

# OFFICE OF JUDICIAL EDUCATION

## 7/2024



July 2024

TO: Consumers of Wisconsin Jury Instructions – Civil

FROM: Wisconsin Court System, Office of Judicial Education

Enclosed is Release No. 57 for the 1981 edition of Wis JI-Civil. The release contains material approved by the Wisconsin Civil Jury Instructions Committee through May 2024.

The following material is included in Release No. 57:

### New Instructions

### Revised Instructions

5	50	1024	1145	1384	1391
	2500	2511	2750		

**Content.** The 7/2024 supplement updates the publication on legislative actions and judicial decisions through May 2024.

**Information.** For information on the status of the Committee's work, please contact Bryce Pierson at [bryce.pierson@wicourts.gov](mailto:bryce.pierson@wicourts.gov).

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# OFFICE OF JUDICIAL EDUCATION

7/2024



## Wis JI-Civil

(Release No. 57 – July 2024)

### Filing Instructions

Remove Old	Insert New
<u>Pages Titled</u>	<u>Pages Titled</u>

#### **Volume I:**

Title Page (1/2024) .....	Title Page (7/2024) Supplement
1/2024 Supplement with (Release No. 56) in the right corner .....	(Release No. 57) in the right corner
Committee List (1/2024) .....	Committee List (7/2024)
Summary of Contents (1/2024) .....	Summary of Contents (7/2024)
Table of Contents (1/2024) .....	Table of Contents (7/2024)
.....	AFTER (JI-1) 5 (7/2024)
50 (2022).....	50 (7/2024)
1024 (2017).....	1024 (7/2024)
1145 (2002).....	1145 (7/2024)
1384 (2017).....	1384 (7/2024)
1391 (2016).....	1391 (7/2024)

#### **Volume II:**

Title Page (1/2024) .....	Title Page (7/2024) Supplement
1/2024 Supplement with (Release No. 56) in the right corner .....	(Release No. 57) in the right corner
Table of Contents (1/2024) .....	Table of Contents (7/2024)
2500 (1/2023).....	2500 (7/2024)





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# WISCONSIN JURY INSTRUCTIONS

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## CIVIL

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## VOLUME I

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Wisconsin Civil Jury  
Instructions Committee

- 7/2024 Supplement (Release No. 57)

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## WISCONSIN CIVIL JURY INSTRUCTIONS COMMITTEE (1959-2024)

### CURRENT MEMBERS

Hon. Michael Waterman, St. Croix County (Chair)  
Hon. William Pocan, Milwaukee County  
Hon. Sarah Harless, Eau Claire County  
Hon. Michael Aprahamian, Waukesha County  
Hon. Emily Lonergan, Outagamie County  
Hon. Kevin Martens, Milwaukee County  
Hon. Eugene Gasiorkiewicz, Racine County

### FORMER MEMBERS

Hon. Helmuth F. Arps (1959-1962)	Hon. Dennis Moroney, (2010-2020)
Hon. M. Eugene Baker (1959-1975)	Hon. Emily Mueller (2004-2014)
Hon. Michael J. Barron (1983-1996)	Hon. Gordon Myse (1978-1983)
Hon. Dennis J. Barry (1994-1997)	Hon. Harvey L. Neelen (1959-1977)
Chief Justice Bruce F. Beilfuss (1959-1964)	Hon. J. Michael Nolan (1991-2001)
Hon. Herbert A. Bunde (1962-1963)	Hon. Daniel Noonan (2003-2013)
Hon. George A. Burns, Jr. (1976-1994)	Hon. William I. O'Neill (1959-1974)
Hon. Lewis J. Charles (1962-1976)	Hon. Richard W. Orton (1959-1961, 1973-1979)
Hon. William E. Crane (1978-1994)	Hon. Robert J. Parins (1970-1982)
Hon. Richard J. Dietz (1997-2006)	Hon. Andrew W. Parnell (1959-1982)
Hon. Daniel Dillon, (2007-2018)	Hon. Robert F. Pfiffner (1970-1987)
Hon. Edward M. DuQuaine (1959-1961)	Hon. Paul Reilly (2013-2018)
Hon. Mark J. Farnum (1979-1989)	Hon. John Roethe (2003-2007)
Hon. Merrill R. Farr (1962-1975)	Hon. Michael Schumacher (2011-2021)
Hon. James P. Fiedler (1981-1991)	Hon. William Sosnay (2013-2023)
Hon. Michael Fitzpatrick (2014-2023)	Hon. Richard H. Stafford (1987-1997)
Hon. Richard G. Greenwood (1983-1994)	Hon. Lisa Stark (2001-2011)
Hon. Marc Hammer, (2017-2022)	Hon. Michael P. Sullivan (1994-2003)
Hon. Gerald W. Jaeckle (1989-1994)	Hon. Joseph M. Troy (1994-2003)
Hon. P. Charles Jones (1994-2004)	Hon. Albert J. Twesme (1962-1980)
Hon. Barbara Key, (2016-2022)	Hon. Clair H. Voss (1974-1978)
Hon. Philip Kirk (2006-2009)	Hon. Francis T. Wasielewski (1996-2006)
Hon. Norris Maloney (1964-1978)	Hon. Patrick Willis (2006-2016)
Hon. Robert Mawdsley (1997-2007)	

**Reporter:** Bryce Pierson, Office of Judicial Education – Wisconsin Court System

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# WIS JI-CIVIL

## SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

### **Tributes**

### **Memorials**

### **1981 Foreword**

### **1978 Preface**

### **1960 Introduction**

### **GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS**

Right to a Jury Trial	1
Comment: Gender-Neutral Language	5
Suggested Order	10
Preliminary Instructions	50-66
Jurors' Duties	100-197
Evidence, Burdens, and Presumptions	200-358
Witnesses	400-425
Accrual of Action	950

### **NEGLIGENCE**

Standard of Care Required	1000-1029
Duties of Persons in Specific Situations	1030-1413
Cause	1500-1511
Comparative Negligence	1580-1595
Imputed Negligence	1600-1610
Damages	1700-1897
Safe Place	1900.2-1911
Nuisance	1920-1932

### **INTENTIONAL TORTS**

Assault and Battery	2000-2020
False Imprisonment	2100-2115
Federal Civil Rights	2151-2155
Conversion	2200-2201
Misrepresentation	2400-2420
Defamation	2500-2552
Misuse of Procedure	2600-2620
Trade Practices	2720-2722
Domestic Relations	2725
Business Relations	2750-2791
Civil Conspiracy; Injury to Business	2800-2822
Tort ImmunityBLaw Note	2900

### **CONTRACTS**

General	3010-3095
Insurance	3100-3118
Breach of Warranty	3200-3230
Duties of Manufacturers and Sellers	3240-3310
Damages	3700-3760

### **AGENCY; EMPLOYMENT; BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS**

	4000-4080
--	-----------

<b>PERSONS</b>	5001-7070
----------------	-----------

<b>PROPERTY</b>	
General	8012-8065
Eminent Domain	8100-8145

### **TABLE OF CASES CITED**

### **INDEX**

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## FOREWORD

Since 1959, the Wisconsin Jury Instructions project has produced over one thousand jury instructions to assist judges, lawyers, and, most importantly, jurors in understanding what the jury must decide at the conclusion of a trial. In 2020, the Jury Instructions project was transferred entirely to the Wisconsin Court System after 60 years as a cooperative effort between the Judicial Conference and the University of Wisconsin Law School. Publication and distribution of the Wisconsin Jury Instructions – Civil is now managed by the Office of Judicial Education with the assistance of the Wisconsin State Law Library. Throughout its sixty-three years of existence, the Wisconsin jury instructions model has proven unique in its longevity, continuity, and orientation toward the trial judge. Despite several structural changes over the last six decades, these distinctive aspects have remained consistent, and the jury instructions model has continued without interruption.

The instructions provided in Wisconsin Jury Instructions – Civil respond to a need for a comprehensive set of instructions to assist judges, juries, and lawyers in performing their role in civil cases. All published jury instructions share the same objective to provide a careful blending of the substantive law and the collective wisdom and courtroom experiences of the Committee members.

This set of instructions has been enriched by valuable suggestions from the judges and lawyers who have used the instructions in preparing trials, as well as presenting cases to juries. The Committee hopes this set will continue to receive the same valuable scrutiny from those who use it. We are proud of this publication and hope those who use it find it valuable.

**(September 2021)**

**Bryce Pierson  
Legal Advisor & Committee Reporter  
Office of Judicial Education**

## COMMITTEE HISTORY

### Foundation of the Wisconsin Civil Jury Instructions

As it is known today, the Wisconsin civil jury instructions model draws its origins to a 1958 panel discussion on uniform jury instructions sponsored by the Judicial Administration Section of the American Bar Association at its annual convention in Los Angeles. After attending this conference, Hon. Andrew. W. Parnell, Circuit Judge of the Tenth Circuit of Wisconsin and the future Chairman of the Civil Jury Instructions Committee, delivered a paper to the Wisconsin Board of Circuit Judges in which he advocated the necessity for uniform instructions in Wisconsin. In his paper, Judge Parnell urged the Board to initiate the development of uniform civil jury instructions, reminding the Board that:

The task seems monumental, but it surely is not insurmountable. It is and should be, a function of this Board to set up the original machinery looking to the production, in due course, of uniform jury instructions in civil cases in our state. The arguments for it are patent and predominate. The ideal of progress and improvement in the judicial administration of our state should ever possess us and make us leaders in that field.

In response, the Board of Circuit Judges, in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin Extension Law Department<sup>1</sup>, and the University of Wisconsin Law School<sup>2</sup>, organized and conducted two seminars oriented around jury instructions in June of 1959. At these seminars, attendees discussed and appraised the necessity and the merits of uniform jury instructions in Wisconsin. As Judge Parnell would eventually note in his introduction to the original 1960 edition of the Wisconsin Jury Instructions-Civil, it was the “interest, desire, and enthusiasm” of the participating members of these two seminars that “ignited the inspirational spark that launched the program.”

Although neither of these seminars produced immediate or recognizable model jury instructions, they made apparent the need for a reference resource that could assist the bench and bar of the State of Wisconsin in the preparation of jury instructions. Therefore, it was determined that a comprehensive strategy would have to be formulated to organize, review, develop, approve, produce, and distribute a book of uniform civil jury instructions.

Following the June seminars, the chairperson and the executive committee of each seminar held several meetings to tentatively resolve preliminary details of sponsoring, publishing, authoring, and editing. The resulting conclusions were then presented to the Board of Circuit Judges at its fall meeting in 1959. As a result, the Board established by resolution the Circuit Judges Civil Jury Instructions Committee. The Board also approved the preliminary agreements that provided the Committee would constitute the authoring personnel. Additionally, Professor John E. Conway of the University of Wisconsin Law

School would serve as editor, and the Extension Law Department would sponsor and produce the uniform civil jury instructions publication.

The first meeting of the appointed Circuit Judges Civil Jury Instructions Committee was held in Madison in October of 1959. At this inaugural gathering, the Committee determined the time, frequency, and places of its meetings, the procedures to prepare the meeting agendas, the assignments for authorship, editing details, and the means of publication. The Committee also determined how it would gather submissions for review and the procedure it would follow for approving proposed instructions.

The Committee began its review process by assembling more than two hundred proposed instructions which were submitted by Wisconsin trial judges and members of the State Bar. Assignments of specific proposals for instruction were then provided to individual members of the Committee who were responsible for preparing a draft of each proposed instruction. An accompanying brief, comments, and supporting legal research were also sought. During the meeting, the author presented their prepared material and answered questions from the other participating members. If the Committee determined that amendments or corrections were necessary, the draft would be tabled until revision were made. If the proposed material was tentatively approved, the instruction was submitted to the editor for editing and arrangement and then returned for eventual approval by the whole Committee. The current Civil Jury Instructions Committee still utilizes this review and approval procedure.

## **Development of the Original Model Instructions**

The Circuit Judges Civil Jury Instructions Committee met nine times between 1959 and 1960 and averaged approximately 17 instructions at each meeting. As a result of these efforts, the first edition of Wisconsin Jury Instructions-Civil was published by the University of Wisconsin-Extension Law Department in December 1960 and included 150 approved model instructions<sup>3</sup>. Following the publication of this edition, the Committee continued to meet consistently to maintain a regular record of updating material and producing supplements to the 1960 edition. In 1978, the Committee released a supplement that included a revised preface by Editor John E. Conway. This preface provided advice and expectations for how users should use the instructions. These objectives and explanations remain accurate today.

In 1981, a new edition of the Wisconsin Jury Instructions-Civil was published, which amended the product's format and added 70 new instructions. Supplementation of the 1981 edition has continued on frequent basis, with each new supplement designated "Release No. \_\_\_\_\_." As of April 2021, 52 supplements have been published since the 1981 revised edition.

## **Court Reorganization and Publication Incorporation into the Wisconsin Court System**

In 1978, the Wisconsin court system was reorganized, and the old statutory boards, including the Board of Circuit Court Judges, were abolished. Furthermore, the Circuit Judges Civil Jury Instructions Committee's name was changed to the Civil Jury Instructions Committee.

In 1986, the University of Wisconsin-Extension, Department of Law, was integrated with the University of Wisconsin Law School as its Office of Continuing Education and Outreach. That office was renamed Continuing Education and External Affairs in 2016. In 2021, the University of Wisconsin transitioned its publication responsibilities to the Wisconsin Court System's Office of Judicial Education. That same year, in partnership with the Wisconsin State Law Library, the Office of Judicial Education converted the production of supplemental releases from physical copies to an all-digital format. The entire set of Wisconsin Jury Instructions-Civil is now available at no cost to the user in Word and PDF format at <https://wilawlibrary.gov/jury>.

### **Characteristics of the Wis JI-Civil Model**

Several characteristics of the civil jury instructions model add significantly to the product's strength and value. First and foremost is the model's orientation toward the trial judge. As the giving of instructions is exclusively a judicial function, a primary focus of the Committee is to assist colleagues on the trial bench who may handle a wide variety of cases. A common point of reference for the Committee when discussing a new or amended instruction is the hypothetical judge faced with a civil trial issue after rotating from a criminal or family law caseload.

Another critical aspect of the model's orientation toward the trial judge is the make-up of the Committee itself. The seven voting members of the Committee are ~~trial-court~~ judges, and only they can approve proposed instructions or amendments. Additionally, the Committee's ability to approve and publish model instructions is done without any additional endorsement by the Judicial Conference or the Supreme Court. A direct result of this arrangement is that trial judges are allowed to use model instructions as guides instead of directives. When necessary, a trial judge may depart from the exact language of the instruction if it does not fit the facts of the case or when they believe an improvement to the model can be made. This model is opposed to a model, like that implemented in Missouri, in which instructions are approved by order of the state supreme court order and must be given without change.

Finally, another unique aspect of the civil jury instructions model is its association with the notion of "law in action." This concept examines the role of law, not just as it exists statutorily or in case law, but as it is actually applied in the courtroom. The

incorporation of this concept into the jury instructions model can be drawn back to the original partnership with the University of Wisconsin Law School and its pursuit of the Wisconsin Idea.<sup>4</sup> Utilizing the assistance of experts like Professor John E. Conway, early versions of the Wisconsin jury instructions committees provided an all-inclusive perspective of the law. Over the years, the committees have sought to continue this practice by recruiting member judges from across the state and support from non-voting emeritus members and law school faculty. Although the University of Wisconsin Law School is no longer part of the jury instructions model, the committees and the Wisconsin Court System still strive to achieve the objectives embodied in the “law in action” concept.

## How to Use the Model Jury Instructions<sup>5</sup>

Unlike instructions drafted for the purpose of a particular case, each instruction was, necessarily, drafted to cover the particular rule of law involved without reference to a specific fact situation. Therefore, it must be emphasized that in very few cases will it be possible to use these instructions verbatim. They are fundamentally models, checklists, or minimum standards. A distinction must be drawn between general instructions, which may frequently be used without change, and the substantive law instructions, which may often have to be modified to fit the needs of the particular case.<sup>6</sup> The user, therefore, should consider each instruction a model to be examined carefully before use for the purpose of determining what modifications are necessitated by the facts of the particular case. In addition, the effect of the instructions upon each other must be considered.<sup>7</sup>

The general instructions are broken down into descriptive categories and presented in the logical order in which they are usually given within each category. Three-digit numbers are used for the general instructions and four-digit numbers for those dealing with substantive law. In the substantive law areas, they are arranged numerically. The gaps between the numbers have been left purposely to permit the insertion of later material. Where there is no remaining space between two whole numbers (see, numbers 1026 and 1027) and it is necessary to insert another instruction, a decimal number is used (1026.5). Instructions that are alternatives bear the same whole number, with one having an “A” suffixed (see 1325 and 1325A).

It is suggested that the comment and the footnotes appearing below the instruction be read fully and carefully before the instruction is used, in order that the user be informed of any conditions prerequisite to its use, alternative material for particular cases, and of other cautionary information. Editorial directions will appear in the body of the instructions in brackets and centered upon the page. These directions tell the user to, for example, select a proper paragraph, insert a paragraph from a different instruction, or to read the verdict question with which the instruction deals. Words and phrases which are to be used alternatively appear in parenthesis and italics. Alternative paragraphs are denoted by brackets at the beginning and end of each alternative paragraphs. Words and phrases which are not appropriate for every case, but which should be given in some situations, are also in brackets.

The book itself may be cited as “Wis JI-Civil” and each instruction by adding the appropriate number. For example, “Wis JI-Civil 405.” It is suggested, however, that these instructions be referred to by their citations only when the user requests that the instruction be given verbatim. If the attorney modifies one of these instructions, it is requested that he or she point out the nature of the change and the reason therefore.



## INQUIRIES AND SUGGESTIONS

Inquiries and suggestions from judges and lawyers are among the most important sources of new business for the Committee. It is always informative to receive questions and suggestions from those the Committee is trying to serve. Individuals are encouraged to contact the reporter by phone, mail, or e-mail or to consult with any Committee member. Copies of approved but not published material are available from the reporter, as are working drafts.

A list of all current members is provided, beginning on the following page. A list of all the former judges who served on the Committee follows.

### Civil Jury Instructions Committee

Bryce Pierson  
Legal Advisor & Reporter – Jury Instructions  
Office of Judicial Education  
110 E. Main St., Ste. 200  
Madison, WI 53703-3328  
Phone: (608) 535-3233  
Email: Bryce.pierson@wicourts.gov

**The Civil Jury Instructions Committee  
Current Members and Emeritus Members as of 2023**

**Judges**

Hon. Michael Waterman, Chair	St. Croix Co.
Hon. William Pocan	Milwaukee Co.
Hon. Sarah Harless	Eau Claire Co.
Hon. Michael Aprahamian	Waukesha Co.
Hon. Emily Lonergan	Outagamie Co.
Hon. Kevin Martens	Milwaukee Co.
Hon. Eugene Gasiorkiewicz	Racine Co.

**Emeritus Members**

Hon. Francis Wasielewski  
Hon. Daniel Dillon  
Hon. Lisa Stark  
Hon. Emily Mueller  
Hon. Dennis Moroney  
Hon. Michael Schumacher  
Hon. Paul Reilly  
Hon. Barbara Key  
Hon. Michael Fitzpatrick  
Hon. William Sosnay

**Reporter**

Bryce Pierson	Wis. Office of Judicial Education
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## The Civil Jury Instructions Committee Members

### Judges

Hon. Helmuth F. Arps	(1959-1962)
Hon. M. Eugene Baker	(1959-1975)
Hon. Michael J. Barron	(1983-1996)
Hon. Dennis J. Barry	(1994-1997)
Chief Justice Bruce F. Beilfuss	(1959-1964)
Hon. Herbert A. Bunde	(1962-1963)
Hon. George A. Burns, Jr.	(1976-1994)
Hon. Lewis J. Charles	(1962-1976)
Hon. William E. Crane	(1978-1994)
Hon. Richard J. Dietz	(1997-2006)
Hon. Daniel Dillon	(2005-2018)
Hon. Edward M. DuQuaine	(1959-1961)
Hon. Mark J. Farnum	(1979-1989)
Hon. Merrill R. Farr	(1962-1975)
Hon. James P. Fiedler	(1981-1991)
Hon. Michael Fitzpatrick	(2014-2023)
Hon. Richard G. Greenwood	(1983-1994)
Hon. Marc Hammer	(2017-2022)
Hon. Gerald W. Jaeckle	(1989-1994)
Hon. P. Charles Jones	(1994-2004)
Hon. Barbara Key	(2016-2022)
Hon. Philip Kirk	(2006-2009)
Hon. Norris Maloney	(1964-1978)
Hon. Robert Mawdsley	(1997-2007)
Hon. Dennis Moroney	(2010-2020)
Hon. Emily Mueller	(2004-2014)
Hon. Gordon Myse	(1978-1983)
Hon. Harvey L. Neelen	(1959-1977)
Hon. J. Michael Nolan	(1991-2001)
Hon. Daniel Noonan	(2003-2013)
Hon. William I. O'Neill	(1959-1974)
Hon. Richard W. Orton	(1959-1961, 1973-1979)
Hon. Robert J. Parins	(1970-1982)
Hon. Andrew W. Parnell	(1959-1982)
Hon. Robert F. Pfiffner	(1970-1987)
Hon. Paul Reilly	(2005-2018)
Hon. John Roethe	(2003-2007)

Hon. Michael Schumacher	(2011-2021)
Hon. William Sosnay	(2013-2023)
Hon Richard H. Stafford	(1987-1997)
Hon. Lisa Stark	(2001-2011)
Hon. Michael P. Sullivan	(1994-2003)
Hon. Joseph M. Troy	(1994-2003)
Hon. Albert J. Twesme	(1962-1980)
Hon. Clair H. Voss	(1974-1978)
Hon. Francis T. Wasielewski	(1996-2006)
Hon. Patrick Willis	(2006-2016)

## Comment

1. The University of Wisconsin Extension Law Department was represented by Professor William Bradford Smith.
2. The University of Wisconsin Law School was represented by Professor John E. Conway.
3. The original 1960 edition included an introduction drafted by Judge Andrew W. Parnell. In that introduction, Judge Parnell provided the following claims and disclaimers made by the Committee concerning its work:
  1. This book is the first tangible realization of a long-abiding dream of the Board of Circuit Judges relating to uniform jury instructions.
  2. It is but a part of a projected end result.
  3. It will be a readily available service to the trial judge in time of pressure of meeting deadlines on preparation of instructions.
  4. It may be conveniently employed by the trial judge while the battle still rages about him, in his presence and hearing, deprived, as he then is, of the leisure and tranquility of legal research.
  5. It will bring confidence to the new trial judges and remove for them the need of desperately seeking and gathering a disorganized file of prolix, unedited, and miscellaneous instructions from the usual sources of supply.
  6. It will be an aid to the trial attorneys in preparing specific and pertinent requests for instructions.
  7. It will avoid for the court the almost hopeless task of timely and correctly appraising, evaluating, and avoiding partial, slanted, and incomplete, or inaccurate submitted instructions at the close of trial.
  8. It will minimize the ever-present hazards of hasty, ill-considered, or erroneous instructions.
  9. It will reduce the frequency of retrials for avoidable errors.
  10. It will make a small but fair contribution to the betterment of judicial administration in our state trial courts.

We Forcefully Disclaim that:

1. It is free from error, completely accurate, or a model of perfection in form statement,

or expression.

