Structure of Federal and State Courts

UNIT IV – Judicial Branch and Legal System
Review: Judicial Branch

- Role: interpret laws
- Settle disputes (civil court) AND decides innocence/guilt (criminal court)
- Based on ideals of
  - Equal justice for all
  - Innocent until proven guilty
FEDERAL COURT SYSTEM
Organization of Federal Courts

- U.S. Supreme Court
- U.S. Court of Appeals
- U.S. District Court
What does each level do?

- **U.S. District Courts** –
  - First court used, decides innocence/guilt, only court to use a jury in federal system, 1 judge hears case

- **U.S. Court of Appeals** –
  - Court used by individuals to get original verdict overturned, does NOT have a jury, 3 judges hear case

- **U.S. Supreme Court** –
  - Highest court in the land, have final say in cases and on Constitution, does NOT have a jury, 9 justices
Federal Judges

- Appointed by the President
- No specific qualifications
- Must be approved by the Senate
- Have their job for life (or until they retire)
- Can be impeached and removed from office
**Supreme Court**
- Highest court in the federal system
- Nine Justices, meeting in Washington, D.C.
- Appeals jurisdiction through *certiorari* process
- Limited original jurisdiction over some cases

**Courts of Appeal**
- Intermediate level in the federal system
- 12 regional “circuit” courts, including D.C. Circuit
- No original jurisdiction; strictly appellate

**District Courts**
- Lowest level in the federal system
- 94 judicial districts in 50 states & territories
- No appellate jurisdiction
- Original jurisdiction over most cases
NC STATE COURT SYSTEM
Organization of NC State Courts

- NC Supreme Court
- NC Court of Appeals
- NC Superior
- NC District Courts
What does each level do?

- **NC District Courts** –
  - Tries misdemeanors (smaller crimes) and small civil cases, NO jury used, 1 judge

- **NC Superior Courts** –
  - Tries felonies (severe crimes) and large civil cases, ONLY NC court to use a jury, 1 judge

- **NC Court of Appeals** –
  - Court used by individuals to get original verdict overturned, does NOT have a jury, 3 judges hear case

- **NC Supreme Court** –
  - Highest court in NC, does NOT have a jury, 7 justices
NC State Judges

- Elected by the people
- No specific qualifications
- District judges – 4 year terms
- All other judges – 8 year terms
- Can be impeached and removed from office
Original Jurisdiction

- a court’s authority to hear and decide a matter before any other court can review the matter
- Supreme Court of the United States is a court of original jurisdiction only in cases between two or more states, as well as cases involving diplomats
- In North Carolina, district and superior courts have original jurisdiction
Original and Appellate Jurisdiction

• Original jurisdiction: held by the court in which a case is originally tried
  • State level: trial court
  • Federal level: U.S. District Court

• Appellate Jurisdiction: held by the court in which appeals may be heard
  • State level: Appellate courts
  • Federal level: U.S. Courts of Appeal
Exclusive and Concurrent Jurisdiction

- Some cases can be heard only in federal courts. In these cases, federal courts have exclusive jurisdiction.
- Many cases may be tried in a federal court or a State court. In such instances, the federal and State courts have concurrent jurisdiction.
Understanding Oral Arguments

- Oral arguments can be similar to a written argument
  - Includes an introduction, body, and conclusion
  - Addresses and refutes opposing points of view
• **majority opinion**: the official ruling of the Supreme Court on a case, explaining how the majority decision was reached

• **concurring opinion**: a separate opinion that agrees with the majority opinion but offers a different reason for making that ruling

• **dissenting opinion**: an opinion written by a justice who disagrees with the ruling of the majority in a case