinely sign electronically filed orders. Courts may provide standardized order forms, designated filing procedures, or courthouse resources for preparing and printing orders. If local practice is unclear, counsel may respectfully inquire regarding the preferred submission method.

Example:

Attorney: Your Honor, would the Court like counsel to prepare an order reflecting today’s ruling?

Judge: Yes, Counsel.

Attorney: Would the court prefer that the order be submitted physically before I leave today, or should it be submitted electronically?