2. It is presented as a standard of instructions pattern to be blindly and unquestionably followed.
  3. It is the final answer to all instructional problems.
  4. It will remove all need for the trial judge's industry and ingenuity in the preparation of instructions.
  5. It has grown to the full stature of its possibilities.
  6. It will lessen the duties of the trial attorneys with respect to the preparation and submission of timely written instructions.
  7. It is above criticism.
  8. It forestalls any constructive suggestions for its improvement.
  9. It is as clear, concise, and correct as it can or ought to be.
4. The Wisconsin Idea is often described as being based on the principle that "the boundaries of the University are the boundaries of the State." It also has a second aspect which recognizes that University faculty and staff who participate in activities like the jury instructions projects use the experience to enrich their teaching, research, and service responsibilities.
  5. Much of the language provided in the "How to Use" section comes from both the Preface to the 1962 edition of Wisconsin Jury Instructions-Criminal authored by Editor John H. Bowers, and the Revised Preface to the 1978 edition of the Wisconsin Jury Instructions-Civil authored by Editor John E. Conway. The advice and expectations for how the instructions should be used provided by Mr. Bowers and Mr. Conway remain accurate today.
  6. As Justice Currie stated in Sharp v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transport Co., 18 Wis.2d 467, 118 N.W.2d 905, 912 (1963): "While the instructions embodied in Wis JI-Civil - Part 1 are a valuable tool to the trial courts, charges to the jury sometimes require more than a compendium of extracts from these uniform instructions without varying their wording to fit the facts of the particular case at hand."
  7. For example, a particular instruction may be limited to one ground of negligence; but in a trial where the evidence warrants submission of several grounds which are related, it may be necessary to modify the instructions suggested here to accommodate not only the facts of the case but also the impact of the two grounds of negligence on each other.

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# **WIS JI-CIVIL**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

---

### **VOLUME I**

#### **GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS**

##### **Jurors' Duties**

**Inst. No.**

1	Right to a Jury Trial: Law Note for Trial Judges (2017)
5	Comment: Gender-Neutral Language (7/2024)
10	Suggested Order of Instructions: Negligence Cases (2018)
50	Preliminary Instruction: Before Trial (7/2024)
57	Juror Questioning of Witnesses (2014)
60	Notetaking Not Allowed (2011)
61	Notetaking Permitted (2011)
63	Transcripts Not Available for Deliberations; Reading Back Testimony (2011)
65	Preliminary Instruction: Use of an Interpreter for a Witness (2011)
66	Preliminary Instruction: Use of an Interpreter for a Juror (2011)
80	Recording Played to the Jury (1/2023)
100	Opening (2013)
103	Summary Exhibit (2013)
106	Submission on General Verdict (2010)
107	Submission on Ultimate Fact Verdict [Withdrawn 2011]
108	Submission on Ultimate Fact Verdict When Court Finds One or More Parties at Fault [Withdrawn 2011]
110	Remarks and Arguments of Counsel (2011)
115	Objections of Counsel (2015)
120	Ignoring Judge's Demeanor (2011)
125	Counsel's Reference to Insurance Company (2011)
130	Stricken Testimony (2011)
145	Special Verdict Questions: Interrelationship (2016)
150	Damage Question Answered by the Court (2005)
152	View of Scene (2011)
155	Question Answered by the Court (2011)
180	Five-Sixths Verdict (2017)
190	Closing: Short Form (2011)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 191 Closing: Long Form (2017)
- 195 Supplemental Instruction Where Jury is Unable to Agree (2003)
- 197 Instruction after Verdict is Received (2010)

### **Evidence, Burdens, and Presumptions**

- 200 Burden of Proof: Ordinary (2004)
- 202 Burden of Proof: Ordinary: Compensatory Damages (2005)
- 205 Burden of Proof: Middle (2016)
- 210 Burden of Proof Where Verdict Contains a Middle Standard Question  
[Withdrawn 1998]
- 215 Credibility of Witnesses; Weight of Evidence (2011)
- 220 Jury Not to Speculate [Withdrawn 1990]
- 230 Circumstantial Evidence (2011)
- 255 Driver's Manual: Use by Jury [Withdrawn 2011]
- 260 Expert Testimony (2017)
- 261 Medical or Scientific Treatise in Evidence (1989)
- 265 Expert Testimony: Hypothetical Questions (2011)
- 268 Opinion of a Nonexpert Witness (2013)
- 305 Measurements (1989)
- 315 Negative Testimony (2016)
- 325 Physical Facts (1989)
- 349 Presumptions and Permissive Inferences - Law Note for Trial Judges (2017)
- 350 Presumptions: Conflict as to Existence of Basic Fact; Evidence Introduced from  
Which Nonexistence of Presumed Fact May Be Inferred (2013)
- 352 Presumptions: Existence of Basic Fact Uncontradicted; Evidence Introduced  
from Which Nonexistence of Presumed Fact May Be Inferred (2013)
- 353 Presumptions: Deceased Person was Not Negligent (2003)
- 354 Presumptions: Conflict as to Existence of Basic Fact; No Evidence Introduced  
from Which Nonexistence of Presumed Fact Could Be Inferred (1991)
- 356 Permissive Inferences; e.g., Res Ipsa Loquitur (1989)
- 358 Subsequent Remedial Measures (2021)

### **Witnesses**

- 400 Spoliation: Inference (2022)
- 405 Falsus in Uno (2018)
- 410 Witness: Absence (2015)
- 415 Witness: Prior Conviction (2011)



## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 420 Impeachment of Witnesses: Prior Inconsistent or Contradictory Statements (1981)
- 425 Witness Exercising Privilege Against Self-Incrimination (2011)
- 430 A Party's Presence Not Required At Trial (7/2023)
- 950 Reasonable Diligence in Discovery of Injury (Statute of Limitations) (2016)

## **NEGLIGENCE**

### **Standard of Care Required**

- 1000 Unavoidable Accident (1989)
- 1001 Negligence: Fault: Ultimate Fact Verdict (2004)
- 1002 Gas Company, Duty to Customer (1989)
- 1003 Negligence, Gas Company, Duty in Installing Its Pipes, Mains, and Meters (1989)
- 1004 Negligent Versus Intentional Conduct (1995)
- 1005 Negligence: Defined (2016)
- 1006 Gross Negligence: Defined (2016)
- 1007 Contributory Negligence: Defined (2015)
- 1007.5 Contributory Negligence: Rescue Rule (2016)
- 1008 Intoxication: Chemical Test Results [Reflects Changes in 2003 Wisconsin Act 30] (2022)
- 1009 Negligence: Violation of Safety Statute (2010)
- 1010 Negligence of Children (© 2014)
- 1011 Attractive Nuisance: Ultimate Fact Question [Renumbered JI-Civil 8025 (2013)]
- 1012 Parents' Duty to Protect Minor Child (1989)
- 1013 Parent's Duty to Control Minor Child (2006)
- 1014 Negligent Entrustment (2017)
- 1014.5 Negligent Entrustment to an Incompetent Person (2017)
- 1015 Negligence in an Emergency [Renumbered JI-Civil-1105A 1995]
- 1019 Negligence: Evidence of Custom and Usage (1995)
- 1020 Negligence: Under Special Circumstances [Withdrawn 2011]
- 1021 Negligence of Mentally Disabled (2006)
- 1021.2 Illness Without Forewarning (2002)
- 1022.2 Negligence of General Contractor: Increasing Risk of Injury to Employee of Subcontractor (2020)
- 1022.4 Negligence: Building Contractor (2016)
- 1022.6 Liability of One Employing Independent Contractor (2015)
- 1023 Medical Negligence (2022)

## WIS JI-CIVIL

- 1023.1 Professional Negligence: Medical: Duty of Physician to Inform a Patient: Special Verdict (2015)
- 1023.2 Professional Negligence: Medical: Duty of Physician to Inform a Patient (2015)
- 1023.3 Professional Negligence: Medical: Duty of Physician to Inform a Patient: Cause (2015)
- 1023.4 Professional Negligence: Medical: Duty of Physician to Inform a Patient: Contributory Negligence (2015)
- 1023.5 Professional Negligence: Legal—Status of Lawyer as a Specialist is Not in Dispute (2022)
- 1023.5A Professional Negligence: Legal—Status of Lawyer as Specialist is in Dispute (1997)
- 1023.6 Negligence of Insurance Agent (2021)
- 1023.7 Professional Negligence: Registered Nurses and Licensed Technicians Performing Skilled Services (2016)
- 1023.8 Professional Negligence: Chiropractor-Treatment (2016)
- 1023.9 Professional Negligence: Chiropractor-Determining Treatability by Chiropractic Means (1999)
- 1023.14 Professional Negligence: Dental (2016)
- 1023.15 Professional Negligence: Chiropractor, Dentist, Optometrist, or Podiatrist: Duty to Inform a Patient: Special Verdict (2015)
- 1023.16 Professional Negligence: Chiropractor, Dentist, Optometrist, or Podiatrist: Duty to Inform a Patient (2015)
- 1023.17 Professional Negligence: Chiropractor, Dentist, Optometrist, or Podiatrist: Duty to Inform a Patient: Cause (2015)
- 1024 Professional Negligence: Medical: Res Ipsa Loquitur (7/2024)
- 1025 Negligence of a Common Carrier (2006)
- 1025.5 Bailment: Defined (2009)
- 1025.6 Duty of Bailor for Hire (1992)
- 1025.7 Bailment: Duty of Bailee under a Bailment for Mutual Benefit (2009)
- 1025.8 Bailment: Liability of a Gratuitous Bailor (2009)
- 1026 Bailment: Negligence of Bailee May Be Inferred (2005)
- 1026.5 Bailment: Negligence of Carrier Presumed (2005)
- 1027 Duty of Owner of Place of Amusement: Common Law [Renumbered JI-Civil 8040 1985]
- 1027.5 Duty of a Proprietor of a Place of Business to Protect a Patron from Injury Caused by Act of Third Person [Renumbered JI-Civil 8045 1986]
- 1027.7 Duty of Hotel Innkeeper [Renumbered JI-Civil 8050 1986]
- 1028 Duty of Owner of a Building Abutting on a Public Highway [Renumbered JI-Civil 8030 1986]
- 1029 Highway or Sidewalk Defect or Insufficiency [Renumbered JI-Civil 8035 1986]

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

### **Duties of Persons in Specific Situations**

- 1030 Right to Assume Due Care by Highway Users (1992)
- 1031 Conditional Privilege of Authorized Emergency Vehicle Operator (2016)
- 1032 Defective Condition of Automobile: Host's Liability (1992)
- 1035 Voluntary Intoxication: Relation to Negligence (2004)
- 1045 Driver's Duty When Children Are Present (1992)
- 1046 Contributory Negligence of Passenger: Placing Self in Position of Danger (1992)
- 1047 Contributory Negligence of Guest: Riding with Host (1992)
- 1047.1 Negligence of Guest: Active: Management and Control (1992)
- 1048 Driver, Negligence: Highway Defect or Insufficiency (1992)
- 1049 Pedestrian, Negligence: Sidewalk Defect or Insufficiency (1989)
- 1050 Duty of Persons with Physical Disability (2005)
- 1051 Duty of Worker: Preoccupation in Work Minimizes Duty (1995)
- 1051.2 Duty of Worker: When Required to Work in Unsafe Premises (1992)
- 1052 Equipment and Maintenance of Vehicles: General Duty (2008)
- 1053 Equipment and Maintenance of Vehicles: Headlights (2008)
- 1054 Equipment and Maintenance of Vehicles: Brakes (2008)
- 1055 Lookout (1997)
- 1056 Lookout: Camouflage (2013)
- 1060 Lookout: Backing (2008)
- 1065 Lookout: Entering or Crossing A Through Highway (2003)
- 1070 Lookout: Failure to See Object in Plain Sight (1992)
- 1075 Lookout: Guest (1996)
- 1076 Lookout: Guest's Duty to Warn (1992)
- 1080 Lookout: Limited Duty on Private Property (1992)
- 1090 Driver on Arterial Approaching Intersection: Lookout; Right of Way; Flashing Yellow Signal (7/2023)
- 1095 Lookout: Pedestrian (2008)
- 1096 Duty to Sound Horn (2008)
- 1105 Management and Control (2008)
- 1105A Management and Control–Emergency (2016)
- 1107 Racing (2008)
- 1112 Operation of Automobile Following Another (2015)
- 1113 Duty of Preceding Driver: Slowing or Stopping: Signaling (2008)
- 1114 Duty of Preceding Driver to Following Driver: Lookout (2008)
- 1115 Parking: Stopping: Leaving Vehicle Off the Roadway (2008)
- 1120 Parking: Stopping: Leaving Vehicle On the Roadway (2008)

## WIS JI-CIVIL

- 1125     Parking: Stopping: Leaving Vehicle On or Off the Roadway: Exception to Prohibition (2008)
- 1132     Stopped School Bus: Position on Highway (2008)
- 1133     School Bus: Flashing Red Warning Lights (2008)
- 1135     Position on Highway on Meeting and Passing (2008)
- 1140     Position on Highway on Meeting and Passing; Violation Excused (2008)
- 1141     Passing: Vehicles Proceeding in Same Direction (2008)
- 1142     Passing: Vehicles Proceeding in Same Direction: Obstructed View (2008)
- 1143     Passing: Vehicles Proceeding in Same Direction: In No Passing Zone or Where Overtaken Vehicle Turning Left (2008)
- 1144     Passing: Vehicles Proceeding in Same Direction (2015)
- 1145     Res Ipsa Loquitur (7/2024)
- 1153     Right of Way: At Intersection with Through Highway (7/2023)
- 1155     Right of Way: At Intersections of Highways (7/2023)
- 1157     Right of Way: At Intersection of Highways: Ultimate Verdict Question (7/2023)
- 1158     Right of Way: To Pedestrian Crossing at Controlled Intersection (7/2023)
- 1159     Right of Way: Pedestrian Control Signal: Walk Signal (2022)
- 1160     Right of Way: To Pedestrian at Intersections or Crosswalks on Divided Highways or Highways Provided with Safety Zones (7/2023)
- 1161     Right of Way: Pedestrian Crossing Roadway at Point Other Than Crosswalk (1982)
- 1165     Right of Way: To Pedestrian at Uncontrolled Intersection or Crosswalk (7/2023)
- 1170     Right of Way: Blind Pedestrian on Highway (2022)
- 1175     Right of Way: Entering Highway from an Alley or Nonhighway Access Point (2022)
- 1180     Right of Way: Funeral Processions; Military Convoys (2022)
- 1185     Right of Way: Green Arrow (2022)
- 1190     Right of Way: Green Signal (7/2023)
- 1190.5     Plaintiff and Defendant Each Claims Green Light in Their Favor (2022)
- 1191     Duty of Driver Entering Intersection with Green Light in Driver's Favor: Lookout (7/2023)
- 1192     Duty of Driver Approaching Intersection When Amber Light Shows (7/2023)
- 1193     Red Traffic Control Light Signaling Stop (2022)
- 1193.5     Flashing Red Traffic Control Light (2022)
- 1195     Right of Way: Left Turn at Intersection (7/2023)
- 1200     Right of Way: Livestock (2008)
- 1205     Right of Way: Moving from Parked Position (2022)
- 1210     Right of Way: On Approach of Emergency Vehicle (2022)
- 1220     Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: At Pedestrian Control Signal (2022)

## WIS JI-CIVIL

- 1225 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: Crossing at Controlled Intersection or Crosswalk (7/2023)
- 1230 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: Crossing Roadway at Point Other than Crosswalk (2022)
- 1235 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: Divided Highways or Highways with Safety Zones (2022)
- 1240 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: Facing Green Arrow (2022)
- 1245 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: Facing Red Signal (2022)
- 1250 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty: Standing or Loitering on Highway (2022)
- 1255 Right of Way: Pedestrian's Duty at Uncontrolled Intersection or Crosswalk; Suddenly Leaving Curb or Place of Safety (2022)
- 1260 Position on Highway: Pedestrian's Duty; Walking on Highway (2022)
- 1265 Right of Way: Persons Working on Highway (2022)
- 1270 Right of Way: When Vehicle Using Alley or Nonhighway Access to Stop (2022)
- 1275 Right of Way: When Yield Sign Installed (2022)
- 1277 Safety Belt: Failure to Use (2009)
- 1278 Safety Helmet: Failure to Use (2009)
- 1280 Skidding (2008)
- 1285 Speed: Reasonable and Prudent; Reduced Speed (2008)
- 1290 Speed: Fixed Limits (2008)
- 1295 Speed: Special Restrictions for Certain Vehicles (2008)
- 1300 Speed: Impeding Traffic (2008)
- 1305 Speed: Failure to Yield Roadway (2015)
- 1310 Speed: Obstructed Vision (2008)
- 1315 Speed: Obstructed Vision: Nighttime (2008)
- 1320 Speed: Camouflage (1992)
- 1325 Stop at Stop Signs (2008)
- 1325A Stop at Stop Signs [Alternate] (2008)
- 1330 Stop: Emerging from an Alley (2008)
- 1335 Emerging from a Private Driveway or Other Nonhighway Access (2008)
- 1336 Railroad Crossing: Driver's Duty (2008)
- 1337 Stop: All Vehicles at Railroad Crossing Signals (2015)
- 1337.5 Stop: Pedestrian Crossing Railroad Tracks (2015)
- 1338 Stop: Nonoperation of Railroad Crossing Signals (2008)
- 1339 Stop: Special Vehicles at Railroad Crossing (2008)
- 1340 Stop: For School Bus Loading or Unloading Children (2008)
- 1350 Turn or Movement: Signal Required (2008)
- 1352 Turn: Position and Method When Not Otherwise Marked or Posted (2008)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 1354 Turn or Movement: Ascertainment that Turn or Movement Can Be Made with Reasonable Safety: Lookout (7/2023)
- 1355 Deviation from Traffic Lane: Clearly Indicated Lanes (2008)

### **Other Negligence**

- 1380 Negligence: Teacher: Duty to Instruct or Warn (2020)
- 1381 Negligence: Teacher: Duty to Supervise Students (2016)
- 1383 Employer Negligence: Negligent Hiring, Training, or Supervision (2019)
- 1384 Duty of Hospital: Granting and Renewing Staff Privileges (Corporate Negligence) (7/2024)
- 1385 Negligence: Hospital: Duty of Employees: Performance of Routine Custodial Care Not Requiring Expert Testimony (1999)
- 1385.5 Negligence: Hospital: Duty of Employees: Suicide or Injury Resulting from Escape or Attempted Suicide (2006)
- 1390 Injury by Dog (2017)
- 1391 Liability of Owner or Keeper of Animal: Common Law (7/2024)
- 1393 Participation in Rec. Act (2022)
- 1395 Duty of Public Utility: Highway Obstructions: Nonenergized Facilities (1989)
- 1397 Negligence: Voluntary Assumption of Duty to a Third Person (2014)

### **RAILROADS**

- 1401 Railroads: Duty to Ring Engine Bell Within Municipality (2007)
- 1402 Railroads: Duty to Ring Engine Bell Outside Municipality (2007)
- 1403 Railroads: Duty to Blow Train Whistle Within Municipality [Withdrawn 2007]
- 1405 Railroads: Duty of Train Crew Approaching Crossing (2006)
- 1407 Railroads: Speed: Fixed Limits (2006)
- 1408 Railroads: Speed: No Limit (2006)
- 1409 Railroads: Negligent Speed, Causation (2006)
- 1410 Railroads: Duty to Maintain Crossing Signs (2006)
- 1411 Railroads: Duty to Maintain Open View at Crossings (2006)
- 1412 Railroads: Duty to Have Proper Headlights (2006)
- 1413 Railroads: Ultrahazardous or Unusually Dangerous Crossings: Increased Duty (2006)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

### **VOLUME II**

#### **NEGLIGENCE (Continued)**

- 1500 Cause (2021)
- 1501 Cause: Normal Response (1998)
- 1505 Cause: Where Cause of Death is in Doubt (1998)
- 1506 Cause: Relation of a Medical Procedure to the Accident (1998)
- 1510 Negligent Infliction of Severe Emotional Distress (Bystander Claim) (2014)
- 1511 Personal Injuries: Negligent Infliction of Severe Emotional Distress (Separate or Direct Claim) (1/2024)

#### **Comparative Negligence**

- 1580 Comparative Negligence: Plaintiff and One or More Defendants (2011)
- 1582 Comparative Negligence: Adult and Child (1990)
- 1585 Comparative Negligence: Plaintiff-Guest and Host-Defendant Negligent (1992)
- 1590 Comparative Negligence: Plaintiff-Guest Passively Negligent; Host (Or Other Driver) Negligent (2003)
- 1591 Comparative Negligence: Guest Passively Negligent; Claims Against and Among Drivers; Apportionment from One Comparative Negligence Question (2015)
- 1592 Comparative Negligence: Guest Passively Negligent; Claims Against and Among Drivers; Apportionment of Comparative Negligence from Two Questions (2003)
- 1595 Comparative Negligence: Where Negligence or Cause Question Has Been Answered by Court (1990)

#### **Imputed Negligence**

- 1600 Servant: Driver of Automobile (Presumption from Ownership of Vehicle) (2003)
- 1605 Driver: Scope of Employment (2014)
- 1610 Joint Adventure (Enterprise): Automobile Cases (1990)

#### **Damages**

- 1700 Damages: General (2016)
- 1705 Damages: Burden of Proof in Tort Actions: Future Damages [Withdrawn 2001]

## WIS JI-CIVIL

- 1707 Punitive Damages: Nonproducts Liability [For Actions Commenced Before May 17, 1995] (1996)
- 1707A Punitive Damages: Products Liability [For Actions Commenced Before May 17, 1995] (1996)
- 1707.1 Punitive Damages: Nonproducts Liability (2018)
- 1707.2 Punitive Damages: Products Liability (2008)
- 1708 Battery: Punitive Damages: Mitigation by Provocation [Withdrawn © 2010]
- 1710 Aggravation of Injury Because of Medical Negligence (2015)
- 1715 Aggravation of Pre-existing Injury (1990)
- 1720 Aggravation or Activation of Latent Disease or Condition (1992)
- 1722 Damages from Nonconcurrent or Successive Torts (1992)
- 1722A Damages from Nonconcurrent or Successive Torts (To be used where several tortfeasors are parties) (1996)
- 1723 Enhanced Injuries (2009)
- 1725 Further Injury in Subsequent Event (2003)
- 1730 Damages: Duty to Mitigate: Physical Injuries (2012)
- 1731 Damages: Duty to Mitigate: Negligence or Breach of Contract (2012)
- 1732 Damages: Duty to Mitigate: Intentional Tort (2012)
- 1735 Damages: Not Taxable as Income (1990)
- 1740 Damages: Common Scheme or Plan; Concerted Action (Wis. Stat. § 895.045(2)) (2009)
- 1741 Personal Injuries: Negligence in Informing the Patient (2015)
- 1742 Personal Injuries: Medical Care: Offsetting Benefit from Operation Against Damages for Negligence in Informing the Patient (2015)
- 1749 Personal Injuries: Conversion Table for 1998 Revision of Damage Instructions (1998)
- 1750.1 Personal Injuries: Subdivided Question as to Past and Future Damages (1998)
- 1750.2 Personal Injuries: Past and Future: One Verdict Question (Except Past Loss of Earnings and Past Medical Expenses) (1998)
- 1754 Personal Injury: One Subdivided Question as to Past Damages [Withdrawn © 1998]
- 1756 Personal Injuries: Past Health Care Expenses (2015)
- 1757 Personal Injuries: Past Health Care Expenses (Medical Negligence Cases) (Negligence of Long-Term Care Provider): Collateral Sources (2013)
- 1758 Personal Injuries: Future Health Care Expenses (2010)
- 1760 Personal Injuries: Past Loss of Earning Capacity (2016)
- 1762 Personal Injuries: Future Loss of Earning Capacity (2022)
- 1766 Personal Injuries: Past Pain, Suffering, and Disability (Disfigurement) (2009)
- 1767 Personal Injuries: Future Pain, Suffering, and Disability (Disfigurement) (1999)



## WIS JI-CIVIL

- 1768 Personal Injuries: Past and Future Pain, Suffering, and Disability (Disfigurement) (1998)
- 1770 Personal Injuries: Severe Emotional Distress (2006)
- 1780 Personal Injuries: Loss of Business Profits [Withdrawn 1998]
- 1785 Personal Injuries: Past Loss of Professional Earnings [Withdrawn 1998]
- 1788 Loss of Earnings: Delay in Obtaining Degree [Withdrawn 1999]
- 1795 Personal Injury: Life Expectancy and Mortality Tables (1992)
- 1796 Damages: Present Value of Future Losses (2003)
- 1797 Damages: Effects of Inflation (1993)
- 1800 Property: Loss of Use of Repairable Automobile (1997)
- 1801 Property: Loss of Use of Nonrepairable Automobile (1997)
- 1803 Property: Destruction of Property (2010)
- 1804 Property: Damage to Repairable Property (2010)
- 1805 Property: Damage to Nonrepairable Property (2010)
- 1806 Property: Damage to a Growing Crop (1997)
- 1810 Trespass: Nominal Damages (2013)
- 1812 Quantum Meruit: Measure of Services Rendered (1992)
- 1815 Injury to Spouse: Loss of Consortium (2012)
- 1816 Injury to Spouse: Past Loss of Earning Capacity: Household Services (1993)
- 1817 Injury to Spouse: Future Loss of Earning Capacity: Household Services (2001)
- 1820 Injury to Spouse: Nursing Services: Past and Future (1992)
- 1825 Injury to Wife: Medical and Hospital Expenses [Withdrawn 1995]
- 1830 Injury to Wife: Medical and Hospital Bills: Dispute over Ownership of Claim [Withdrawn 1995]
- 1835 Injury to Minor Child: Parent's Damages for Loss of Child's Earnings and Services: Past and Future (2001)
- 1837 Injury to Minor Child: Parent's Damages for Loss of Society and Companionship (2001)
- 1838 Injury to Parent: Minor Child's Damages for Loss of Society and Companionship (2001)
- 1840 Injury to Minor Child: Parents' Damages for Medical Expenses: Past and Future (1996)
- 1845 Injury to Child: Parents' Damages for Services Rendered to Child: Past and Future (1992)
- 1850 Estate's Recovery for Medical, Hospital, and Funeral Expenses (2016)
- 1855 Estate's Recovery for Pain and Suffering (2018)
- 1860 Death of Husband: Pecuniary Loss [Withdrawn 1992]
- 1861 Death of Spouse (Domestic Partner): Pecuniary Loss (2010)
- 1865 Death of Wife: Pecuniary Loss [Withdrawn 1992]

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 1870 Death of Spouse: Surviving Spouse's Loss of Society and Companionship (2019)
- 1875 Death of Spouse: Medical, Hospital, and Funeral Expenses (1992)
- 1880 Death of Parent: Pecuniary Loss (2016)
- 1885 Death of Adult Child: Pecuniary Loss (2001)
- 1890 Damages: Death of Minor Child: Premajority Pecuniary Loss (2001)
- 1892 Damages: Death of Minor Child: Postmajority Pecuniary Loss (2001)
- 1895 Death of Child: Parent's Loss of Society and Companionship (2019)
- 1897 Death of Parent: Child's Loss of Society and Companionship (2019)

### **Safe Place**

- 1900.2 Safe-Place Statute: Duty of Employer (1992)
- 1900.4 Safe-Place Statute: Injury to Frequenter: Negligence of Employer or Owner of a Place of Employment (2022)
- 1901 Safe-Place Statute: Definition of Frequenter (1996)
- 1902 Safe-Place Statute: Negligence of Plaintiff Frequenter (2004)
- 1904 Safe-Place Statute: Public Buildings: Negligence of Owner (1990)
- 1910 Safe-Place Statute: Place of Employment: Business (1990)
- 1911 Safe-Place Statute: Control (1992)

### **Nuisance**

- 1920 Nuisance: Law Note (2019)
- 1922 Private Nuisance: Negligent Conduct (2010)
- 1924 Private Nuisance: Abnormally Dangerous Activity: Strict Liability (2010)
- 1926 Private Nuisance: Intentional Conduct (2010)
- 1928 Public Nuisance: Negligent Conduct (2010)
- 1930 Public Nuisance: Abnormally Dangerous Activity: Strict Liability (2010)
- 1932 Public Nuisance: Intentional Conduct (2010)

## **INTENTIONAL TORTS**

### **Assault and Battery**

- 2000 Intentional Tort: Liability of Minor (2014)
- 2001 Intentional Versus Negligent Conduct (1995)
- 2004 Assault (2011)
- 2005 Battery (2011)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2005.5 Battery: Offensive Bodily Contact (2015)
- 2006 Battery: Self-Defense (2013)
- 2006.2 Battery: Self-Defense; Defendant's Dwelling, Motor Vehicle, Place of Business; Wis. Stat. § 895.62 (2016)
- 2006.5 Battery: Defense of Property (2013)
- 2007 Battery: Liability of an Aider and Abettor (2011)
- 2008 Battery: Excessive Force in Arrest (2002)
- 2010 Assault and Battery: Offensive Bodily Contact [Renumbered JI-Civil- 2005.5 2011]
- 2020 Sports Injury: Reckless or Intentional Misconduct (1/2023)

### **False Imprisonment**

- 2100 False Imprisonment: Definition (2014)
- 2110 False Imprisonment: Compensatory Damages (2014)
- 2115 False Arrest: Law Enforcement Officer; Without Warrant (1993)

### **Federal Civil Rights**

- 2150 Federal Civil Rights: §§ 1981 and 1982 Actions (1993)
- 2151 Federal Civil Rights: § 1983 Actions [Withdrawn 2014]
- 2155 Federal Civil Rights: Excessive Force in Arrest (in Maintaining Jail Security) [Withdrawn 2014]

### **Conversion**

- 2200 Conversion: Dispossession (2014)
- 2200.1 Conversion: Refusal to Return Upon Demand (Refusal by Bailee) (1993)
- 2200.2 Conversion: Destruction or Abuse of Property (1991)
- 2201 Conversion: Damages (2016)

### **Misrepresentation**

- 2400 Misrepresentation: Bases for Liability and Damages - Law Note for Trial Judges (1/2023)
- 2401 Misrepresentation: Intentional Deceit (1/2023)
- 2402 Misrepresentation: Strict Responsibility (1/2023)
- 2403 Misrepresentation: Negligence (1/2023)
- 2405 Intentional Misrepresentation: Measure of Damages in Actions Involving Sale [Exchange] of Property (Benefit of the Bargain) (2018)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2405.5 Strict Responsibility: Measure of Damages in Actions Involving Sale [Exchange] of Property (Benefit of the Bargain) (2018)
- 2406 Negligent Misrepresentation: Measure of Damages in Actions Involving Sale [Exchange] of Property (Out of Pocket Rule) (2014)
- 2418 Unfair Trade Practice: Untrue, Deceptive, or Misleading Representation: Wis. Stat. § 100.18(1) (2021)
- 2419 Property Loss Through Fraudulent Misrepresentation: Wis. Stat. § 895.446 (Based on Conduct (Fraud) Prohibited by Wis. Stat. § 943.20) (2018)
- 2420 Civil Theft: Wis. Stat. § 895.446 (Based on Conduct (Theft) Prohibited by Wis. Stat. § 943.20(1)(a)) (2019)

## **Defamation**

- 2500 Defamation - Law Note for Trial Judges (7/2024)
- 2501 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Private Individual, No Privilege (1/2023)
- 2505 Defamation: Truth as a Defense (Nonmedia Defendant) (1/2023)
- 2505A Defamation: Truth of Statement (First Amendment Cases) (1/2023)
- 2507 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Private Individual with Conditional Privilege (1/2024)
- 2509 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Media Defendant (Negligent Standard) (2003)
- 2510 Defamation: Truth as Defense Where Plaintiff Charged with Commission of a Crime [Withdrawn 1993]
- 2511 Defamation: Public Figure Versus Media Defendant or Private Figure with Constitutional Privilege (Actual Malice) (7/2024)
- 2512 Defamation: Truth as Defense Where Plaintiff Not Charged with Commission of a Crime [Withdrawn 1993]
- 2513 Defamation: Express Malice (1/2023)
- 2514 Defamation: Effect of Defamatory Statement or Publication [Withdrawn 1993]
- 2516 Defamation: Compensatory Damages (1991)
- 2517 Defamation: Conditional Privilege: Abuse of Privilege [Renumbered JI-Civil 2507 1993]
- 2517.5 Defamation: Public Official: Abuse of Privilege [Renumbered JI-Civil 2511 1993]
- 2518 Defamation: Express Malice [Renumbered JI-Civil 2513 1993]
- 2520 Defamation: Punitive Damages (2003)
- 2550 Invasion of Privacy (Publication of a Private Matter) Wis. Stat. § 995.50(2)(c) (1/2024)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2551 Invasion of Privacy: Highly Offensive Intrusion; Wis. Stat. § 995.50(2)(a) (1/2024)
- 2552 Invasion of Privacy: Publication of a Private Matter: Conditional Privilege (2003)

### **Misuse of Procedure**

- 2600 Malicious Prosecution: Instituting a Criminal Proceeding (2022)
- 2605 Malicious Prosecution: Instituting a Civil Proceeding (2022)
- 2610 Malicious Prosecution: Advice of Counsel: Affirmative Defense (Criminal Proceeding) (2015)
- 2611 Malicious Prosecution: Advice of Counsel: Affirmative Defense (Civil Proceeding) (2015)
- 2620 Abuse of Process (2013)

### **Trade Practices**

- 2720 Home Improvement Practices Act Violation; Wisconsin Administrative Code Chapter ATCP 110; Wis. Stat. § 100.20 (2013)
- 2722 Theft by Contractor (Wis. Stat. § 779.02(5)) (1/2023)

### **Domestic Relations**

- 2725 Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress (2020)

### **Business Relations**

- 2750 Employment Relations: Wrongful Discharge - Public Policy (7/2024)
- 2760 Bad Faith by Insurance Company (Excess Verdict Case) (2003)
- 2761 Bad Faith by Insurance Company: Assured's Claim (2012)
- 2762 Bad Faith by Insurance Company: Third Party Employee Claim Against Worker's Compensation Carrier [Withdrawn] (2009)
- 2769 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Existence of Dealership (2020)
- 2770 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Good Cause for Termination, Cancellation, Nonrenewal, Failure to Renew, or Substantial Change in Competitive Circumstances (Wis. Stat. § 135.03) (2022)
- 2771 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Adequate Notice by Grantor (Wis. Stat. § 135.04) (2005)
- 2772 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Special Verdict (2005)
- 2780 Intentional Interference with Contractual Relationship (1/2024)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2790 Trade Name Infringement (2022)
- 2791 Trade Name Infringement: Damages (2010)

### **Civil Conspiracy**

- 2800 Conspiracy: Defined (2018)
- 2802 Conspiracy: Proof of Membership (2003)
- 2804 Conspiracy: Indirect Proof (2003)
- 2806 Conspiracy to be Viewed as a Whole (1993)
- 2808 Conspiracy between Affiliated Corporations [Withdrawn 2009]
- 2810 Conspiracy: Overt Acts (2003)
- 2820 Injury to Business: (Wis. Stat. § 134.01) (2008)
- 2822 Restraint of Will (Wis. Stat. § 134.01) (2003)

### **Tort Immunity**

- 2900 Tort Immunity: Immunities Abrogated - Law Note for Trial Judges (1993)

## **CONTRACTS**

### **General**

- 3010 Agreement (2011)
- 3012 Offer: Making (1993)
- 3014 Offer: Acceptance (1993)
- 3016 Offer: Rejection (1993)
- 3018 Offer: Revocation (1993)
- 3020 Consideration (1993)
- 3022 Definiteness and Certainty (1993)
- 3024 Implied Contract: General (1993)
- 3026 Implied Contract: Promise to Pay Reasonable Value (1993)
- 3028 Contracts Implied in Law (Unjust Enrichment) (7/2023)
- 3030 Modification by Mutual Assent (1993)
- 3032 Modification by Conduct (1993)
- 3034 Novation (1993)
- 3040 Integration of Several Writings (1993)
- 3042 Partial Integration: Contract Partly Written, Partly Oral (1993)
- 3044 Implied Duty of Good Faith (Performance of Contract) (2007)
- 3045 Definitions – “Bona Fide” (1993)
- 3046 Implied Promise of No Hindrance (1993)
- 3048 Time as an Element (2016)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 3049 Duration (2016)
- 3050 Contracts: Subsequent Construction by Parties (1993)
- 3051 Contracts: Ambiguous Language (2012)
- 3052 Substantial Performance (1994)
- 3053 Breach of Contract (2007)
- 3054 Demand for Performance (2014)
- 3056 Sale of Goods: Delivery or Tender of Performance (1993)
- 3057 Waiver (2018)
- 3058 Waiver of Strict Performance (1993)
- 3060 Hindrance or Interference with Performance (1993)
- 3061 Impossibility: Original (1993)
- 3062 Impossibility: Supervening (1993)
- 3063 Impossibility: Partial (1993)
- 3064 Impossibility: Temporary (1993)
- 3065 Impossibility: Superior Authority (1993)
- 3066 Impossibility: Act of God (1993)
- 3067 Impossibility: Disability or Death of a Party (1993)
- 3068 Voidable Contracts: Duress, Fraud, Misrepresentation (2016)
- 3070 Frustration of Purpose (2020)
- 3072 Avoidance for Mutual Mistake of Fact (2014)
- 3074 Estoppel: Law Note for Trial Judges (2018)
- 3076 Contracts: Rescission for Nonperformance (2001)
- 3078 Abandonment: Mutual (1993)
- 3079 Termination of Easement by Abandonment (2022)
- 3082 Termination of Servant's Employment: Indefinite Duration (1993)
- 3083 Termination of Servant's Employment: Employer's Dissatisfaction (1993)
- 3084 Termination of Servant's Employment: Additional Consideration Provided by  
Employee (1993)

## **Real Estate**

- 3086 Real Estate Listing Contract: Validity: Performance (2019)
- 3088 Real Estate Listing Contract: Termination for Cause (1993)
- 3090 Real Estate Listing Contract: Broker's Commission on Sale Subsequent to  
Expiration of Contract Containing "Extension" Clause (1993)
- 3094 Residential Eviction: Possession of Premises (2020)
- 3095 Landlord - Tenant: Constructive Eviction (2013)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

### **VOLUME III**

#### **CONTRACTS (Continued)**

##### **Insurance**

- 3100 Insurance Contract: Misrepresentation or Breach of Affirmative Warranty by the Insured (1998)
- 3105 Insurance Contract: Failure of Condition or Breach of Promissory Warranty (1994)
- 3110 Insurance Contract: Definition of “Resident” or “Member of a Household” (2022)
- 3112 Owner’s Permission for Use of Automobile (1993)
- 3115 Failure of Insured to Cooperate (2016)
- 3116 Failure to Cooperate: Materiality (2016)
- 3117 Failure to Give Notice to Insurer (1994)
- 3118 Failure to Give Notice to Insurer: Materiality (2002)

##### **Breach of Warranty**

- 3200 Products Liability: Law Note (2021)
- 3201 Implied Warranty: Merchantability Defined (2009)
- 3202 Implied Warranty: Fitness for Particular Purpose (1994)
- 3203 Implied Warranty: By Reason of Course of Dealing or Usage of Trade (1994)
- 3204 Implied Warranty: Sale of Food (1994)
- 3205 Implied Warranty: Exclusion or Modification (2009)
- 3206 Implied Warranty: Exclusion by Reason of Course of Dealing or Usage of Trade (1994)
- 3207 Implied Warranty: Use of Product after the Defect Known (2009)
- 3208 Implied Warranty: Failure to Examine Product (2009)
- 3209 Implied Warranty: Susceptibility or Allergy of User (2009)
- 3210 Implied Warranty: Improper Use (1994)
- 3211 Implied Warranty: Notice of Breach (1993)
- 3220 Express Warranty: General (1994)
- 3222 Express Warranty: No Duty of Inspection (1994)
- 3225 Express Warranty: Statement of Opinion (1994)
- 3230 Express Warranty under the Uniform Commercial Code (1994)



## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

### **Duties of Manufacturers and Sellers**

- 3240 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (2007)
- 3242 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (Supplier) to Warn (2020)
- 3244 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (Seller) to Give Adequate Instructions as to Use of a Complicated Machine (Product) (1994)
- 3246 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (Seller) Who Undertakes to Give Instruction as to the Use of a Machine (Product) (1994)
- 3248 Negligence: Duty of Restaurant Operator in Sale of Food Containing Harmful Natural Ingredients (1994)
- 3250 Negligence: Duty of Seller: Installing (Servicing) Product (1994)
- 3254 Duty of Buyer or Consumer: Contributory Negligence (2015)
- 3260 Strict Liability: Duty of Manufacturer to Ultimate User (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3260.1 Product Liability: Wis. Stat. § 895.047 (For Actions Commenced after January 31, 2011) (1/2024)
- 3262 Strict Liability: Duty of Manufacturer (Supplier) to Warn (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3264 Strict Liability: Definition of Business (1994)
- 3268 Strict Liability: Contributory Negligence (2015)
- 3290 Strict Products Liability: Special Verdict (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3290.1 Product Liability: Wis. Stat. § 895.047: Verdict (For Actions Commenced after January 31, 2011) (2014)
- 3294 Risk Contribution: Negligence: Verdict (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3295 Risk Contribution: Negligence Claim (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3296 Risk Contribution: Negligence: Verdict (Wis. Stat. § 895.046) (For Actions Commenced after January 31, 2011) (2014)

### **Lemon Law**

- 3300 Lemon Law Claim: Special Verdict (2016)
- 3301 Lemon Law Claim: Nonconformity (2001)
- 3302 Lemon Law Claim: Four Attempts to Repair: Same Nonconformity (1999)
- 3303 Lemon Law Claim: Out of Service Warranty Nonconformity (Warranty on or after March 1, 2014) (2016)
- 3304 Lemon Law Claim: Failure to Repair (Relating to Special Verdict Question 6) (2006)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

3310 Magnuson–Moss Claim (2020)

### **Damages**

- 3700 Damages: Building Contracts: Measure of Damages (2012)
- 3710 Consequential Damages for Breach of Contract (2018)
- 3720 Damages: Incidental (1994)
- 3725 Damages: Future Profits (2008)
- 3735 Damages: Loss of Expectation (1994)
- 3740 Damages: Termination of Real Estate Listing Contract (Exclusive) by Seller;  
Broker's Recovery (1994)
- 3750 Damages: Breach of Contract by Purchaser (1994)
- 3755 Damages: Breach of Contract by Seller (1994)
- 3760 Damages: Attorney Fees (1994)

## **AGENCY; EMPLOYMENT; BUSINESS ORGANIZATION**

- 4000 Agency: Definition (2019)
- 4001 General Agent: Definition (1994)
- 4002 Special Agent: Definition (1994)
- 4005 Agency: Apparent Authority (1994)
- 4010 Agency: Implied Authority (1994)
- 4015 Agency: Ratification (1994)
- 4020 Agent's Duties Owed to Principal (1994)
- 4025 Agency: Without Compensation (2005)
- 4027 Agency: Termination: General (1994)
- 4028 Agency: Termination: Notice to Third Parties (1994)
- 4030 Servant: Definition (2015)
- 4035 Servant: Scope of Employment (2020)
- 4040 Servant: Scope of Employment; Going to and from Place of Employment  
(2014)
- 4045 Servant: Scope of Employment While Traveling (2020)
- 4050 Servant: Master's Ratification of Wrongful Acts Done Outside Scope of  
Employment (1994)
- 4055 Servant: Vicarious Liability of Employer (2005)
- 4060 Independent Contractor: Definition (2005)
- 4080 Partnership (2009)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

### **PERSONS**

- 5001 Paternity: Child of Unmarried Woman (2021)
- 7030 Child in Need of Protection or Services [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7039 Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights: Child in Need of Protection or Services: Preliminary Instruction [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7040 Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights: Continuing Need of Protection or Services [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7042 Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights: Abandonment under Wis. Stat. § 48.415(1)(a) 2 or 3 [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7050 Involuntary Commitment: Mentally Ill (2022)
- 7050A Involuntary Commitment: Mentally Ill: Recommitment Alleging Wis. Stat. § 51.20(1)(am) (1/2023)
- 7054 Petition for Guardianship of the Person: Incompetency; Wis. Stat. § 54.10(3)(a)2 (2019)
- 7055 Petition for Guardianship of the Estate: Incompetency; Wis. Stat. § 54.10(3)(a)3 (2009)
- 7056 Petition for Guardianship of the Estate: Spendthrift; Wis. Stat. § 54.10(2) (2009)
- 7060 Petition for Guardianship of Incompetent Person and Application for Protective Placement; Wis. Stat. § 54.10 and 55.08(1) (2019)
- 7061 Petition for Guardianship of Incompetent Person and Application for Protective Services; Wis. Stat. § 54.10 and 55.08(2) (2014)
- 7070 Involuntary Commitment: Habitual Lack of Self-Control as to the Use of Alcohol Beverages (2003)

### **PROPERTY**

#### **General**

- 8012 Trespasser: Definition (2013)
- 8015 Consent of Possessor to Another's Being on Premises (2013)
- 8017 Duty of Hotelkeeper to Furnish Reasonably Safe Premises and Furniture for Guests (Renumbered JI-Civil 8051) (1994)
- 8020 Duty of Owner or Possessor of Real Property to Nontrespasser User (2020)
- 8025 Trespass: Owner's Duty to Trespasser; Duty to Child Trespasser (Attractive Nuisance) (2022)
- 8026 Trespass: Special Verdict (2016)
- 8027 Trespass: Child Trespasser (Attractive Nuisance): Special Verdict (2013)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 8030 Duty of Owner of a Building Abutting on a Public Highway (2006)
- 8035 Highway or Sidewalk Defect or Insufficiency (2021)
- 8040 Duty of Owner of Place of Amusement: Common Law (1994)
- 8045 Duty of a Proprietor of a Place of Business to Protect a Patron from Injury  
Caused by Act of Third Person (2012)
- 8050 Duty of Hotel Innkeeper: Providing Security (1994)
- 8051 Duty of Hotelkeeper to Furnish Reasonably Safe Premises and Furniture for  
Guests (2020)
- 8060 Adverse Possession Not Founded on Written Instrument (Wis. Stat. § 893.25)  
(7/2023)
- 8065 Prescriptive Rights by User: Domestic Corporation, Cooperative Association, or  
Cooperative (Wis. Stat. § 893.28(2)) (1/2023)

## **Eminent Domain**

- 8100 Eminent Domain: Fair Market Value (Total Taking) (1/2023)
- 8101 Eminent Domain: Fair Market Value (Partial Taking) (2012)
- 8102 Eminent Domain: Severance Damages (2008)
- 8103 Eminent Domain: Severance Damages: Cost-To-Cure (2007)
- 8104 Eminent Domain: Unity of Use - Two or More Parcels (2007)
- 8105 Eminent Domain: Lands Containing Marketable Materials (2008)
- 8107 Eminent Domain: Severance Damages; Unity of Use (Renumbered JI-Civil  
8104) (2008)
- 8110 Eminent Domain: Change in Grade (2022)
- 8111 Eminent Domain: Access Rights (1/2023)
- 8112 Eminent Domain: Air Rights (2007)
- 8113 Eminent Domain: Taking of a Limited Easement (1/2024)
- 8115 Eminent Domain: Special Benefits (2008)
- 8120 Eminent Domain: Comparable Sales Approach (2022)
- 8125 Eminent Domain: Inconvenience to Landowner [Withdrawn 2008]
- 8130 Eminent Domain: Income Approach (2008)
- 8135 Eminent Domain: Cost Approach (2008)
- 8140 Eminent Domain: Legal Nonconforming Use, Lot or Structure (Definitions)  
(2007)
- 8145 Eminent Domain: Assemblage (2007)

**Table of Cases Cited** (7/2024)

**Index** (7/2024)

## 5 COMMENT: GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

This is intended to explain the Committee's approach to the use of gender-neutral language in the Wis JI-Civil and to provide references for users who wish to use gender-neutral language in revising or supplementing the published instructions.

### Substantive Gender Bias

The Committee attempts to prepare instructions that are free from substantive gender bias. By substantive bias, we mean statements that indicate that one gender is to be treated differently from the other in applying the law as described in the instructions. An example would be indicating that a witness was less likely to be credible because of gender.<sup>1</sup>

### Pronouns

Originally, some instructions adhered to the conventional grammar and statutory drafting norms of the time, employing masculine pronouns to refer to antecedents of mixed or unknown gender.<sup>2</sup> However, starting in 1991, all Wisconsin jury instructions have been drafted or revised to avoid using the masculine form. This has been achieved using several different techniques.<sup>3</sup>

The Committee's current drafting format requires that all new instructions use gender-neutral language.<sup>4</sup> Where a party's name is not appropriate, instructions include reference to "he or she" and "him or her." However, there are exceptions where this format might not be suitable, especially if removing a pronoun changes the specific substantive meaning of the relevant statute.<sup>5</sup>

The Committee has always assumed that the published instructions will be tailored to the facts of each case. This includes modifying all pronouns to match their antecedents, as failure to do so may confuse the jury. See the dissenting opinion in Betchkal v. Willis, 127 Wis.2d 177, 190, 378 N.W.2d 684 (1985). The Committee's current drafting format provides both "he" and "she" pronouns when referring to the specific party. Although this format does not include the singular "they," the Committee acknowledges that trial courts have the discretion to use "they" or "their" in place of "he" or "she" when referring to a single person.<sup>6</sup>

Where users encounter an instruction that has not yet been revised in accordance with these principles, some of the techniques described in the notes below may help with any revision that may be required.<sup>7</sup>

## COMMENT

Wis JI-Civil 5 was approved by the Committee in January 2024.

This instruction aims to provide insight into the Committee's drafting guidelines regarding adhering to scholarly consensus and style guides. It also aims to provide techniques for modifying the model instructions to incorporate gender-neutral language.

The 1991 recommendations for revising the uniform jury instructions were made by the Civil Law Subcommittee of the Wisconsin Equal Justice Task Force.

1. No instances of explicit substantive gender bias have been brought to the Committee's attention. To confront the danger of implicit gender bias, the Committee has published Wis JI-Civil 50, which, in giving the jury general instruction on its duties, includes the following statement:

People make assumptions and form opinions from their own personal backgrounds and experiences. Generally, we are aware of these things, but you should consider the possibility that you have biases of which you may not be aware which can affect how you evaluate information and make decisions.

2. Wis. Stat. Section 990.001(2) provides: "Words importing one gender extend and may be applied to any gender."

3. Some of the common techniques are:

- rewriting to avoid the problem. Often, the pronoun or the phrase in which it appears can simply be dropped. Or the sentence can easily be rewritten to make the pronoun unnecessary.
- substituting nouns for pronouns. The instructions often suggest using the name or title of a person; repeating the name or title avoids use of a pronoun and adds clarity as well.
- substituting plural pronouns for a singular pronoun. Using "witnesses . . . their" in place of "witness . . . his" usually works well.
- substituting a gender-neutral pronoun. Using "one" in place of "his" or "her" is grammatically correct but often increases the complexity of an instruction, making it more difficult to understand.
- using gender-neutral terms. The instructions typically use "police officer" instead of "policeman," "firefighter" instead of "fireman," etc.

For a summarization of these and other techniques, see Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*, p. 499 (Oxford, 1987) and Melinkoff, *Legal Writing: Sense and Nonsense*, pp. 48-51 (West, 1982). Several other guides are also available. It has been the Committee's experience that rewriting can virtually always increase gender neutrality and clarity at the same time.

4. The Committee believes it is following the view of most of the commentators on current usage

in general and the law in particular. While the rules of grammar on the pronoun issue are described as unsettled, there is consensus that it is best to avoid the problem where it is possible to do so. See, for example, Garner, *A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage*, p. 499 (Oxford, 1987); Melinkoff, *Legal Writing: Sense and Nonsense*, pp. 48 51 (West, 1982).

5. Changes in meaning can result if pronouns are changed without a careful eye on the substantive effect. For example, a criminal statute was revised several years ago to substitute “in personal possession” for “in his possession.” See § 943.12, Possession of Burglarious Tools. One could argue that “personal possession” has a specific substantive meaning that changed the statute.

6. The use of singular “they.”

The singular “they” is a generic third-person singular pronoun in English. In the past, formal writing and style guides, including the APA Publication Manual, the MLA Handbook, and the AP Stylebook, did not endorse the use of “they” as a singular third-person pronoun. However, most guides now wholly support the use of “they” or accept its use in limited cases as a singular and-or gender-neutral pronoun. Still, others, like the Chicago Manual of Style, take a stronger stance, deeming it too informal and ungrammatical, and recommend avoiding its use. Nevertheless, such a position is a recommendation, not a prohibition, and allows writers to make the final determination.

The Committee recognizes that such usage continues gaining scholarly acceptance and believes that it is wise to make an effort to determine what is appropriate for a particular situation. Additionally, the Committee believes that it is acceptable to use “they” or “their” instead of “he” or “she” when referring to a single person unless doing so would create undue confusion.

7. See note 3, supra.

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**50 PRELIMINARY INSTRUCTION: BEFORE TRIAL**

(NOTE TO THE TRIAL JUDGE: The following is a suggested instruction to be given to the jury before opening statements are made by the lawyers for the parties. While most of this instruction should apply to most cases, some parts of it do not apply to all cases, and some parts of it may not apply to the case before you now. Read the instruction before it is given and delete any parts that are not applicable. Also, the language used in this instruction is “suggested” language. You may have another way of expressing the same ideas in this instruction and may do so in a way consistent with Wisconsin law.)

**MEMBERS OF THE JURY:**

Before the trial begins, there are certain instructions you should have to better understand your functions as a juror and how you should conduct yourself during the trial.

Your duty is to decide the case based only on the evidence presented at trial and the law given to you by the court. Anything you may see or hear outside the courtroom is not evidence. All people deserve fair treatment in our system of justice, regardless of their personal characteristics. [These include, but are not limited to, race, national origin, religion, age, ability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, education, income level, occupation, or any other personal characteristic.]<sup>1</sup> People make assumptions and form opinions from their own personal backgrounds and experiences. Generally, we are aware of these things, but you should consider the possibility that you have biases of which you may not be aware. Like conscious bias, bias of which you may not be aware can affect how you evaluate information and make decisions. This is called unconscious or implicit bias.

You must carefully evaluate the evidence and resist any urge to reach a verdict that is

influenced by bias for or against any party, witness, or attorney in order to treat all parties equally and to arrive at a just and proper verdict based on the evidence.

In fairness to the parties, keep an open mind during the trial. Do not begin your deliberations and discussion of the case until all the evidence is presented and I have instructed you on the law. Do not discuss this case among yourselves or with anyone else until your final deliberations in the jury room. This order is not limited to face-to-face conversations. It also extends to all forms of electronic communications. Do not use any electronic devices, such as a mobile phone or computer, text or instant messaging, or social networking sites, to send or receive any information about this case or your experience as a juror. Once deliberations begin in the jury room you will then be in a position to intelligently and fairly exchange your views with other jurors.

## **CONDUCT**

We will stop, or “recess,” from time to time during the trial. You may be excused from the courtroom when it is necessary for me to hear legal arguments from the lawyers. If you come in contact with the parties, lawyers [interpreters,] or witnesses, do not speak with them. For their part, the parties, lawyers, [interpreters,] and witnesses will not contact or speak with the jurors. Do not listen to any conversation about this case.

Do not research any information that you personally think might be helpful to you in understanding the issues presented. Do not investigate this case on your own or visit the scene, either in person or by any electronic means. Do not read any newspaper reports or

listen to any news reports on radio, television, over the internet, or any other electronic application or tool about this trial. Do not consult dictionaries, computers, electronic applications, social media, the internet, or other reference materials for additional information. Do not seek information regarding the public records of any party or witness in this case. Any information you obtain outside the courtroom could be misleading, inaccurate, or incomplete. Relying on this information is unfair because the parties would not have the opportunity to refute, explain, or correct it.

Do not communicate with anyone about this trial or your experience as a juror while you are serving on this jury. Do not use a computer, cell phone, or other electronic device, including personal wearable electronics, applications, or tools with communication capabilities, to share any information about this case. For example, do not communicate by telephone, blog post, e-mail, text message, instant message, social media post, or in any other way, on or off the computer.

Do not permit anyone to communicate with you about this matter, either in person, electronically, or by any other means. If anyone does so despite your telling them not to, you should report that to me. I appreciate that it is tempting when you go home in the evening to discuss this case with another member of your household, but you may not do so. This case must be decided by you, the jurors, based on the evidence presented in the courtroom. People not serving on this jury have not heard the evidence, and it is improper for them to influence your deliberations and decisions in this case. After this trial is

completed, you are free to communicate with anyone in any manner.

These rules are intended to ensure that jurors remain impartial throughout the trial. If any juror has reason to believe that another juror has violated these rules, you should report that to me. If jurors do not comply with these rules, it could result in a new trial involving additional time and significant expense to the parties and the taxpayers.

## **PARTIES**

A party who brings a lawsuit is called a plaintiff. In this case, the plaintiff[s] [is] [are] \_\_\_\_\_ [state separately as to each if more than one]. The plaintiff[s] [is] [are] suing to [note: state purposes of the action for each plaintiff, for example, recover damages from a defendant].

[If there are multiple plaintiffs, give the following: You should decide the case of each plaintiff as if it were a separate lawsuit. Each plaintiff is entitled to separate consideration of [his] [her] [its] own claim(s). All instructions apply to each plaintiff unless I tell you otherwise.]

A party against whom a claim is made is called a defendant. In this case, the defendant[s] [is] [are] \_\_\_\_\_ [state separately to each if more than one].

[If there are multiple defendants, give the following: You should decide the case against each defendant as if it were a separate lawsuit. Each defendant is entitled to separate consideration of [his] [her] [its] own defenses. All instructions apply to each defendant

unless I tell you otherwise.]

[If there is a counterclaiming defendant, give the following: The defendant[s] in this case have also filed a claim against the plaintiff[s]. [Identify the party making the counterclaim and the party against whom the counterclaim is made]. The claim of a defendant against a plaintiff is called a counterclaim. The defendant[s] [is] [are] counterclaiming for [note: state purposes of the counterclaim for each defendant, for example, recover damages from a plaintiff.]

[If there are parties with subrogated interests or other parties named in the caption and not appearing at trial, give the following: There [is another party] [are other parties] named in this case that will not participate in this trial. Do not speculate on the reasons. Any claims involving them are not to be considered by you in deciding this case.]

[If there are settled, dismissed, or withdrawn parties, give the following: [Former party] is no longer a party in this case. [The claims of that party] [Claims against that party] have been [settled] [dismissed] [withdrawn]. Do not speculate on the reasons.]

## **EVIDENCE**

You are to decide the case solely on the evidence offered and received at trial.

Evidence is:

1. testimony of witnesses given in court, both on direct and cross-examination, regardless of who called the witness;
2. deposition testimony presented during the trial;

3. exhibits admitted by me regardless of whether they go to the jury room; and
4. any facts to which the lawyers have agreed or stipulated or which I have directed you to find.

Anything you may have seen or heard outside the courtroom is not evidence.

Remarks of the attorneys are not evidence. If any remarks suggest certain facts not in evidence, disregard the suggestion.

### **ORDER OF PROOF**

Normally, a plaintiff will produce all witnesses and exhibits supporting the plaintiff's claim against the defendant before the defendant introduces any evidence, although exceptions are sometimes made to that rule to accommodate a witness. After the plaintiff's case is presented, the defendant may present witnesses and exhibits to establish any defenses. There is no requirement that the defendant call any witnesses or present any evidence [unless the defendant is making a claim against the plaintiff]. If the defendant does introduce evidence, the plaintiff is then permitted to offer additional evidence to rebut the defendant's case. Each witness is first examined by the lawyer who called the witness to testify, and then the opposing lawyer is permitted to cross-examine.

### **OBJECTIONS**

At times during a trial, objections may be made to the introduction of evidence. I do not permit arguments on objections to evidence to be made in your presence. Any ruling upon objections will be based solely upon the law and are not matters which should concern

you at all. You must not infer from any ruling that I make or from anything that I should say during the trial that I hold any views for or against either party to this lawsuit.

During the trial, I will sustain objections to questions asked without permitting the witness to answer or, where an answer has been made, will instruct that it be stricken from the record and that you are to disregard it and dismiss it from your minds. You should not draw any inference from an unanswered question, nor may you consider testimony that has been stricken in reaching your decision. This is because the law requires that your decision be made solely upon the competent evidence before you.

**[NOTETAKING NOT ALLOWED]**

Do not take notes during the trial. Taking notes will not be permitted in this case because \_\_\_\_\_.]

**[NOTETAKING PERMITTED]**

You are not required to, but you may take notes during this trial, except during the opening statements and closing arguments. The court will provide you with materials.

In taking notes, you must be careful that it does not distract you from carefully listening to and observing the witnesses.

You may rely on your notes to refresh your memory during your deliberations. Otherwise, keep them confidential. After the trial, the notes will be collected and destroyed.]

**TRANSCRIPTS NOT AVAILABLE FOR DELIBERATIONS; READING BACK TESTIMONY**

You will not have a copy of the written transcript of the trial testimony available for use during your deliberations. [You may ask to have specific portions of the testimony read to you.] You should pay careful attention to all the testimony because you must rely primarily on your memory of the evidence and testimony introduced during the trial.

**USE OF DEPOSITIONS**

During the trial, the lawyers will often refer to and read from depositions. Depositions are transcripts of testimony taken before the trial. The testimony may be that of a party or anybody who has knowledge of facts relating to the lawsuit. Deposition testimony, just like testimony during the trial, if received into evidence at the trial, may be considered by you along with the other evidence in reaching your verdict in this case.

**[JUROR QUESTIONING OF WITNESSES]**

You will be given the opportunity to ask written questions of the witnesses testifying in this case.

After both lawyers have finished questioning a witness, you may raise your hand if you have any questions that have not been addressed by the lawyers. Questions must be in writing and directed to the witness and not to the lawyers or me. If I determine that your question may be asked, I will ask it. If I do not ask your question, you should not speculate what the answer to the question is or why I did not ask it.]



## CREDIBILITY OF WITNESSES

It is the duty of the jury to scrutinize and to weigh the testimony of witnesses and to determine the effect of the evidence as a whole. You are the sole judges of the credibility, that is, the believability, of the witnesses and of the weight to be given to their testimony.

In determining the credibility of each witness and the weight you give to the testimony of each witness, consider these factors:

- whether the witness has an interest or lack of interest in the result of this trial;
- the witness' conduct, appearance, and demeanor on the witness stand;
- the clearness or lack of clearness of the witness' recollections;
- the opportunity the witness had for observing and for knowing the matters the witness testified about;
- the reasonableness of the witness's testimony;
- the apparent intelligence of the witness;
- bias or prejudice, if any, has been shown;
- possible motives for falsifying testimony, if any has been shown; and
- all other facts and circumstances during the trial which tend either to support or to discredit the testimony.

Then, give to the testimony of each witness the weight you believe it should receive.

[In your determination of credibility, you must avoid your own personal biases.]<sup>2</sup>

There is no magic way for you to evaluate the testimony; instead, you should use your

common sense and experience. In everyday life, you determine for yourselves the reliability of things people say to you. You should do the same thing here.

### **BURDEN OF PROOF**

In every trial there is a burden of proof. The phrase “burden of proof” means that when a party comes into a courtroom and makes a claim, as the plaintiff is making here, the law says that the claim must be proved. After the trial, I will instruct you on the proper burden of proof to be applied to the questions in the verdict that will be submitted to you.

### **[CLOSING ARGUMENTS**

After all of the evidence is introduced and both parties have rested, the lawyers will again have an opportunity to address you in a closing argument. While the closing arguments are very important, they are not evidence, and you are not bound by the argument of either lawyer.

After the final arguments are concluded, I will instruct you on the rules of law applicable to the case, and you will then retire for your deliberations. Your function as jurors is to determine what the facts are and to apply the rules of law that I give you to the facts. The conclusion you reach will be your verdict. You will determine what the facts are from all the testimony that you hear and from exhibits that are submitted to you. You are the sole and exclusive judges of the facts. In that field, neither I nor anyone may invade your province. I will try to preside impartially during this trial and not express any opinion concerning the facts. Any views of mine as to what the facts are totally irrelevant.

I do caution you, however, that under your oath as jurors, you are duty-bound to accept the rules of law that I give you whether you agree with them or not. As the sole judges of the facts in this case, you must determine which of the witnesses you believe, what portion of their testimony you accept, and what weight you attach to it.]

### **OPENING STATEMENTS**

We have now reached that stage of the proceedings where both lawyers have the opportunity to make an opening statement.

The purpose of an opening statement is to outline for you what each side expects to prove so that you will better understand the evidence as it is introduced during the trial. I must caution you, however, that the opening statements are not evidence.

After [counsel/the parties] have completed their opening statements, we will begin the trial by (plaintiff)’s lawyer calling the first witness.

### **NOTES**

1. The language in brackets provides an optional, non-exhaustive list of personal characteristics. If a trial judge chooses to include this language, they may modify the list as needed for each case, either by adding new characteristics or removing existing ones.
2. The text enclosed in brackets is optional and can be included at the trial judge’s discretion in the instructions given verbally or in written form to the jury.

### **COMMENT**

This instruction was approved in 2010 and revised in 2017, 2020, and 2022. The 2017 revision included a “Note to the Trial Judge” at the beginning of the instruction. The 2020 revision expanded on the use of social media and other digital tools. This revision was approved by the Committee in January 2024; it expanded the range of personal characteristics that may affect a juror’s consideration of the

evidence.

**1024 PROFESSIONAL NEGLIGENCE: MEDICAL: RES IPSA LOQUITUR**

If you find that (name the part of the body that was injured) of (plaintiff) was injured during the course of the operation performed by (doctor) and if you further find (from expert medical testimony in this case)<sup>1</sup> that the injury to the (name the part of the body that was injured) of (plaintiff) is of a kind that does not ordinarily occur if a surgeon exercises proper care and skill, you may infer, from the fact of surgery to the (name the part of the body that was injured) of (plaintiff), that (doctor) failed to exercise that degree of care and skill which reasonably prudent surgeons would exercise. This rule will not apply if (doctor) has offered an explanation for the injury to the (name the part of the body that was injured) of (plaintiff) which satisfies you that the injury to (plaintiff) did not occur through any failure on (doctor)’s part to exercise due care and skill.

**NOTES**

1. A plaintiff may employ “competent expert testimony which serves in the place of the jurors’ common knowledge and gives them a rational basis for concluding that the event does not ordinarily occur unless someone has been negligent.” Utica Mut. Ins. Co. v. Ripon Co-op., 50 Wis. 2d 431, 436-37, 184 N.W.2d 65 (1971).

If the jury may be permitted to infer negligence on the basis of layman’s knowledge (as whether the plaintiff’s shoulder was injured during an appendectomy), omit the phrase in lines two and three “from expert medical testimony in this case.”

**COMMENT**

The instruction and comment were originally published in 1967. This revision was approved in 1980. The comment was updated in 1997, 2010, and 2017. This revision was approved by the Committee in January 2024; it updated the comment.

Kelley v. Hartford Casualty Ins. Co., 86 Wis.2d 129, 271 N.W.2d 676 (1978); Hoven v. Kelble, 79 Wis.2d 444, 256 N.W.2d 379 (1977); Trogun v. Fruchtman, 58 Wis.2d 569, 207 N.W.2d 297 (1973); Burnside v. Evangelical Deaconess Hosp., 46 Wis.2d 519, 175 N.W.2d 230 (1970); see also Lecander v. Billmeyer, 171 Wis.2d 593, 492 N.W.2d 167 (Ct. App. 1992); Petzel v. Valley Orthopedics Ltd., 2009 WI App. 106, 320 Wis.2d 621, 770 N.W.2d 787.

Whether the evidence presented warrants the giving of a res ipsa loquitur instruction always presents a question of law for the trial court. Fehrman v. Smirl, 20 Wis.2d 1, 28b, 121 N.W.2d 255 (1963).

Where “the plaintiff’s evidence of negligence in a given case has been so substantial that it provides a full and complete explanation of the event,” then “causation is no longer a mystery, and the res ipsa loquitur instruction would be superfluous and erroneous.” Utica Mut. Ins. Co. v. Ripon Coop., 50 Wis.2d 431, 439, 184 N.W.2d 65 (1971). See also Fehrman, *supra*; Puls v. St. Vincent Hospital (1967), 36 Wis.2d 679, 154 N.W.2d 308, and Rembalski v. John Plewa, Inc., 2023 WI App 58, ¶16, 409 Wis.2d 647, 998 N.W.2d 523.

Res ipsa loquitur was first applied to medical malpractice actions in 1963. Fehrman v. Smirl, 20 Wis.2d 1, 121 N.W.2d 255 (1963). In this case, the Supreme Court loosened the rule that a physician’s negligence could only be proven by expert testimony in situations where the errors were of such a nature that a layperson could conclude from common experience that such mistakes do not happen if the physician had exercised proper skill and care. Res ipsa loquitur is a rule of evidence that permits the jury to draw a permissible inference of the physician’s negligence without any direct or expert testimony as to the physician’s conduct at the time the negligence occurred. Hoven v. Kelble, 79 Wis.2d 444, 256 N.W.2d 379 (1977). The doctrine can be involved in a medical malpractice action when: (1) there is evidence that the event in question would not ordinarily occur unless there was negligence; (2) the agent or instrumentality that caused the harm was within the defendant’s exclusive control; and (3) the evidence allows more than speculation but does not fully explain the event. See Lecander v. Billmeyer, 171 Wis.2d 593, 601-02, 492 N.W.2d 167 (Ct. App. 1992); Walker v. Sacred Heart Hospital, Appeal No. 2015AP805 (decided January 4, 2017). In Richards v. Mendivil, 200 Wis.2d 665, 548 N.W.2d 85 (Ct. App. 1996), the court of appeals noted that there is a danger that when a plaintiff relies upon expert testimony that the evidence of negligence will be so substantial that a full and complete explanation of causation is provided and res ipsa loquitur will not be applicable.

The third element discussed above, that the evidence allows more than speculation but does not fully explain the event, was set forth in Fiumefreddo v. Mclean, 174 Wis.2d 10, 496 N.W.2d 226 (Ct. App. 1993). See also Lecander v. Billmeyer, *supra*.

In Kelley, the court stated, at 132:

Before a res ipsa loquitur instruction can be given to a jury, the evidence must conform to these requirements:

(1) The event in question must be of the kind which does not ordinarily occur in the absence of negligence; and (2) the agency or instrumentality causing the harm must have been within the exclusive control of the defendant. Trogun v. Fruchtman, 58 Wis.2d 569, 590, 207 N.W.2d 297 (1973).

With respect to these two conditions, the court in Hoven v. Kelble, *supra* at 451-52, stated:

When these two conditions are present, they give rise to a permissive inference of negligence on the part of the defendant which the jury is free to accept or reject. It is settled that the doctrine may be applied in medical malpractice cases and that the likelihood that negligence was the cause may be shown by expert medical testimony in cases where it may not be so inferred on the basis of common knowledge. Fehrman v. Smirl, 20 Wis.2d 1, 21, 22, 25, 26, 121 N.W.2d 255, 122 N.W.2d 439 (1963); Trogun v. Fruchtman, supra.

The principle of *res ipsa loquitur*, commonly discussed in the context of a jury instruction, is also applicable in court trials where the circuit court serves as the fact-finder. In a court trial, when determining whether to apply this doctrine, the circuit court essentially follows the same analysis it would use during a trial to decide whether to offer the jury instruction. See Palisades Collection LLC v. Kalal, 2010 WI App 38, ¶13, 324 Wis. 2d 180, 781 N.W.2d 503. See also Rembalski v. John Plewa, Inc., 2023 WI App 58, 409 Wis.2d 647, 998 N.W.2d 523, note 2.

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**1145 RES IPSA LOQUITUR**

If you find (defendant) had (exclusive control of) (exclusive right to the control of)<sup>1</sup> the (name the instrument or agency involved) involved in the accident, and if you further find that the accident in question is of a type or kind that ordinarily would not have occurred had (defendant) exercised ordinary care, then you may infer from the accident itself and the surrounding circumstances that there was negligence on the part of (defendant),<sup>2</sup> unless (defendant) has offered an explanation of the accident which is satisfactory to you.

**NOTES**

1. The alternate phrase “exclusive right to the control of” should be used in those cases where defendant disavows exclusive control because he or she has delegated (by contract or otherwise) the duty of repair or maintenance of the instrument or agency to another. Turk v. H. C. Prange Co., 18 Wis.2d 547, 119 N.W.2d 365 (1963); Koehler v. Thiensville State Bank, 245 Wis. 281, 14 N.W.2d 15 (1944). Goebel v. General Bldg. Serv. Co., 26 Wis.2d 129, 131 N.W.2d 852 (1964), is a situation where several parties might have exercised control.

2. A plaintiff may employ “competent expert testimony which serves in the place of the jurors’ common knowledge and gives them a rational basis for concluding that the event does not ordinarily occur unless someone has been negligent.” Utica Mut. Ins. Co. v. Ripon Co-op., 50 Wis. 2d 431, 436-37, 184 N.W.2d 65 (1971).

**COMMENT**

This instruction and comment were approved by the Committee in 1977. The comment was updated in 1989 and 2001. This revision was approved by the Committee in January 2024; it added to the comment.

The following conditions must be present before the doctrine of res ipsa loquitur is applicable: (1) the event in question must be of a kind which does not ordinarily occur in the absence of negligence; and (2) the agency of instrumentality causing the harm must have been within exclusive control of the defendant. When these two conditions are present, they give rise to a permissible inference of negligence, which the jury is free to accept or reject. Lambrecht v. Estate of Kaczmarczyk, 2001 WI 25, 241 Wis.2d 804, 623 N.W.2d 751.

The court decides as a preliminary matter of law that the inference is reasonable; if not, the instruction is not given.

Where “the plaintiff’s evidence of negligence in a given case has been so substantial that it provides a full and complete explanation of the event,” then “causation is no longer a mystery, and the res ipsa loquitur instruction would be superfluous and erroneous.” Utica Mut. Ins. Co. v. Ripon Coop., 50 Wis.2d 431, 439, 184 N.W.2d 65 (1971). See also, Fehrman v. Smirl (1964), 25 Wis.2d 645, 131 N.W.2d 314; Puls v. St. Vincent Hospital (1967), 36 Wis.2d 679, 154 N.W.2d 308, and Rembalski v. John Plewa, Inc., 2023 WI App 58, ¶16, 409 Wis.2d 647, 998 N.W.2d 523.

Insert the facts of the case in the instruction if desired. This instruction was approved by implication in Brunner v. Van Hoof, 4 Wis.2d 459, 464, 90 N.W.2d 551 (1958); Colla v. Mandella, 271 Wis. 145, 149-50, 72 N.W.2d 755 (1955); and Georgia Casualty Co. v. American Milling Co., 169 Wis. 456, 460, 172 N.W. 148 (1919).

The mere happening of a collision is not probative that someone has been negligent. Millonig v. Bakken, 112 Wis.2d 445, 334 N.W.2d 80 (1983). In Millonig, the court said that res ipsa loquitur “only creates a permissive inference” and for the doctrine to apply one of the necessary elements is that the accident probably would not have occurred but for the negligent of the defendant. 112 Wis.2d, at p. 457.

The instruction does not cover negligence on the part of plaintiff, since Wisconsin has a comparative negligence law.

This instruction applies to host-guest cases. Turk v. H. C. Prange Co., *supra*. Henthorn v. MGC Corp., 1 Wis.2d 180, 187, 83 N.W.2d 759 (1957); Modl v. National Farmers Union Prop. & Casualty Co., 272 Wis. 650, 656, 76 N.W.2d 599 (1956).

Res ipsa loquitur can be used in strict liability cases. Jagmin v. Simonds Abrasive Co., 61 Wis.2d 60, 211 N.W.2d 810 (1973).

This instruction is proper even though plaintiffs have tried to prove specific negligence and have failed. Commerce Ins. Co. v. Merrill Gas Co., 271 Wis. 159, 168, 72 N.W.2d 771 (1955).

If res ipsa loquitur rests on data which was used as the basis for an allegation of a specific act of negligence, but the inference of negligence so raised was rebutted, then res ipsa loquitur is not in the case. Brunner v. Van Hoof, *supra* at 464, citing Gay v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Light Co., 138 Wis. 348, 353-54, 120 N.W. 283 (1909).

Where an event which caused injury to the plaintiff might have been caused by a specific act of X or by inferred negligence of the defendant who was in control of the situation, the jury should be instructed that res ipsa loquitur would be applicable only if it first found that the specific act did not cause the event. Mixis v. Wisconsin Pub. Serv. Comm’n, 26 Wis.2d 488, 132 N.W.2d 769 (1965).

The burden of proof (persuasion) does not shift from plaintiff to defendant, and it is error to so state. Ziino v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Transp. Co., 272 Wis. 21, 24, 74 N.W.2d 791 (1956).

If no instruction is requested in the trial court, the Supreme Court will not consider res ipsa loquitur for the first time on appeal. Ahola v. Sincock, 6 Wis.2d 332, 349, 94 N.W.2d 566 (1959).

The principle of res ipsa loquitur, commonly discussed in the context of a jury instruction, is also applicable in court trials where the circuit court serves as the fact-finder. In a court trial, when determining whether to apply this doctrine, the circuit court essentially follows the same analysis it would use during a trial to decide whether to offer the jury instruction. See Palisades Collection LLC v. Kalal, 2010 WI App 38, ¶13, 324 Wis. 2d 180, 781 N.W.2d 503. See also Rembalski v. John Plewa, Inc., 2023 WI App 58, 409 Wis.2d 647, 998 N.W.2d 523, note 2.

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**1384 DUTY OF HOSPITAL: GRANTING AND RENEWING STAFF PRIVILEGES (CORPORATE NEGLIGENCE)**

A hospital owes a duty to its patients to use reasonable care in granting and renewing staff privileges to permit only competent (physicians) (surgeons) to use its facilities. This duty requires the hospital to use reasonable care to appoint only qualified physicians and surgeons to its medical staff (and to periodically monitor and review their competency). The failure to use reasonable care is negligence.

In investigating the qualifications of doctors applying for staff privileges, the duty of reasonable care requires that a hospital: (1) require an applicant to complete an application; (2) verify the accuracy of the applicant's statements especially in regard to the applicant's medical education, training, and experience; (3) solicit information from the applicant's peers, including those not referenced in the application, who are knowledgeable about the education, training, experience, health, competence, and ethical character of the applicant; (4) determine if the applicant is currently licensed to practice in this state and if the applicant's licensure or registration has been or is currently being challenged; (5) inquire whether the applicant has been involved in adverse medical malpractice actions and whether the applicant has lost (his) (her) membership in any medical organizations or privileges at any other hospital.

A hospital must evaluate the information gained through its investigation and make a reasonable judgment to approve or deny an application for staff privileges. With respect to

its investigation and evaluation, the hospital must gather and evaluate all of the facts and knowledge that would have been acquired had it exercised reasonable care in investigating its medical staff applicants.

[Hospitals are not insurers of the competency of their medical staff. If the hospital exercised the degree of care, skill, and judgment as required of it, it cannot be found negligent simply because a member of its medical staff acted in a negligent manner.]

#### COMMENT

This instruction and comment were originally approved in 1988. The instruction was revised in 1998. The comment was updated in 1998 and 2017. This revision was approved by the Committee in January 2024; it added to the comment.

This instruction is based on the decision of the supreme court in Johnson v. Misericordia Community Hosp., 99 Wis.2d 708, 301 N.W.2d 156 (1981).

**Standard of Care.** The standard of ordinary care under the circumstances expressed in Osborn v. Montgomery, 203 Wis. 223, 234 N.W. 372 (1931) applies to hospitals. Johnson, *supra* at 738; Schuster v. St. Vincent Hosp., 45 Wis.2d 135, 172 N.W.2d 421 (1969). The standard of care is determined by what a reasonable hospital would do in the same or similar circumstances, not by the hospital's policies. Johnson, *supra*, at 739-40. The revision to this instruction in 1998 changed the standard of "average hospital" to "reasonable hospital." See Nowatske v. Osterloh, 198 Wis.2d 419, 543 N.W.2d 25 (1996).

**Need for Expert Testimony.** In establishing the negligence of a hospital, the necessity for expert testimony depends upon the type of negligent acts involved. Expert testimony should be adduced concerning those matters involving special knowledge, skill, or experience on subjects which are not within the realm of the ordinary experience of mankind and which requires special learning, study, or experience. Payne v. Milwaukee Sanitarium Found., Inc., 81 Wis.2d 264, 272, 260 N.W.2d 386 (1977). See also Walker v. Sacred Heart Hospital, Appeal No. 2015AP805. Because the procedures ordinarily used by hospitals to evaluate applications for staff privileges are not within the realm of the ordinary experience of mankind, expert testimony is generally required to prove negligence. Johnson, *supra* at 739. However, not every case will require expert testimony, *e.g.*, where the hospital has made no effort to investigate the applicant.

**Causation.** A claim of corporate negligence must be supported by evidence establishing a causal nexus between the corporate conduct and the underlying act of an employee or agent that caused injury. Miller v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., 219 Wis. 2d 250, 261-62, 580 N.W.2d 233 (1998).

**Bifurcation of Trial.** If, at the pretrial, the plaintiff indicates that evidence will be presented relating to prior bad acts of medical treatment by the doctor to show the hospital's negligence, then bifurcation of the claims against the doctor and the hospital should be considered to prevent prejudice against the doctor. See Wis. Stat. § 904.03. Under this bifurcated format, the case against the doctor would be presented first. If the doctor is not negligent, then the trial is over unless there are claims against hospital employees (e.g., nurses or residents). The second phase would cover the hospital's negligence, comparison of negligence, and damages. The same jury should hear both phases of the trial.

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**1391 LIABILITY OF OWNER OR KEEPER OF ANIMAL: COMMON LAW**

(An owner) (A keeper) of a(n) (insert name of animal) is deemed to be aware of the natural traits and habits that are usual to a(n) (insert name of animal) and must use ordinary care to restrain and control the animal so that it will not in the exercise of its natural traits and habits cause injury or damage to the person or property of another.

In addition, if (an owner) (a keeper) is aware or in the exercise of ordinary care should be aware that the animal possesses any unusual traits or habits that would be likely to result in injury or damage, then the (owner) (keeper) must use ordinary care to restrain the animal as necessary to prevent the injury or damage.

**ADD THE FOLLOWING IF THE CLAIM CONCERNS A KEEPER OF AN ANIMAL**

[A person is said to be a keeper of an animal if, even though not owning the animal, the person has possession and control of it or if the person permits another person who is a member of his or her family or household to maintain the animal on his or her premises.]

**SPECIAL VERDICT**

1. Did (defendant) own or keep (animal)?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

2. Did (animal) cause injury or damage to the person or the property of another?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

If the answer to both question 1 and question 2 is “yes,” then answer Question No. 3:

3. Was the injury or damage due to the animal’s exercise of its natural traits and habits?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

If the answer to question 3 is “yes,” then answer Question No. 4:

4. Was (defendant) negligent in failing to use ordinary care to restrain and control the (animal)?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

#### COMMENT

This instruction and comment were approved by the Committee in 1974. The comment was updated in 1990, 1994, 1995, 2001, 2004, 2013, and 2015. The special verdict was added in 2016. This revision, approved by the Committee in May 2024, modified the special verdict form to add “negligence” to question 4.

**Control of Animal.** This instruction sets forth the duty of the person who has control over the animal. White v. Leeder, 149 Wis.2d 948, 440 N.W.2d 557 (1989). It is not designed to set forth a duty as between the owner and keeper of an animal.

This instruction covers a claim based on common law negligence. The owner is also liable where the damage caused by the animal was caused by poor care and treatment of the animal. Denil v. Coppersmith,

117 Wis.2d 90, 343 N.W.2d 136 (Ct. App. 1983).

**Stallions, Bulls, Boars, Rams, Goats.** For liability of an owner or keeper for damage by a stallion over one year, a bull over six months, boar, ram, or billy goat over four months, which runs at large, see Wis. Stat. § 172.01. The statute creates strict liability; no showing of fault by the owner is required. See also Leipske v. Guenther, 7 Wis.2d 86, 88, 95 N.W.2d 774 (1959).

For injuries caused by a horse on a highway, see Templeton v. Crull, 16 Wis.2d 416, 144 N.W.2d 843 (1962). For injuries caused by a muskie, see Ollhoff v. Peck, 177 Wis.2d 719, 503 N.W.2d 323 (Ct. App. 1993).

For the negligence of a riding or stable master, see Smith v. Pabst, 233 Wis. 489, 288 N.W. 780 (1940).

Facts evidencing “unusual traits and habits likely to result in injury” are discussed in Denil v. Coppersmith, *supra*.

**Owners and Keepers.** The casual presence of a dog on someone’s premises does not make that person an owner or keeper. Patterman v. Patterman, 173 Wis.2d 143, 496 N.W.2d 613 (Ct. App. 1992).

This instruction does not distinguish between domesticated and wild animals but rather instructs the jury to hold owners of animals to the appropriate standard of care given the nature of the animal involved. See Ollhoff v. Peck, 177 Wis.2d 719, 503 N.W.2d 323 (Ct. App. 1993)

The terms “owner” and “keeper” are defined in Koetting v. Conroy, 223 Wis. 550, 270 N.W. 625 (1937). See also White v. Leeder, *supra* at 957-58; Patterman v. Patterman, *supra*; Augsburger v. Homestead Mutual Ins. Co., 2014 WI 133, 359 Wis.2d 385, 856 N.W.2d 874. “Harboring” an animal lacks the proprietary aspect of keeping, Patterman, *supra*, at 149 n.4.

White v. Leeder, *supra*, contains the following discussion of the common law negligence rule with respect to animals.

. . . . At common law, the cases have established that the owner or keeper of a domesticated animal is held to anticipate the general propensities of the class to which the animal belongs, as well as any unusual traits or habits of the individual animal. See Leipske v. Guenther, 7 Wis.2d 86, 88, 95 N.W.2d 774, 96 N.W.2d 821 (1959).

The common-law rule first requires the owner or keeper to use ordinary care in controlling the characteristics normal to the animal’s class. The owner or keeper of a bull is thus required to take greater precautions to keep it under effective control than would be required of the owner of a cow or steer. See Restatements, Second, Torts, sec. 518, comment g, p. 31 (1977).

The common-law rule further allows the plaintiff to show that the individual animal had vicious or mischievous propensities and that the owner or keeper knew or should have known of them. A vicious propensity is a tendency of an animal to do any act which might endanger the safety of persons or property in a given situation. See 3A C.J.S. Animals, sec. 180, p. 674 (1973).

**Contributory Negligence.** The doctrine of contributory negligence applies to the plaintiff’s actions. White v. Leeder, *supra* at 958.

**Expert Testimony.** In White v. Leeder, *supra*, the court agreed with the trial court that technical expert testimony was not required to establish causal negligence. The court said that the issues involving whether the matter in which the owner kept a bull negligently caused the plaintiff's injury was within the realm of comprehension.

**Damages.** A claim by an injured keeper against a dog's owner for common law negligence is not governed by the damage provisions in the dog bite statute § 174.02. Malik v. American Family Ins. Co., *supra*, ¶ 31. The court concluded that the trial court correctly ruled that since the keeper's claim under § 174.02 was dismissed, she could not recover double damages under § 174.02(1)(b) even if she prevailed on the remaining common law negligence claim. Malik, 2001 WI App 82, ¶ 10.

**Liability of Landowner or Landlord.** In Smaxwell v. Bayard, 2004 WI 101, the court limited liability arising from injuries caused by dogs. The court held, on public policy grounds, that landowners and landlords can be held liable only if they are the owner or keeper of the dog in question:

"We hold, on public policy factors, that common law liability of landowners and landlords for negligence associated with injuries caused by dogs is limited to situations where the landowner or landlord is also the owner or keeper of the dog causing injury." *Id.* at par. 55.



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# WISCONSIN JURY INSTRUCTIONS

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## CIVIL

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## VOLUME II

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Wisconsin Civil Jury  
Instructions Committee

- 7/2024 Supplement (Release No. 57)

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# **WIS JI-CIVIL**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

---

### **VOLUME II**

#### **NEGLIGENCE (Continued)**

- 1500 Cause (2021)
- 1501 Cause: Normal Response (1998)
- 1505 Cause: Where Cause of Death is in Doubt (1998)
- 1506 Cause: Relation of a Medical Procedure to the Accident (1998)
- 1510 Negligent Infliction of Severe Emotional Distress (Bystander Claim) (2014)
- 1511 Personal Injuries: Negligent Infliction of Severe Emotional Distress  
(Separate or Direct Claim) (1/2024)

#### **Comparative Negligence**

- 1580 Comparative Negligence: Plaintiff and One or More Defendants (2011)
- 1582 Comparative Negligence: Adult and Child (1990)
- 1585 Comparative Negligence: Plaintiff-Guest and Host-Defendant Negligent (1992)
- 1590 Comparative Negligence: Plaintiff-Guest Passively Negligent; Host (Or Other  
Driver) Negligent (2003)
- 1591 Comparative Negligence: Guest Passively Negligent; Claims Against and  
Among Drivers; Apportionment from One Comparative Negligence  
Question (2015)
- 1592 Comparative Negligence: Guest Passively Negligent; Claims Against and  
Among Drivers; Apportionment of Comparative Negligence from Two  
Questions (2003)
- 1595 Comparative Negligence: Where Negligence or Cause Question Has Been  
Answered by Court (1990)

#### **Imputed Negligence**

- 1600 Servant: Driver of Automobile (Presumption from Ownership of Vehicle)  
(2003)
- 1605 Driver: Scope of Employment (2014)
- 1610 Joint Adventure (Enterprise): Automobile Cases (1990)

## WIS JI-CIVIL

### Damages

- 1700 Damages: General (2016)
- 1705 Damages: Burden of Proof in Tort Actions: Future Damages [Withdrawn 2001]
- 1707 Punitive Damages: Nonproducts Liability [For Actions Commenced Before May 17, 1995] (1996)
- 1707A Punitive Damages: Products Liability [For Actions Commenced Before May 17, 1995] (1996)
- 1707.1 Punitive Damages: Nonproducts Liability (2018)
- 1707.2 Punitive Damages: Products Liability (2008)
- 1708 Battery: Punitive Damages: Mitigation by Provocation [Withdrawn © 2010]
- 1710 Aggravation of Injury Because of Medical Negligence (2015)
- 1715 Aggravation of Pre-existing Injury (1990)
- 1720 Aggravation or Activation of Latent Disease or Condition (1992)
- 1722 Damages from Nonconcurrent or Successive Torts (1992)
- 1722A Damages from Nonconcurrent or Successive Torts (To be used where several tortfeasors are parties) (1996)
- 1723 Enhanced Injuries (2009)
- 1725 Further Injury in Subsequent Event (2003)
- 1730 Damages: Duty to Mitigate: Physical Injuries (2012)
- 1731 Damages: Duty to Mitigate: Negligence or Breach of Contract (2012)
- 1732 Damages: Duty to Mitigate: Intentional Tort (2012)
- 1735 Damages: Not Taxable as Income (1990)
- 1740 Damages: Common Scheme or Plan; Concerted Action (Wis. Stat. § 895.045(2)) (2009)
- 1741 Personal Injuries: Negligence in Informing the Patient (2015)
- 1742 Personal Injuries: Medical Care: Offsetting Benefit from Operation Against Damages for Negligence in Informing the Patient (2015)
- 1749 Personal Injuries: Conversion Table for 1998 Revision of Damage Instructions (1998)
- 1750.1 Personal Injuries: Subdivided Question as to Past and Future Damages (1998)
- 1750.2 Personal Injuries: Past and Future: One Verdict Question (Except Past Loss of Earnings and Past Medical Expenses) (1998)
- 1754 Personal Injury: One Subdivided Question as to Past Damages [Withdrawn © 1998]
- 1756 Personal Injuries: Past Health Care Expenses (2015)
- 1757 Personal Injuries: Past Health Care Expenses (Medical Negligence Cases) (Negligence of Long-Term Care Provider): Collateral Sources (2013)
- 1758 Personal Injuries: Future Health Care Expenses (2010)
- 1760 Personal Injuries: Past Loss of Earning Capacity (2016)



## WIS JI-CIVIL

- 1762 Personal Injuries: Future Loss of Earning Capacity (2022)
- 1766 Personal Injuries: Past Pain, Suffering, and Disability (Disfigurement) (2009)
- 1767 Personal Injuries: Future Pain, Suffering, and Disability (Disfigurement) (1999)
- 1768 Personal Injuries: Past and Future Pain, Suffering, and Disability  
(Disfigurement) (1998)
- 1770 Personal Injuries: Severe Emotional Distress (2006)
- 1780 Personal Injuries: Loss of Business Profits [Withdrawn 1998]
- 1785 Personal Injuries: Past Loss of Professional Earnings [Withdrawn 1998]
- 1788 Loss of Earnings: Delay in Obtaining Degree [Withdrawn 1999]
- 1795 Personal Injury: Life Expectancy and Mortality Tables (1992)
- 1796 Damages: Present Value of Future Losses (2003)
- 1797 Damages: Effects of Inflation (1993)
- 1800 Property: Loss of Use of Repairable Automobile (1997)
- 1801 Property: Loss of Use of Nonrepairable Automobile (1997)
- 1803 Property: Destruction of Property (2010)
- 1804 Property: Damage to Repairable Property (2010)
- 1805 Property: Damage to Nonrepairable Property (2010)
- 1806 Property: Damage to a Growing Crop (1997)
- 1810 Trespass: Nominal Damages (2013)
- 1812 Quantum Meruit: Measure of Services Rendered (1992)
- 1815 Injury to Spouse: Loss of Consortium (2012)
- 1816 Injury to Spouse: Past Loss of Earning Capacity: Household Services (1993)
- 1817 Injury to Spouse: Future Loss of Earning Capacity: Household Services (2001)
- 1820 Injury to Spouse: Nursing Services: Past and Future (1992)
- 1825 Injury to Wife: Medical and Hospital Expenses [Withdrawn 1995]
- 1830 Injury to Wife: Medical and Hospital Bills: Dispute over Ownership of Claim  
[Withdrawn 1995]
- 1835 Injury to Minor Child: Parent's Damages for Loss of Child's Earnings and  
Services: Past and Future (2001)
- 1837 Injury to Minor Child: Parent's Damages for Loss of Society and  
Companionship (2001)
- 1838 Injury to Parent: Minor Child's Damages for Loss of Society and  
Companionship (2001)
- 1840 Injury to Minor Child: Parents' Damages for Medical Expenses: Past and  
Future (1996)
- 1845 Injury to Child: Parents' Damages for Services Rendered to Child: Past and  
Future (1992)
- 1850 Estate's Recovery for Medical, Hospital, and Funeral Expenses (2016)
- 1855 Estate's Recovery for Pain and Suffering (2018)
- 1860 Death of Husband: Pecuniary Loss [Withdrawn 1992]

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 1861 Death of Spouse (Domestic Partner): Pecuniary Loss (2010)
- 1865 Death of Wife: Pecuniary Loss [Withdrawn 1992]
- 1870 Death of Spouse: Surviving Spouse's Loss of Society and Companionship (2019)
- 1875 Death of Spouse: Medical, Hospital, and Funeral Expenses (1992)
- 1880 Death of Parent: Pecuniary Loss (2016)
- 1885 Death of Adult Child: Pecuniary Loss (2001)
- 1890 Damages: Death of Minor Child: Premajority Pecuniary Loss (2001)
- 1892 Damages: Death of Minor Child: Postmajority Pecuniary Loss (2001)
- 1895 Death of Child: Parent's Loss of Society and Companionship (2019)
- 1897 Death of Parent: Child's Loss of Society and Companionship (2019)

### **Safe Place**

- 1900.2 Safe-Place Statute: Duty of Employer (1992)
- 1900.4 Safe-Place Statute: Injury to Frequenter: Negligence of Employer or Owner of a Place of Employment (2022)
- 1901 Safe-Place Statute: Definition of Frequenter (1996)
- 1902 Safe-Place Statute: Negligence of Plaintiff Frequenter (2004)
- 1904 Safe-Place Statute: Public Buildings: Negligence of Owner (1990)
- 1910 Safe-Place Statute: Place of Employment: Business (1990)
- 1911 Safe-Place Statute: Control (1992)

### **Nuisance**

- 1920 Nuisance: Law Note (2019)
- 1922 Private Nuisance: Negligent Conduct (2010)
- 1924 Private Nuisance: Abnormally Dangerous Activity: Strict Liability (2010)
- 1926 Private Nuisance: Intentional Conduct (2010)
- 1928 Public Nuisance: Negligent Conduct (2010)
- 1930 Public Nuisance: Abnormally Dangerous Activity: Strict Liability (2010)
- 1932 Public Nuisance: Intentional Conduct (2010)

## **INTENTIONAL TORTS**

### **Assault and Battery**

- 2000 Intentional Tort: Liability of Minor (2014)
- 2001 Intentional Versus Negligent Conduct (1995)
- 2004 Assault (2011)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2005 Battery (2011)
- 2005.5 Battery: Offensive Bodily Contact (2015)
- 2006 Battery: Self-Defense (2013)
- 2006.2 Battery: Self-Defense; Defendant's Dwelling, Motor Vehicle, Place of Business; Wis. Stat. § 895.62 (2016)
- 2006.5 Battery: Defense of Property (2013)
- 2007 Battery: Liability of an Aider and Abettor (2011)
- 2008 Battery: Excessive Force in Arrest (2002)
- 2010 Assault and Battery: Offensive Bodily Contact [Renumbered JI-Civil- 2005.5 2011]
- 2020 Sports Injury: Reckless or Intentional Misconduct (1/2023)

### **False Imprisonment**

- 2100 False Imprisonment: Definition (2014)
- 2110 False Imprisonment: Compensatory Damages (2014)
- 2115 False Arrest: Law Enforcement Officer; Without Warrant (1993)

### **Federal Civil Rights**

- 2150 Federal Civil Rights: §§ 1981 and 1982 Actions (1993)
- 2151 Federal Civil Rights: § 1983 Actions [Withdrawn 2014]
- 2155 Federal Civil Rights: Excessive Force in Arrest (in Maintaining Jail Security) [Withdrawn 2014]

### **Conversion**

- 2200 Conversion: Dispossession (2014)
- 2200.1 Conversion: Refusal to Return Upon Demand (Refusal by Bailee) (1993)
- 2200.2 Conversion: Destruction or Abuse of Property (1991)
- 2201 Conversion: Damages (2016)

### **Misrepresentation**

- 2400 Misrepresentation: Bases for Liability and Damages - Law Note for Trial Judges (1/2023)
- 2401 Misrepresentation: Intentional Deceit (1/2023)
- 2402 Misrepresentation: Strict Responsibility (1/2023)
- 2403 Misrepresentation: Negligence (1/2023)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2405 Intentional Misrepresentation: Measure of Damages in Actions Involving Sale [Exchange] of Property (Benefit of the Bargain) (2018)
- 2405.5 Strict Responsibility: Measure of Damages in Actions Involving Sale [Exchange] of Property (Benefit of the Bargain) (2018)
- 2406 Negligent Misrepresentation: Measure of Damages in Actions Involving Sale [Exchange] of Property (Out of Pocket Rule) (2014)
- 2418 Unfair Trade Practice: Untrue, Deceptive, or Misleading Representation: Wis. Stat. § 100.18(1) (2021)
- 2419 Property Loss Through Fraudulent Misrepresentation: Wis. Stat. § 895.446 (Based on Conduct (Fraud) Prohibited by Wis. Stat. § 943.20) (2018)
- 2420 Civil Theft: Wis. Stat. § 895.446 (Based on Conduct (Theft) Prohibited by Wis. Stat. § 943.20(1)(a)) (2019)

## **Defamation**

- 2500 Defamation - Law Note for Trial Judges (7/2024)
- 2501 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Private Individual, No Privilege (1/2023)
- 2505 Defamation: Truth as a Defense (Nonmedia Defendant) (1/2023)
- 2505A Defamation: Truth of Statement (First Amendment Cases) (1/2023)
- 2507 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Private Individual with Conditional Privilege (1/2024)
- 2509 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Media Defendant (Negligent Standard) (2003)
- 2510 Defamation: Truth as Defense Where Plaintiff Charged with Commission of a Crime [Withdrawn 1993]
- 2511 Defamation: Public Figure Versus Media Defendant or Private Figure with Constitutional Privilege (Actual Malice) (7/2024)
- 2512 Defamation: Truth as Defense Where Plaintiff Not Charged with Commission of a Crime [Withdrawn 1993]
- 2513 Defamation: Express Malice (1/2023)
- 2514 Defamation: Effect of Defamatory Statement or Publication [Withdrawn 1993]
- 2516 Defamation: Compensatory Damages (1991)
- 2517 Defamation: Conditional Privilege: Abuse of Privilege [Renumbered JI-Civil 2507 1993]
- 2517.5 Defamation: Public Official: Abuse of Privilege [Renumbered JI-Civil 2511 1993]
- 2518 Defamation: Express Malice [Renumbered JI-Civil 2513 1993]
- 2520 Defamation: Punitive Damages (2003)
- 2550 Invasion of Privacy (Publication of a Private Matter) Wis. Stat. § 995.50(2)(c) (1/2024)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2551 Invasion of Privacy: Highly Offensive Intrusion; Wis. Stat. § 995.50(2)(a) (1/2024)
- 2552 Invasion of Privacy: Publication of a Private Matter: Conditional Privilege (2003)

### **Misuse of Procedure**

- 2600 Malicious Prosecution: Instituting a Criminal Proceeding (2022)
- 2605 Malicious Prosecution: Instituting a Civil Proceeding (2022)
- 2610 Malicious Prosecution: Advice of Counsel: Affirmative Defense (Criminal Proceeding) (2015)
- 2611 Malicious Prosecution: Advice of Counsel: Affirmative Defense (Civil Proceeding) (2015)
- 2620 Abuse of Process (2013)

### **Trade Practices**

- 2720 Home Improvement Practices Act Violation; Wisconsin Administrative Code Chapter ATCP 110; Wis. Stat. § 100.20 (2013)
- 2722 Theft by Contractor (Wis. Stat. § 779.02(5)) (1/2023)

### **Domestic Relations**

- 2725 Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress (2020)

### **Business Relations**

- 2750 Employment Relations: Wrongful Discharge - Public Policy (7/2024)
- 2760 Bad Faith by Insurance Company (Excess Verdict Case) (2003)
- 2761 Bad Faith by Insurance Company: Assured's Claim (2012)
- 2762 Bad Faith by Insurance Company: Third Party Employee Claim Against Worker's Compensation Carrier [Withdrawn] (2009)
- 2769 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Existence of Dealership (2020)
- 2770 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Good Cause for Termination, Cancellation, Nonrenewal, Failure to Renew, or Substantial Change in Competitive Circumstances (Wis. Stat. § 135.03) (2022)
- 2771 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Adequate Notice by Grantor (Wis. Stat. § 135.04) (2005)
- 2772 Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law: Special Verdict (2005)
- 2780 Intentional Interference with Contractual Relationship (1/2024)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 2790 Trade Name Infringement (2022)
- 2791 Trade Name Infringement: Damages (2010)

### **Civil Conspiracy**

- 2800 Conspiracy: Defined (2018)
- 2802 Conspiracy: Proof of Membership (2003)
- 2804 Conspiracy: Indirect Proof (2003)
- 2806 Conspiracy to be Viewed as a Whole (1993)
- 2808 Conspiracy between Affiliated Corporations [Withdrawn 2009]
- 2810 Conspiracy: Overt Acts (2003)
- 2820 Injury to Business: (Wis. Stat. § 134.01) (2008)
- 2822 Restraint of Will (Wis. Stat. § 134.01) (2003)

### **Tort Immunity**

- 2900 Tort Immunity: Immunities Abrogated - Law Note for Trial Judges (1993)

## **CONTRACTS**

### **General**

- 3010 Agreement (2011)
- 3012 Offer: Making (1993)
- 3014 Offer: Acceptance (1993)
- 3016 Offer: Rejection (1993)
- 3018 Offer: Revocation (1993)
- 3020 Consideration (1993)
- 3022 Definiteness and Certainty (1993)
- 3024 Implied Contract: General (1993)
- 3026 Implied Contract: Promise to Pay Reasonable Value (1993)
- 3028 Contracts Implied in Law (Unjust Enrichment) (7/2023)
- 3030 Modification by Mutual Assent (1993)
- 3032 Modification by Conduct (1993)
- 3034 Novation (1993)
- 3040 Integration of Several Writings (1993)
- 3042 Partial Integration: Contract Partly Written, Partly Oral (1993)
- 3044 Implied Duty of Good Faith (Performance of Contract) (2007)
- 3045 Definitions – “Bona Fide” (1993)
- 3046 Implied Promise of No Hindrance (1993)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 3048 Time as an Element (2016)
- 3049 Duration (2016)
- 3050 Contracts: Subsequent Construction by Parties (1993)
- 3051 Contracts: Ambiguous Language (2012)
- 3052 Substantial Performance (1994)
- 3053 Breach of Contract (2007)
- 3054 Demand for Performance (2014)
- 3056 Sale of Goods: Delivery or Tender of Performance (1993)
- 3057 Waiver (2018)
- 3058 Waiver of Strict Performance (1993)
- 3060 Hindrance or Interference with Performance (1993)
- 3061 Impossibility: Original (1993)
- 3062 Impossibility: Supervening (1993)
- 3063 Impossibility: Partial (1993)
- 3064 Impossibility: Temporary (1993)
- 3065 Impossibility: Superior Authority (1993)
- 3066 Impossibility: Act of God (1993)
- 3067 Impossibility: Disability or Death of a Party (1993)
- 3068 Voidable Contracts: Duress, Fraud, Misrepresentation (2016)
- 3070 Frustration of Purpose (2020)
- 3072 Avoidance for Mutual Mistake of Fact (2014)
- 3074 Estoppel: Law Note for Trial Judges (2018)
- 3076 Contracts: Rescission for Nonperformance (2001)
- 3078 Abandonment: Mutual (1993)
- 3079 Termination of Easement by Abandonment (2022)
- 3082 Termination of Servant's Employment: Indefinite Duration (1993)
- 3083 Termination of Servant's Employment: Employer's Dissatisfaction (1993)
- 3084 Termination of Servant's Employment: Additional Consideration Provided by  
Employee (1993)

## **Real Estate**

- 3086 Real Estate Listing Contract: Validity: Performance (2019)
- 3088 Real Estate Listing Contract: Termination for Cause (1993)
- 3090 Real Estate Listing Contract: Broker's Commission on Sale Subsequent to  
Expiration of Contract Containing "Extension" Clause (1993)
- 3094 Residential Eviction: Possession of Premises (2020)
- 3095 Landlord - Tenant: Constructive Eviction (2013)

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**2500 DEFAMATION: LAW NOTE FOR TRIAL JUDGES****INTRODUCTION**

1. **Elements.** Under Wisconsin law, the three basic elements of a defamatory communication are:

- (1) the statement is false;
- (2) the statement is communicated by speech, by conduct, or in writing to a person other than the person defamed; and
- (3) the communication is unprivileged and tends to harm one's reputation so as to lower the person in the estimation of the community or to deter third persons from associating or dealing with the person.<sup>1</sup>

However, beyond these elements, additional constitutional requirements may apply based on the plaintiff's and defendant's status.

2. **Libel or Slander.** A defamation action can be founded upon either libel or slander.<sup>2</sup>

3. **Truth.** Substantial truth of the statement is an absolute defense to a defamation claim.<sup>3</sup> "By definition, a defamatory statement must be false."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the truth of a communication is an absolute defense to a defamation claim. Further, the communication need not "be true in every particular. All that is required is that the statement be substantially true."<sup>5</sup> It is the defendant's burden in these circumstances to establish that the statement was substantially true.<sup>6</sup>

4. **Publication.** Actionable defamation requires publication or communication. The required parts of this element are:

- (a) the words must be intentionally or negligently communicated to a person other than the person defamed, and
- (b) the communication must identify the person defamed expressly or by reasonable inference.<sup>7</sup>

5. **Opinion.** Defamatory communication must typically consist of a statement of fact,

as expressions of opinion generally cannot serve as the basis of a defamation action. However, where the defamer departs from expressing “pure opinion” and communicates what the courts have described as “mixed opinion,” then liability may result. In Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., 418 U.S. 323, 339 (1974), the Supreme Court stated that there can be no such thing as a “false idea.” “Mixed opinion” is a communication which blends an expression of opinion with a statement of fact. This type of a communication is actionable if it implies the assertion of undisclosed defamatory facts as the basis of the opinion.<sup>8</sup> Communications are not made non-defamatory as a matter of law merely because they are phrased as opinions, suspicions, or beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

6. **Privilege.** Some defamatory statements are protected by privileges created by common law, state and federal constitutions, or by statute. These privileges are discussed on pages 7 and 8 of this law note.

7. **Status.** In defamation cases, the degree of fault—actual malice or negligence—varies depending on the plaintiff’s status and whether they are a public figure or a private individual.<sup>10</sup> For public figures suing for defamation against a media defendant, the First Amendment is implicated and requires the plaintiff to prove actual malice on the defendant’s part to establish liability for the defamatory statement.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, a private individual suing for defamation only needs to show that the media defendant was negligent in publishing the defamatory falsehood to establish liability and receive actual damages.<sup>12</sup> However, if the private individual seeks to recover presumed or punitive damages, they must then prove actual malice.<sup>13</sup>

## KEY DEFINITIONS

1. **Defamatory.** Wisconsin has adopted the definition of “defamatory” stated in Restatement, Second, Torts § 559 (1977):

A communication is defamatory if it tends so to harm the reputation of another as to lower him in the estimation of the community or to deter third persons from associating or dealing with him. Restatement, 3 Torts, p. 156, sec. 559; Ranous v. Hughes, 30 Wis.2d 452, 460 (1966).

2. **Level of fault.** The status of the plaintiff as a public figure or public official is significant in determining the level of “fault” the plaintiff must show to recover. A public figure, either general purpose or limited purpose, suing a defendant protected by a conditional constitutional privilege must show actual malice instead of simple negligence.

3. **Implied Malice.** Wisconsin law applies a strict liability theory to the communication of a defamatory falsehood by a private defendant about a private plaintiff when there is no conditional privilege involved. The law implies “malice” in the communication and no showing of “malice” is required to recover compensatory damages.<sup>14</sup>

4. **Express Malice.** Express malice arises from ill will, bad intent, or malevolence towards the defamed party. Such malice exists when slanderous words are uttered or libelous words are published from motives of ill will, envy, spite, revenge, or other bad motives against the person defamed.<sup>15</sup> This type of malice is sometimes referred to as “common-law” malice. See page 4 for a discussion of the difference between actual and express malice.

5. **Actual Malice.** Actual malice exists when there is a statement made with knowledge that it is false or with reckless disregard of whether such statement is false or not.<sup>16</sup> The constitutional standard of actual malice is applicable to two broad categories of public individuals: public officials and public figures.<sup>17</sup> See page 4 for a discussion of the difference between actual and express malice.

6. **Public Official.** Per Wagner v Allen Media Broadcasting, 2024 WI App 9, 410 Wis.2d 666, 3 N.W.3d 758, according to Wisconsin case law, “the ‘public official’ designation ‘applies at the very least to those ... governmental employees who have, or appear to the public to have, substantial responsibility for or control over the conduct of governmental affairs.’”<sup>18</sup> This definition includes both elected officials and some officials who are not elected.<sup>19</sup> For an individual to be classified as a public official, their role must be of a nature that attracts public attention and debate about the person occupying it, independently of any scrutiny and discussion arising from specific allegations in question.<sup>20</sup>

In Rosenblatt v. Baer, 383 U.S. 75, the U.S. Supreme Court addressed, in a footnote, whether individuals who leave public office are still treated as public officials regarding defamatory statements about their actions while in office. The Court provided that such retired individuals could still be seen as public officials, emphasizing that their past actions in office continue to be of public interest and relevance despite no longer holding their positions.

However, in Lewis v. Coursolle Broad. of Wisconsin, Inc., 127 Wis. 2d 105, 377 N.W.2d 166, the Wisconsin Supreme Court ruled that a former state legislator, who had been out of office for three years, did not retain the status of a public official after retirement. Similarly, in Biskupic v. Cicero, 2008 WI App 117, ¶¶18-19, 313 Wis. 2d 225,

756 N.W.2d 649, the court of appeals determined that a former district attorney was no longer a “public official” following his term. Both cases established that individuals who are public officials while in office lose this designation for First Amendment purposes after they retire.<sup>21</sup>

Although Lewis and Biskupic appear to be inconsistent with Rosenblatt, the court of appeals is bound to follow them pursuant to Cook v. Cook, 208 Wis. 2d 166, 189, 560 N.W.2d 246 (1997) and Zarder v. Humana Ins. Co., 2010 WI 35, ¶¶53-58, 324 Wis. 2d 325, 782 N.W.2d 682.<sup>22</sup> This was affirmed in Wagner v Allen Media Broadcasting, 2024 WI App 9, ¶50, 410 Wis.2d 666, 3 N.W.3d 758.

7. **Public Figure.** “Public figures” are individuals who are not “public officials” but in whom the public has a justified and important interest for at least some purposes.<sup>23</sup> The court in Denny v. Mertz, 106 Wis.2d 636, 649-50, 318 N.W.2d 141 (1982) adopted the following test based on Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., *supra*, to determine whether an individual is a public figure:

Analyzing the above cases, we consider the following criteria applicable to whether a defamation plaintiff may be considered a public controversy. First, there must be a public controversy. While courts are not well-equipped to make this determination as pointed out in Gertz, the nature, impact, and interest in the controversy to which the communication relates has a bearing on whether a plaintiff is a public figure. Secondly, the court must look at the nature of the plaintiff’s involvement in the public controversy to see whether he has voluntarily injected himself into the controversy so as to influence the resolution of the issues involved. Factors, relevant to this test are whether the plaintiff’s status gives him access to the media so as to rebut the defamation and whether a plaintiff should be deemed to have “voluntarily exposed themselves to increased risk of injury from defamatory falsehood concerning them.” Gertz, 418 U.S. at 344-45.

An individual can be categorized as a public figure plaintiff either in a “general” sense or for “limited” specific contexts.<sup>24</sup>

A “general purpose public figure” refers to a widely recognized celebrity, a person whose name is familiar in many households and whose actions and opinions are closely followed by the public due to their perceived significance or influence.<sup>25</sup>

A “limited purpose public figure” refers to a person who, while not broadly famous or well-known, has become a public figure for a limited purpose due to their involvement in a particular public controversy.<sup>26</sup>

A person can become a public figure with respect to a limited public controversy either by voluntarily injecting themselves into it, or because their activities “almost inevitably” thrust them in a central role within that controversy.<sup>27</sup> A person can also become an involuntary public figure unintentionally, either due to bad luck or by being drawn into a public controversy.<sup>28</sup>

Whether an individual is a limited purpose public figure is a question of law.<sup>29</sup>

**Determining Limited Purpose Public Figure Status:** The question of whether a person is a limited purpose public figure is an issue left solely to the court to decide as a matter of law, not an issue of fact to be decided by the jury. Lewis v. Coursolle Broadcasting of Wisconsin, Inc., 127 Wis.2d 105, 110, 377 N.W.2d 166 (1985). The court of appeals has said, that while the ultimate question of whether a plaintiff is a limited purpose public figure is a question of law, material factual disputes on this issue can arise. These factual disputes are not to be left to the jury at trial but should be resolved by the trial court, after an evidentiary hearing solely on that issue. Bay View Packing Co. v. Taff, 198 Wis.2d 653, 543 N.W.2d 522 (Ct. App. 1995). See also Erdmann v. SF Broad. of Green Bay, Inc., 229 Wis. 2d at 165, 599 N.W.2d 1

In Denny v. Mertz, 106 Wis. 2d 636, 649-650, 318 N.W.2d 141, the Wisconsin Supreme Court established the following two-prong test to determine whether a plaintiff is a limited purpose public figure:

- (1) there must be a public controversy; and
- (2) the court must look at the nature of the plaintiff's involvement in the public controversy.”

Bay View Packing, supra, at 678 (citing Denny v. Mertz, 106 Wis. 2d 636, 649-50, 318 N.W.2d 141 (1982)).

In Wiegel, supra, the court of appeals expanded on Denny and provided the following three-step analysis to be used when considering the second prong of the test:

- (1) isolate the controversy at issue;
- (2) examine the plaintiff's role in the controversy to determine whether it is more than trivial or tangential; and
- (3) determine whether the alleged defamation was germane to the plaintiff's participation in the controversy.

Wiegel, *supra*, at 82-82.

The U.S. Supreme Court has recognized that “it may be possible for someone to become a public figure through no purposeful action of [their] own.” Gertz v. Robert Welch, 418 U.S. at 345, 94 S.Ct. 2997. Hypothetically, a person may become an involuntary public figure “without their consent or will, purely through bad luck, or by being drawn into public controversies.” Bay View Packing, *supra*, at 682-83.

8. **Media Defendant.** Although case law does not explicitly define “media defendant,” the Court in Denny v. Mertz, *supra*, did suggest that the term generally refers to any entity that publishes or broadcasts an allegedly defamatory statement.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note that the Wisconsin Supreme Court has not yet addressed whether the actual malice standard, applicable when the plaintiff is a public figure, also applies in situations where the defendant is not a media entity. However, the court of appeals in Sidoff v. Merry, 2023 WI App 49, 409 Wis. 2d 186, 203, 996 N.W.2d 88, considered the opinion in Underwager v. Salter, 22 F.3d 730, 732 (7th Cir. 1994) persuasive on the issue. In that particular case, the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals determined that, according to Wisconsin law, some non-media defendants are entitled to the same actual malice protection as media defendants.<sup>31</sup>

### TRIAL COURT’S INQUIRY ON WHETHER THE STATEMENT IS DEFAMATORY

The initial inquiry in a defamation action is usually whether the words at issue in the lawsuit are capable of a defamatory meaning. This inquiry is for the trial judge and is normally presented on a motion to dismiss. On a motion to dismiss, it is the function of the court to determine whether a communication is capable of a defamatory meaning. If the communication is capable of a defamatory as well as a nondefamatory meaning, then a jury question is presented. Only if the communication cannot reasonably be understood as defamatory should the motion be granted.<sup>32</sup> The question to the jury is whether the communication made was reasonably understood in a defamatory sense by the persons to whom it was published.<sup>33</sup>

The legal standard for determining whether a statement is capable of conveying a defamatory meaning is whether the language is reasonably capable of conveying a defamatory meaning to the ordinary mind and whether the meaning ascribed by the plaintiff is a natural and proper one.<sup>34</sup> In Frinzi v. Hanson, 30 Wis.2d 271, 276, 140 N.W.2d 259 (1966), the court said:

The words must be reasonably interpreted and must be construed in the plain and popular sense in which they would naturally be understood in the context in which they were used and under the circumstances they were uttered.

Thus, Wisconsin applies the “reasonable interpretation” test. The trier of fact should not give the statement a “strained” or “unstructured construction,” and the statement should be evaluated in context.<sup>35</sup> On a motion to dismiss, how does this “reasonable interpretation” standard relate to the requirement that complaints are to be liberally construed? Wis. Stat. § 802.03(6) governs pleadings in an action for libel or slander:

(6) **LIBEL OR SLANDER.** In an action for libel or slander, the particular words complained of shall be set forth in the complaint, but their publication and their application to the plaintiff may be stated generally.

### **MALICE IN DEFAMATION ACTIONS**

Wisconsin defamation law recognizes three types of malice: implied malice, actual malice, and express malice.

1. **Implied Malice.** The element of malice creates some confusion in analyzing the various types of defamation actions. As a general principle, Wisconsin tort law holds that malice is an element of actionable defamation.<sup>36</sup> However, the Supreme Court has implied the existence of such malice from the publication of a defamatory statement itself unless a conditional privilege applies.<sup>37</sup>

2. **Actual Malice and Express Malice.** In cases where a constitutional privilege is involved or where punitive damages are being sought, the difference between actual and express malice is important. The definitions of these two types of malice are contained in the following passage from Calero v. Del Chemical Corp., 68 Wis.2d 487, 499-500, 228 N.W.2d 737 (1975):

“Actual malice” in defamation cases refers to a constitutional standard that is something other than malice as such. As this court said in Polzin v. Helmbrecht (1972), 54 Wis.2d 578, 587, 588, 196 N.W.2d 685:

At the outset it is important to note that there are two types of malice: “Express malice” is that malice described in the jury instruction used in this case, that is “ill will, envy, spite, revenge,” etc.; the Supreme Court in Rosenbloom also referred to this type of malice as “common law malice.” “Actual malice” (referred to in the New York Times case) is not malice at all, rather it is knowledge that a statement

was false or published with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not. “Actual malice” is what is required for a constitutional determination of libel under New York Times.

“Express” and “actual” malice are very different concepts.

The term “actual malice” arises when there has been an abuse of a constitutional conditional privilege, *i.e.*, where one makes a defamatory statement “with knowledge that it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.”<sup>38</sup>

The problem of actual malice arises in the cases involving first amendment protections afforded to the media, such as newspapers, television and radio, or comments made about public officers or public figures.

### DEFENSES TO A DEFAMATION CLAIM

1. **Truth.** As stated earlier, the “substantial truth” of the alleged defamatory statement is an absolute defense to the claim.<sup>39</sup> In 1986, the United States Supreme Court held that a private-figure plaintiff who is suing a media defendant for publishing a defamatory statement of public concern cannot recover damages without showing that the statement at issue is false.<sup>40</sup> The holding in Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. appeared to be in contrast, at least in cases involving a media defendant, to Wisconsin common law which placed the burden of proving that the statement was true on the defendant as an affirmative defense.<sup>41</sup> The resulting uncertainty as to whether Denny v. Mertz applied to defamation actions involving non-media defendants was resolved in Laughland v. Beckett, 365 Wis. 2d 148, ¶¶23, 26 (Ct. App. 2015). There, the Court held that when the defendant is not a media defendant, it is the defendant’s burden to establish that the allegedly defamatory statement was substantially true.<sup>42</sup> Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. v. Hepps, *supra*, involved a constitutional conditional privilege.

2. **Privilege.** Wisconsin law recognizes certain privileges that protect the communicator of a defamatory statement from liability. These privileges have been created to allow citizens, public officials, and media personnel to engage in communications that are useful to society with some protection from liability for the consequences that result from the communications. The most litigated of these privileges involve conditional privileges.

a. Absolute privilege

This type of privilege protects participants in judicial and legislative proceedings.<sup>43</sup> As



a general rule, this privilege protects the communicator of the defamatory statement if the statement has some relation to the matter involved in the proceeding.

b. Conditional privileges created by common law

Wisconsin law recognizes that some communications are conditionally privileged. In Lathan v. Journal Co.,<sup>44</sup> the court stated:

There are also certain occasions where a defamation is conditionally privileged. Conditional privileges or immunities from liability for defamation are based on public policy which recognizes the social utility of encouraging the free flow of information in respect to certain occasions and persons, even at the risk of causing harm by the defamation.

At common law, a person is privileged to make a statement about another person even though it is defamatory, so long as he or she is making the statement to protect certain defined interests and he or she did not abuse the privilege.

The types of communications that are protected by a conditional privilege are those statements (1) to protect the communicator's interest; (2) to protect the interest of the recipient or a third person; (3) to protect a common interest or a family relationship; and (4) statements to a person who may act in the public interest.<sup>45</sup>

When the defamatory communication is privileged, the law will not imply or impute malice.<sup>46</sup> If the privilege is abused, the communicator of the defamatory statement is not protected. In earlier case law, the court had held that this type of privilege is "conditional" because the statement must be reasonably calculated to accomplish the privileged purpose and must be made without "malice."<sup>47</sup> Later, in Ranous v. Hughes, *supra*, the court recognized that the word "malice" expressed in the Hett decision was "probably unfortunate."<sup>48</sup> The court, instead of retaining the "malice" concept from Hett, adopted the Restatement approach which speaks in terms of "abuse of privilege." The court then recognized the five conditions contained in Restatement, Second, Torts which may constitute an abuse of the privilege: (1) because of the publisher's knowledge or reckless disregard as to the falsity of the defamatory matter (see §§ 600-602); (2) because the defamatory matter is published for some purpose other than that for which the particular privilege is given (see § 603); (3) because the publication is made to some person not reasonably believed to be necessary for the accomplishment of the purpose of the particular privilege (see § 604); (4) because the publication includes defamatory matter not reasonably believed to be necessary to accomplish the purpose for which the occasion is privileged (see § 605); or (5) the publication includes unprivileged matter as well as

privileged matter (see § 605A).

A finding of express malice, *i.e.*, ill will, spite, etc., will also constitute an abuse of the conditional privilege.<sup>49</sup>

Subsequent to the decision of the United States Supreme Court in Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., *supra*, the Restatement substituted a new test of abuse of privilege, namely: “actual knowledge of falsity or reckless disregard as to truth or falsity.”

C. Conditional privileges created by the United States Constitution

A constitutional conditional privilege refers to the protection afforded media sources (and also to nonmedia persons, where the statement involves a matter of a public interest or concern) under the first amendment. The principal case establishing this constitutional privilege is New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, *supra*. The effect of the constitutional conditional privilege is that the court will require some finding of “fault” on the part of the defendant instead of allowing the strict liability which exists at common law where malice is implied. The degree of “fault” required by this privilege depends on the nature of the plaintiff. Where the plaintiff is a private individual, only negligence by the defendant media source or individual is required to be shown. Denny v. Mertz, *supra*. However, where the plaintiff is a public official or public figure, a higher level of fault must be shown. In this type of case, the plaintiff must show that the defamatory statement was published with “actual malice,” *i.e.*, actual knowledge or with reckless disregard of whether the statement was true or false. In discussing the Gertz decision, the court, in Denny v. Mertz, explained the rationale in Gertz for permitting a less rigorous showing of “fault” when a private plaintiff was seeking recovery. The court, in Denny, *supra*, stated:

The [Gertz] court justified divergent standards for public figures and private individuals on the ground that public figures had greater access to the media and so could more effectively counteract defamations. It also reasoned that public figures had, by seeking prominent roles for themselves, assumed a risk of being libeled, which was not true of private individuals. 418 U.S. at 344.<sup>50</sup>

In Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., *supra*, the United States Supreme Court permitted the states to adopt the degree of protection to be afforded statements involving private persons so long as the states did not impose liability without fault. The Wisconsin Supreme Court, in response to Gertz, stated that in a defamation action involving a private plaintiff in a matter of private concern, the required showing of fault is simple negligence. Denny v. Mertz, *supra*.

#### D. Statutory privilege

Wisconsin statutes create an absolute privilege which protects persons reporting legislative, judicial, or other public official proceedings. Wis. Stat. § 895.05(1) states:

Damages in Actions For Libel. (1) The proprietor, publisher, editor, writer or reporter upon any newspaper published in this state shall not be liable in any civil action for libel for the publication of such newspaper of a true and fair report of any judicial, legislative or other public official proceeding authorized by law or of any public statement, speech, argument or debate in the course of such proceeding. This section shall not be construed to exempt any such proprietor, publisher, editor, writer or reporter from liability for any libelous matter contained in any headline or headings to any such report, or to libelous remarks or comments added or interpolated in any such report or made and published concerning the same, which remarks or comments were not uttered by the person libeled or spoken concerning him in the course of such proceeding by some other person.

### TYPES OF DEFAMATION ACTIONS

Generally, an action for defamation will fall into one of four categories according to the nature of the parties. At the end of this law note, there is a chart that compares the various types of defamation actions. These categories are:

- a. Private individual versus a private individual with no conditional privilege applicable.
- b. Private individual versus a private individual with a conditional nonconstitutional privilege applicable.
- c. Private individual versus a media defendant which will always involve a conditional constitutional privilege.
- d. Public official or public figure versus a media or nonmedia defendant which will always involve a conditional constitutional privilege.

In each of these categories, the requisite showing of “fault” is different.

1. When the action is brought by a private individual against another private individual, with no privilege involved, existence of malice is implied from the libelous matter itself.<sup>51</sup>

2. When the action is brought by a private individual against another private individual, with a conditional nonconstitutional privilege involved, liability can be established by proof of the defamatory statement<sup>52</sup>, and abuse of the conditional privilege.<sup>53</sup>
3. When the action is brought by a private individual against a media defendant, thereby involving a conditional constitutional privilege, liability is established by proof that the media defendant was negligent in broadcasting or publishing the defamatory statement.<sup>54</sup>
4. In a case involving a public official or public figure, as defined in Denny, against a media defendant or a nonmedia individual, thereby involving a conditional constitutional privilege, the plaintiff must prove actual malice.<sup>55</sup>

### **BURDEN OF PROOF TO ESTABLISH CAUSE OF ACTION**

1. In a case involving a private individual against another private individual, with no privilege involved, existence of malice is implied. The burden of proof of showing the defamatory statement was made is the ordinary burden.<sup>56</sup>
2. In the case involving a private individual versus a private individual, with a conditional nonconstitutional privilege involved, the plaintiff has the ordinary burden of proof to show the defamatory statement was made; i.e., greater weight of the credible evidence to a reasonable certainty.<sup>57</sup> The defendant has the ordinary burden to prove privilege as a defense to the action.<sup>58</sup>
3. In the case involving a private individual versus a media defendant, the plaintiff has the ordinary burden of proof; i.e., the greater weight of the credible evidence to a reasonable certainty. There is no Wisconsin case directly stating that the plaintiff has the ordinary burden of proof. However, the Gertz decision permits individual states to define for themselves the appropriate standard of liability in such cases. The court in Denny, supra<sup>59</sup>, established for Wisconsin that a private individual need only prove that a media defendant was negligent in broadcasting or publishing a defamatory statement. With negligence as the standard, the Committee concluded that ordinary burden of proof applies.
4. In cases involving a public official or a public figure versus a media defendant or private individual, the plaintiff has the middle burden of proof, i.e.; by evidence that is clear, satisfactory, and convincing to a reasonable certainty.<sup>60</sup>

### RECOVERY OF COMPENSATORY DAMAGES

It is not necessary in libel actions to plead or prove actual damages of a pecuniary nature, called special damages.<sup>61</sup> If the writing alleged to be libelous is determined by the court to be capable of a defamatory meaning, an allegation of general damages is sufficient. Slandorous statements may, in certain instances, be classified as defamatory and slanderous *per se*, and, in such instances, the plaintiff may plead and recover general damages.<sup>62</sup> Oral statements imputing certain crimes, a loathsome disease, or affecting the plaintiff in his business, trade, profession, or office, or of unchastity to a woman are actionable without proof of special damages. All other slander not falling into these seemingly artificial categories is not actionable without alleging and proving special damages.<sup>63</sup>

In Denny v. Mertz, *supra*, the court stated that items of damage recoverable in libel and slander actions in Wisconsin are set forth in Wis JI-Civil 2516.

The burden of proof is the ordinary civil burden.

### RECOVERY OF PUNITIVE DAMAGES

In cases involving a private individual against a private individual, whether or not a conditional unconstitutional privilege is involved, the plaintiff must establish express malice to recover punitive damages.<sup>64</sup> In cases involving a private individual against a media defendant, the plaintiff must prove actual malice to recover punitive damages.<sup>65</sup>

In cases involving a public official or public figure against a media defendant or nonmedia individual, the plaintiff can only recover punitive damages upon a showing of express malice.

It should finally be noted that in a case such as this where the New York Times standards apply and where punitive damages are sought, there must be a finding of both express and actual malice to support an award of punitive damages: “Express malice” to meet the criteria for awarding punitive damages and “actual malice” to meet the constitutional requirements for liability at all.<sup>66</sup>

The decision in Wangen v. Ford Motor Co., 97 Wis.2d 260, 300, 294 N.W.2d 437 (1980), establishes the standard for the required degree of proof to be applied to punitive damage claims. In Wangen, the court held that the middle burden of proof shall apply to punitive damage claims. Therefore, the plaintiff must establish its punitive damage claims to a reasonable certainty by evidence that is clear, satisfactory, and convincing. This burden of proof applies to all types of defamatory actions, whether involving conditional privileges

or not.

### **TYPES OF DEFAMATION ACTIONS - CHART**

The following page compares the different types of defamation actions as to elements and burdens of proof.

### **DEFAMATION SERIES**

The following list shows the instructions on substantive law and damages included in this defamation series.

- 2501 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Private Individual, No Privilege
- 2505 Defamation: Truth as a Defense (Nonmedia Defendant)
- 2505A Defamation: Truth of Statement (First Amendment Cases)
- 2507 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Private Individual with Conditional Privilege
- 2509 Defamation: Private Individual Versus Media Defendant (Negligent Standard)
- 2511 Defamation: Public Figure Versus Media Defendant or Private Figure with Constitutional Privilege (Actual Malice)
- 2513 Defamation: Express Malice
- 2516 Defamation: Compensatory Damages
- 2517.5 Defamation: Public Official: Abuse of Privilege
- 2520 Defamation: Punitive Damages

## TYPES OF DEFAMATION ACTIONS IN WISCONSIN

Type of Plaintiff	Type of Defendant	Degree of "Fault" Necessary for Compensatory Damages	Burden of Proof for Compensatory Damages	Conduct Necessary for Punitive Damages	Burden of Proof for Punitive Damages
Private individual	Private with no confidential privilege	Defamatory statement only (malice is implied or imputed)	Ordinary <u>Calero v. Del Chemical</u> 68 Wis.2d 487, 500	Express malice <u>Dalton v. Meister</u> 52 Wis.2d 173, 179, <u>Calero, supra</u> at 506	Middle - <u>Wangen v. Ford Motor Co.</u> , 97 Wis.2d 260, 300
Private individual	Private with nonconstitutional conditional privilege	Defamatory statement and abuse of privilege <u>Ranous v. Hughes</u> , 30 Wis.2d 452, 468	Ordinary, <u>Calero, supra</u> at 500	Express malice <u>Calero, supra</u> at 506	Middle - <u>Wangen v. Ford Motor Co.</u> , 97 Wis.2d 260, 300
Private individual	Media defendant or private indiv. in matter of public concern with constitutional privilege - <u>Dalton</u> , p. 183	Negligence <u>Gertz v. Robert Welsh, Inc.</u> , 418 U.S. 323, 347, held that states establish the standard of liability; <u>Denny v. Mertz</u> , 106 Wis.2d 636, 654 established the negligence standard	Ordinary	Actual malice <u>Denny, supra</u> at 659 <u>Gertz, supra</u> at 350	Middle - <u>Wangen, supra</u> at 300
Public figure	Media defendant or private indiv. in matter of public concern with constitutional privilege - <u>Dalton, supra</u> at 183	Actual malice <u>New York Times v. Sullivan</u> , 376 U.S. 254, 279-280 <u>Calero, supra</u> at 500 <u>Polzin v. Helmbrecht</u> , 54 Wis.2d 578, 587-588	Middle <u>Calero, supra</u> at 500	Express malice <u>Polzin, supra</u> at 588	Middle - <u>Wangen, supra</u> at 300

## NOTES

1. See Donohoo v. Action Wisconsin Inc., 2008 WI 56, ¶37, 309 Wis. 2d 704, 750 N.W.2d 739. In Sidoff v. Merry, 2023 WI App 49, 409 Wis. 2d 186, 996 N.W.2d 88, the court observed in a footnote that the Wisconsin Supreme Court acknowledged a shift in the Court of Appeals' approach to the elements of defamation. While earlier opinions referenced four elements following the Restatement (Second) of Torts § 558 (1981), since 2008, the Court of Appeals has consistently adhered to the three elements outlined in Donohoo.

2. See Martin v. Outboard Marine Corp., 15 Wis.2d 452, 113 N.W.2d 135 (1962).

3. See Schaefer v. State Bar of Wis., 77 Wis.2d 120, 252 N.W.2d 343 (1977). See also DeMiceli v. Klieger, 58 Wis.2d 359, 363, 206 N.W.2d 184 (1973).

4. Anderson v. Hebert, 2011 WI App 56, ¶14, 332 Wis. 2d 432, 798 N.W.2d 275.

5. Anderson, *supra*.

6. Laughland v. Beckett, 2015 WI App 70, 365 Wis. 2d 148, ¶¶23, 26, 870 N.W.2d 466.

7. See Ranous v. Hughes, 30 Wis.2d 452, 461 62, 141 N.W.2d 251 (1966). See also Schoenfeld v. Journal Co., 204 Wis. 132, 235 N.W. 442 (1931); Wis. Stat. § 802.03(6); and Restatement, Second, Torts § 577 (1977).

In Wagner v. Allen Media Broadcasting, 2024 WI App 9, 410 Wis.2d 666, ¶33, 3 N.W.3d 758(2024), the court noted the following:

Our case law provides that, for a statement to be defamatory, it must “refer to some ascertained or ascertainable person, and that person must be the plaintiff.” Arnold v. Ingram, 151 Wis. 438, 452, 138 N.W. 111 (1912) (citation omitted); see also Luthey v. Kronschnabl, 239 Wis. 375, 379, 1 N.W.2d 799 (1942). “If the words used really contain no reflection on any particular individual, no averment or innuendo can make them defamatory.” Arnold, 151 Wis. at 452, 138 N.W. 111. This concept is sometimes referred to as “ascertainment.” See Giwoosky v. Journal Co., 71 Wis. 2d 1, 10 & n.9, 237 N.W.2d 36 (1976).

8. Restatement, Second, Torts § 566 (1977).

9. See, Converters Equip. Corp. v. Condes Corp., 80 Wis.2d 257, 263-64, 258 N.W.2d 712 (1977). See also Laughland v. Beckett, 2015 WI App 70, *supra*.

10. Sidoff v. Merry, 2023 WI App 49, ¶14, 409 Wis. 2d 186, 996 N.W.2d 88. See also Torgerson v. Journal/Sentinel, Inc., 210 Wis. 2d 524, 535, 563 N.W.2d 472 (1997).

11. Sidoff, *supra*, at ¶14. See also New York Times Co., *supra*, at 279-80.

12. Denny v. Mertz, 106 Wis.2d 637, 654, 318 N.W.2d 141 (1982).

13. Denny, *supra*, at 639.

14. Denny, *supra*, at 657.

15. See Polzin v. Helmbrecht, 54 Wis.2d 578, 587, 196 N.W.2d 685 (1972).

16. See New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254, 84 S.Ct. 710 (1964); Polzin, *supra*, at 587-88.

17. See Lewis v. Coursolle Broad. of Wisconsin, Inc., 127 Wis. 2d 105, 114, 377 N.W.2d 166 (1985).



18. Wagner v. Allen Media Broadcasting, 2024 WI App 9, ¶51, 410 Wis.2d 666, 3 N.W.3d 758, citing Pronger v. O'Dell, 127 Wis. 2d 292, 295, 379 N.W.2d 330 (Ct. App. 1985).

19. Miller v. Minority Broth. of Fire Prot., 158 Wis. 2d 589, 599, 463 N.W.2d 690 (Ct. App. 1990).

20. Rosenblatt v. Baer, 383 U.S. 75, 87, 86 S.Ct. 669.

21. Following its decision that Lewis, due to his retirement, was no longer a public official, the Wisconsin Supreme Court further concluded that he was a general purpose public figure. This determination was based on the recognition that his actions while in office had brought him widespread fame and notoriety, thus requiring him to allege actual malice in his case. Lewis v. Coursolle Broad. of Wisconsin, Inc., 127 Wis. 2d 105, 115-16, 377 N.W.2d 166 (1985). Adopting a similar stance, the court in Biskupic determined that the plaintiff had achieved the status of a general purpose public figure. This was due to his controversial actions while in office, which continued to be a topic of active public discussion, thus obliging him to allege actual malice in his claim. Biskupic v. Cicero, 2008 WI App 117, ¶¶24-26, 313 Wis. 2d 225, 756 N.W.2d 649.

22. Pursuant to Cook v. Cook, 208 Wis. 2d 166, 189, 560 N.W.2d 246 (1997) and Zarder v. Humana Ins. Co., 2010 WI 35, ¶¶53-58, 324 Wis. 2d 325, 782 N.W.2d 682.22, the court of appeals cannot dismiss a statement in a prior Wisconsin Supreme Court opinion as dictum. See also Wagner v. Allen Media Broadcasting, 2024 WI App 9, ¶50, 410 Wis.2d 666, 3 N.W.3d 758.

23. See Biskupic, *supra*, at ¶15, and Lewis, *supra*, at 113.

24. Sidoff, *supra*, at ¶15.

25. Wiegel v. Capital Times Co., 145 Wis. 2d 71, 82, 426 N.W.2d 43 (Ct. App. 1988).

26. Sidoff, *supra*, at ¶16. See also Wiegel, *supra*, at 82; Bay View Packing Co. v. Taff, 198 Wis. 2d 653, 676, 543 N.W.2d 522 (Ct. App. 1995), and Erdmann v. SF Broad. of Green Bay, Inc., 229 Wis. 2d 156, 165, 599 N.W.2d 1 (Ct. App. 1999).

27. Sidoff, *supra*, at ¶16 (citing Weigel, *supra*, at 85-86, and Erdmann, *supra*, at 164).

28. Bay View Packing, *supra*, at 682-83.

29. Sidoff, *supra*, at ¶19.

30. Denny, *supra*, at 660. The Court explained that the constitutional actual malice standard properly applies when “[a] defamation ... is published or broadcast” because it “gets infinitely greater circulation and can do the defamed person much greater harm.”

31. Underwager v. Salter, 22 F.3d 730, 732 (7th Cir. 1994).

32. Starobin v. Northridge Lakes, 91 Wis.2d 1, 287 N.W.2d 747 (1980). See also Denny, *supra*; Westby v. Madison Newspapers, Inc., 81 Wis.2d 1, 5, 259 N.W.2d 691 (1977); Schaefer, *supra*; DiMiceli,

supra; Polzin, supra; and Lathan v. Journal Co., 30 Wis.2d 146, 140 N.W.2d 417 (1966).

33. Schaefer, supra, at 124-25.
34. Meier v. Meurer, 8 Wis.2d 24, 29, 98 N.W.2d 411 (1959).
35. Schaefer, supra.
36. Denny, supra, at 657.
37. Polzin v. Helmbrecht, supra. See also Denny, supra, at 657.
38. New York Times Co., supra, at 279.
39. Schaefer v. State Bar of Wis., supra.
40. Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. v. Hepps, 475 U.S. 767 (1986).
41. Denny, supra, at 661.
42. Laughland v. Beckett, 365 Wis. 2d 148, ¶¶23, 26 (Ct. App. 2015).
43. Spoehr v. Mittlestadt, 34 Wis.2d 653, 150 N.W.2d 502 (1967); Hartman v. Buerger, 71 Wis.2d 393, 398 400, 238 N.W.2d 505 (1976); Restatement, Second, Torts §§ 583 92 (1977).
44. Lathan v. Journal Co., supra, at 152.
45. Restatement, Second, Torts §§ 594 98 (1977).
46. Hett v. Ploetz, 20 Wis.2d 55, 121 N.W.2d 270 (1963).
47. Hett v. Ploetz, supra.
48. Ranous v. Hughes, supra, at 468.
49. Calero, supra; Polzin, supra, at 584; Ranous, supra, at 469; Restatement, Second, Torts § 603 Comment a (1977).
50. Denny, supra, at 645.
51. Denny, supra, at 657.
52. Calero v. Del Chemical Corp., supra, at 500.
53. Ranous, supra, at 468.
54. Denny, supra, at 654.

55. New York Times Co., supra, at 726; Calero, supra, at 500; Polzin, supra, at 586; see also Dalton v. Meister, 52 Wis.2d 173, 188 N.W.2d 494 (1971).
56. Denny, supra, at 657.
57. Calero, supra, at 500.
58. Calero, supra, at 499.
59. Denny, supra, at 654.
60. Polzin, supra, at 586; Calero, supra, at 500.
61. Dalton, supra; Lawrence v. Jewell Companies, Inc., 53 Wis.2d 656, 193 N.W.2d 695 (1972).
62. Starobin v. Northridge Lakes Co., supra.
63. Martin v. Outboard Marine Corp., supra.
64. Calero, supra, at 506; Dalton, supra, at 179.
65. Gertz, supra; Denny, supra, at 659.
66. Polzin, supra, at 588.

#### COMMENT

This law note was approved in 1987 and revised in 2016 and 2022. The format was revised in 2002. This revision, approved by the Committee in May 2024, expanded on the designations of “public official,” “public figure,” and “media defendant.”

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**2511 DEFAMATION: PUBLIC FIGURE VERSUS MEDIA DEFENDANT OR PRIVATE FIGURE WITH CONSTITUTIONAL PRIVILEGE (ACTUAL MALICE)**

(As to question 1, give the definition of “Defamation” from Wis JI-Civil 2501.)

Because of protections afforded a defendant such as (defendant) under the First Amendment of the Constitution, (plaintiff) must prove that any defamatory statements made (published) by (defendant) were made (published) with actual malice.

Your answers to questions 2 and 3 of the verdict will determine whether (defendant) acted with actual malice in making (publishing) the alleged defamatory statements.

A person acts with actual malice when such person (makes) (publishes) a defamatory statement knowing that the statement is false<sup>1</sup> or with reckless disregard of whether it is false or not.<sup>2</sup> If you find that the statement was substantially true, then the statement is not false. Slight inaccuracies of expression do not mean that the statement is false if it is true in substance.

To find that (defendant) acted with reckless disregard of the truth or falsity of the statement, you must determine that (defendant) had serious doubts as to the truth of the statement or had a high degree of awareness that the statement was probably false.<sup>3</sup>

Reckless conduct is not measured by whether a reasonably prudent person would have made (published) the statement or would have investigated the facts more thoroughly before making (publishing) it.<sup>4</sup> It is not enough to show that (defendant) made (published) the statement from feelings of ill will or a desire to injure (plaintiff).<sup>5</sup> There must be

sufficient evidence to permit the conclusion that (defendant) in fact entertained serious doubts as to the truth of the statement made (published). Making (publishing) a statement with such doubts shows reckless disregard for truth or falsity and demonstrates actual malice.<sup>6</sup>

In the course of your deliberations, you need not accept as conclusive (defendant)'s testimony that (he) (she) believed the statement to be true or had no serious doubt as to the truth of the statement. You may consider such factors as whether there were obvious reasons for (defendant) to doubt the veracity of (his) (her) information or whether the statement is so inherently improbable that only a reckless person would have made (published) it.<sup>7</sup>

(Plaintiff) has the burden of proof to convince you by evidence that is clear, satisfactory, and convincing, to a reasonable certainty, that (defendant) made (published) the statement knowing it was false or with reckless disregard of whether it was false or not.<sup>8</sup>

(As to question 4, the damage question, give Wis JI-Civil 2516.)

(As to question 5, express malice, give Wis JI-Civil 2513.)

(As to question 6, punitive damages, give Wis JI-Civil 2520.)

(As to questions 4, 5, and 6, give Wis JI-Civil 205.)

**SPECIAL VERDICT**

Question 1: Was the statement made (published) by (defendant) (insert statement, e.g., that John Jones took a bribe) defamatory?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

Question 2: If you answered “yes” to question 1, answer this question:  
Did (defendant) make (publish) such a statement knowing that it was false?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

Question 3: If you answered “no” to question 2, answer this question:  
Did (defendant) make (publish) such a statement with reckless disregard of its truth or falsity?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

Question 4: If you answered “yes” to either of questions 2 or 3, answer this question:

What sum of money will fairly and reasonably compensate (plaintiff) because of such a defamatory statement?

Answer: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Question 5: If you answered “yes” to either of questions 2 or 3, answer this question:

Did (defendant) act with express malice in making (publishing) such a statement?

Answer: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

Question 6: If you answered “yes” to question 5, answer this question:



What sum of money, if any, do you assess against (defendant) for punitive damages?

Answer: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

#### NOTES

1. “By definition, a defamatory statement must be false.” Anderson v. Hebert, 2011 WI App 56, ¶14, 332 Wis. 2d 432, 798 N.W.2d 275. Therefore, the truth of a communication is an absolute defense to a defamation claim. Id. Further, the communication need not “be true in every particular. All that is required is that the statement be substantially true.” Id. It is the defendant’s burden in these circumstances to establish that the statement was substantially true. See, e.g., Laughland v. Beckett, 2015 WI App 70, 365 Wis. 2d 148, ¶¶23, 26, 870 N.W.2d 466.

2. The term “actual malice” was defined in New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 376 U.S. 254 (1964), and cited by Wisconsin in Polzin v. Helmbrecht, 54 Wis.2d 578 (1972), and Calero v. Del Chemical Corp., 68 Wis.2d 487 (1975). See also Wis JI-Civil 2500, Law Note.

3. Restatement, Second, Torts § 580A, Comment d (1977); Garrison v. State of Louisiana, 379 U.S. 64 (1964).

4. Restatement, Second, Torts § 580A, Comment d (1977); St. Amant v. Thompson, 390 U.S. 727 (1968).

5. Restatement, Second, Torts § 580A, Comment d (1977).

6. St. Amant, 88 S. Ct. 1325.

7. St. Amant, 88 S. Ct. 1326.

8. Calero, supra note 1, at 500.

#### COMMENT

This instruction and comment were approved in 1986. Nonsubstantive editorial changes were made to the instruction in 1993. The comment was updated in 1997. This instruction was revised in 2002 to conform the language regarding the burden of proof to the Committee’s 2002 revisions to Wis. JI-Civil 200 and 205, the instructions on the civil burdens of proof. See Wis. JI-Civil 200, Comment. The instruction was also

revised in 2022. This revision, approved by the Committee in May 2024, amended the comment to direct users to Wis JI-Civil 2500, Defamation - Law Note for Trial Judges, for guidance on “public figures.”

For detailed guidelines on determining who is a “public figure” plaintiff, either for “general” or “limited” purposes in defamation cases, refer to Wis JI-Civil 2500 Defamation - Law Note for Trial Judges.

There is an obvious problem of proof when the case is based upon reckless disregard of whether the defamatory statement is false or not. This problem was recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court in St. Amant v. Thompson, 390 U.S. 727, 88 St. Ct. 1323 (1968):

“Reckless disregard,” it is true, cannot be fully encompassed in one infallible definition. Inevitably its outer limits will be marked out through case-by-case adjudication, as is true with so many legal standards for judging concrete cases, whether the standard is provided by the Constitution, statutes or case law. 88 S. Ct. 1325.

**2750 EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS: WRONGFUL DISCHARGE — PUBLIC POLICY**

In Wisconsin, an employer may discharge an employee for good reason, for no reason, or even for a reason that is morally wrong without committing a legal wrong. An exception to this rule is [where the termination of the employee's job violates] [where the employee is discharged for refusing an employer's command to do something that would itself violate] a well-established and important public policy. Public policy in Wisconsin prohibits the firing of an employee for (insert policy).

(Plaintiff) claims that (he) (she) was fired from (his) (her) job by (defendant) because (give public policy being violated, e.g., (he) (she) refused to commit perjury). If you find that (defendant) fired (plaintiff) for that reason, then (plaintiff) was wrongfully discharged.

A discharge is not wrongful merely because it is retaliatory, unreasonable, or motivated by bad faith or malice. Further, a discharge is not wrongful merely because the discharged employee's conduct was praiseworthy or because the public may have derived some benefit from it.

**SPECIAL VERDICT**

Was (plaintiff) wrongfully discharged from (his) (her) employment by (defendant)?

ANSWER: \_\_\_\_\_

Yes or No

**COMMENT**

This instruction was approved in 1985 and revised in 1991 and 1995. The comment was updated in 1986, 1987, 1995, 1998, 2018, and 2020. This revision was approved by the Committee in January 2024; it added to and amended the comment.

Brockmeyer v. Dun & Bradstreet, 113 Wis.2d 561, 335 N.W.2d 834 (1983); Ferraro v. Koelsch, 124 Wis.2d 154, 368 N.W.2d 666 (1985); Scarpace v. Sears, Roebuck & Co., 113 Wis.2d 608, 335 N.W.2d 844 (1983); Yanta v. Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc., 66 Wis.2d 53, 244 N.W.2d 389 (1974). See also Schultz v. Industrial Coils, Inc., 125 Wis.2d 520, 373 N.W.2d 74 (Ct. App. 1985). A claim for wrongful discharge based on public policy may be grounded upon an administrative rule. Winkelman v. Beloit Memorial Hosp., 168 Wis.2d 12, 483 N.W.2d 211 (1992).

**Employment-at-Will Doctrine.** In Brockmeyer, the court expressly refused to require good faith in the termination of employment contracts. However, the court did recognize the “public policy exception” to the employment-at-will doctrine. The court stated that the public policy claimed by the plaintiff must be evidenced by a constitutional or statutory provision. The other two exceptions to employment-at-will are (1) where an employment contract specifies a period of employment and (2) where a statutory provision governs the employment agreement. The court in Brockmeyer v. Dun & Bradstreet, 113 Wis.2d 561, provided the following non-exclusive list of various Wisconsin statutory provisions prohibiting the discharge of an employee for certain reasons:

Statutory modification of the at will doctrine can be found in a variety of federal and state laws prohibiting certain forms of discrimination. Both Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 6 and Wisconsin’s Fair Employment Act, secs. 111.31-111.395, Stats., make it unlawful for an employer to discharge an employee because of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. 7 Similarly, the National Labor Relations Act 8 and the Wisconsin Employment Peace Act, sec. 111.06(1) (c)1, prevent discharges for union activities. Other forms of discriminatory discharges have also been prohibited by the legislature.

Id., at 567-568. See also, n.9.

In Wandry v. Bull’s Eye Credit Union, 129 Wis.2d 37, 384 N.W.2d 325 (1986), the court concluded that Wis. Stat. § 103.455 articulates a “fundamental and well-defined public policy” within the public policy exception to the employment-at-will doctrine. This statute proscribes economic coercion by an employer upon an employee to bear the burden of a work-related loss when the employee has no opportunity to show that the loss was not caused by the employee’s carelessness, negligence, or willful misconduct. Wandry, supra at 47.

In Hausman v. St. Croix Care Center, 214 Wis.2d 654, 571 N.W.2d 393 (1997), the Supreme Court examined the employment-at-will doctrine, surveyed the breadth of the narrow public policy exception to the doctrine, and determined whether the case fell within its requirements. In its decision, the court rejected the plaintiffs’ claims that the facts as alleged fit within the existing public policy exception and declined to adopt a broad whistle-blower exception. However, the court recognized that the plaintiff’s compliance with an affirmative legal duty requiring them to take action to prevent abuse or neglect of nursing home residents comports with a well-defined public policy and the rationale of the court’s public policy exception to the

employment-at-will doctrine.

The plaintiff-employee bears the burden of proving that the dismissal violates a clear mandate of public policy. Kempfer v. Automated Finishing, Inc., 211 Wis.2d 100, 564 N.W.2d 692 (1997). In Kempfer, the court said that if a public policy is not contained in a statutory, constitutional, or administrative provision, it cannot fall under the public policy exception to the employment-at-will doctrine. However, just because a public policy is evidenced by a statutory, constitutional, or administrative provision does not mean that it falls under the exception. 211 Wis.2d at 112. The public policy must still be found to be fundamental and well defined. In Kempfer, the court noted that an administrative rule is less likely to satisfy the fundamental and well defined requirements than a statutory provision and that a statutory provision is less likely to rise to the level of fundamental and well defined than a constitutional provision. In Kempfer, the Supreme Court made clear that the Wisconsin public policy exception to the employment-at-will doctrine is very narrow. It only provides that an employee may not be discharged for refusing a command to violate a fundamental and well-defined public policy that is evidenced by a constitutional, statutory, or administrative provision. With the exception of such a public policy, an employer may discharge an employee at will for any reason or for no reason.

**Procedure.** In Brockmeyer, the court explained the format for wrongful discharge litigation. The threshold determination of whether the public policy asserted by the plaintiff is a well-defined and fundamental one is an issue of law and is to be made by the trial court. Brockmeyer v. Dun & Bradstreet, supra at 574. At trial, the plaintiff must then “demonstrate” to the jury that “the conduct that caused the discharge was consistent with a clear and compelling public policy.” The decision in Brockmeyer, supra at 574, suggests by way of dicta that an employer must then produce evidence to prove that the dismissal was for “just cause.” See also Winkelman, supra at 24. The Committee is of the opinion that “just cause” need not be proved but only that the discharge was for a reason other than a violation of a clear and compelling public policy.

**Remedies.** In Brockmeyer v. Dun & Bradstreet, supra, the court determined that a wrongful discharge claim is a contract action. It specifically rejected tort remedies, including punitive damages. Instead, it stated, at 113 Wis.2d at 575:

We believe that reinstatement and back pay are the most appropriate remedies for public policy exception wrongful discharges since the primary concern in these actions is to make the wronged employee “whole.”

The court, in Brockmeyer, also held that where the legislature has created a statutory remedy for a wrongful discharge, that remedy is exclusive. 113 Wis.2d at 576 n.17.

**Effect of Employee Handbooks.** Representations in an employee’s handbook may limit the power of an employer to terminate an employment relationship that would otherwise be terminable at will. Ferraro v. Koelsch, supra. A handbook may convert the employment relationship into one that can only be terminated by adherence to contractual terms.

**Attorney’s Fee.** Attorney’s fees are not available in a common law wrongful discharge cause of action. Winkelman v. Beloit Memorial Hosp., supra.

**Intentional disability discrimination.** An employer engages in employment discrimination if it terminates a person from employment “because of any basis enumerated in s. 111.321.” Wis. Stat.

§ 111.322(1). Two methods of determining whether an employer intentionally terminated employment “because of” disability are available. The first method asks whether the employer held “actual discriminatory animus against an employee because that employee was an individual with a disability[.]” Maeder v. Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, ERD Case No. CR200501824 (LIRC June 28, 2013). The alternative method, known as the “inference method,” finds intent to discriminate when an employer bases its adverse action on “a problem with that employee’s behavior or performance which is caused by the employee’s disability.” See Id. A violation of Wis. Stat. § 111.322(1) cannot be found to have occurred under the inference method of proving intentional discrimination unless the employee proves the employer knew that a disability caused the conduct on which the adverse employment decision was made and that the employer had this knowledge at the time it made the decision. Wisconsin Bell, Inc. v. Labor & Indus. Review Comm’n, 2018 WI 76, 382 Wis.2d 624, 657, 914 N.W.2d 1 (2018).

**Probationary Employees:** For decisions discussing the applicability of procedural guarantees outlined in sec. 62.13(5) as they pertain to probationary employees, see Kaiser v. Board of Police & Fire Commissioners of Wauwatosa, 104 Wis.2d 498, 311 N.W.2d 646 (1981); and State v. City of Prescott, 390 Wis.2d 378, 938 N.W.2d 602, 2020 WI App 3.



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# WISCONSIN JURY INSTRUCTIONS

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## CIVIL

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## VOLUME III

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Wisconsin Civil Jury  
Instructions Committee

- 7/2024 Supplement (Release No. 57)

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# **WIS JI-CIVIL**

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

---

### **VOLUME III**

#### **CONTRACTS (Continued)**

##### **Insurance**

- 3100 Insurance Contract: Misrepresentation or Breach of Affirmative Warranty by the Insured (1998)
- 3105 Insurance Contract: Failure of Condition or Breach of Promissory Warranty (1994)
- 3110 Insurance Contract: Definition of “Resident” or “Member of a Household” (2022)
- 3112 Owner’s Permission for Use of Automobile (1993)
- 3115 Failure of Insured to Cooperate (2016)
- 3116 Failure to Cooperate: Materiality (2016)
- 3117 Failure to Give Notice to Insurer (1994)
- 3118 Failure to Give Notice to Insurer: Materiality (2002)

##### **Breach of Warranty**

- 3200 Products Liability: Law Note (2021)
- 3201 Implied Warranty: Merchantability Defined (2009)
- 3202 Implied Warranty: Fitness for Particular Purpose (1994)
- 3203 Implied Warranty: By Reason of Course of Dealing or Usage of Trade (1994)
- 3204 Implied Warranty: Sale of Food (1994)
- 3205 Implied Warranty: Exclusion or Modification (2009)
- 3206 Implied Warranty: Exclusion by Reason of Course of Dealing or Usage of Trade (1994)
- 3207 Implied Warranty: Use of Product after the Defect Known (2009)
- 3208 Implied Warranty: Failure to Examine Product (2009)
- 3209 Implied Warranty: Susceptibility or Allergy of User (2009)
- 3210 Implied Warranty: Improper Use (1994)
- 3211 Implied Warranty: Notice of Breach (1993)
- 3220 Express Warranty: General (1994)
- 3222 Express Warranty: No Duty of Inspection (1994)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 3225 Express Warranty: Statement of Opinion (1994)
- 3230 Express Warranty under the Uniform Commercial Code (1994)

### **Duties of Manufacturers and Sellers**

- 3240 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (2007)
- 3242 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (Supplier) to Warn (2020)
- 3244 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (Seller) to Give Adequate Instructions as to Use of a Complicated Machine (Product) (1994)
- 3246 Negligence: Duty of Manufacturer (Seller) Who Undertakes to Give Instruction as to the Use of a Machine (Product) (1994)
- 3248 Negligence: Duty of Restaurant Operator in Sale of Food Containing Harmful Natural Ingredients (1994)
- 3250 Negligence: Duty of Seller: Installing (Servicing) Product (1994)
- 3254 Duty of Buyer or Consumer: Contributory Negligence (2015)
- 3260 Strict Liability: Duty of Manufacturer to Ultimate User (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3260.1 Product Liability: Wis. Stat. § 895.047 (For Actions Commenced after January 31, 2011) (1/2024)
- 3262 Strict Liability: Duty of Manufacturer (Supplier) to Warn (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3264 Strict Liability: Definition of Business (1994)
- 3268 Strict Liability: Contributory Negligence (2015)
- 3290 Strict Products Liability: Special Verdict (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3290.1 Product Liability: Wis. Stat. § 895.047: Verdict (For Actions Commenced after January 31, 2011) (2014)
- 3294 Risk Contribution: Negligence: Verdict (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3295 Risk Contribution: Negligence Claim (For Actions Commenced Before February 1, 2011) (2014)
- 3296 Risk Contribution: Negligence: Verdict (Wis. Stat. § 895.046) (For Actions Commenced after January 31, 2011) (2014)

### **Lemon Law**

- 3300 Lemon Law Claim: Special Verdict (2016)
- 3301 Lemon Law Claim: Nonconformity (2001)
- 3302 Lemon Law Claim: Four Attempts to Repair: Same Nonconformity (1999)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 3303 Lemon Law Claim: Out of Service Warranty Nonconformity (Warranty on or after March 1, 2014) (2016)
- 3304 Lemon Law Claim: Failure to Repair (Relating to Special Verdict Question 6) (2006)
- 3310 Magnuson–Moss Claim (2020)

### **Damages**

- 3700 Damages: Building Contracts: Measure of Damages (2012)
- 3710 Consequential Damages for Breach of Contract (2018)
- 3720 Damages: Incidental (1994)
- 3725 Damages: Future Profits (2008)
- 3735 Damages: Loss of Expectation (1994)
- 3740 Damages: Termination of Real Estate Listing Contract (Exclusive) by Seller; Broker's Recovery (1994)
- 3750 Damages: Breach of Contract by Purchaser (1994)
- 3755 Damages: Breach of Contract by Seller (1994)
- 3760 Damages: Attorney Fees (1994)

## **AGENCY; EMPLOYMENT; BUSINESS ORGANIZATION**

- 4000 Agency: Definition (2019)
- 4001 General Agent: Definition (1994)
- 4002 Special Agent: Definition (1994)
- 4005 Agency: Apparent Authority (1994)
- 4010 Agency: Implied Authority (1994)
- 4015 Agency: Ratification (1994)
- 4020 Agent's Duties Owed to Principal (1994)
- 4025 Agency: Without Compensation (2005)
- 4027 Agency: Termination: General (1994)
- 4028 Agency: Termination: Notice to Third Parties (1994)
- 4030 Servant: Definition (2015)
- 4035 Servant: Scope of Employment (2020)
- 4040 Servant: Scope of Employment; Going to and from Place of Employment (2014)
- 4045 Servant: Scope of Employment While Traveling (2020)
- 4050 Servant: Master's Ratification of Wrongful Acts Done Outside Scope of Employment (1994)
- 4055 Servant: Vicarious Liability of Employer (2005)
- 4060 Independent Contractor: Definition (2005)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

4080 Partnership (2009)

### **PERSONS**

- 5001 Paternity: Child of Unmarried Woman (2021)
- 7030 Child in Need of Protection or Services [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7039 Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights: Child in Need of Protection or Services: Preliminary Instruction [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7040 Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights: Continuing Need of Protection or Services [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7042 Involuntary Termination of Parental Rights: Abandonment under Wis. Stat. § 48.415(1)(a) 2 or 3 [Withdrawn 2014]
- 7050 Involuntary Commitment: Mentally Ill (2022)
- 7050A 7050A Involuntary Commitment: Mentally Ill: Recommitment Alleging Wis. Stat. § 51.20(1)(am) (1/2023)
- 7054 Petition for Guardianship of the Person: Incompetency; Wis. Stat. § 54.10(3)(a)2 (2019)
- 7055 Petition for Guardianship of the Estate: Incompetency; Wis. Stat. § 54.10(3)(a)3 (2009)
- 7056 Petition for Guardianship of the Estate: Spendthrift; Wis. Stat. § 54.10(2) (2009)
- 7060 Petition for Guardianship of Incompetent Person and Application for Protective Placement; Wis. Stat. § 54.10 and 55.08(1) (2019)
- 7061 Petition for Guardianship of Incompetent Person and Application for Protective Services; Wis. Stat. § 54.10 and 55.08(2) (2014)
- 7070 Involuntary Commitment: Habitual Lack of Self-Control as to the Use of Alcohol Beverages (2003)

### **PROPERTY**

#### **General**

- 8012 Trespasser: Definition (2013)
- 8015 Consent of Possessor to Another's Being on Premises (2013)
- 8017 Duty of Hotelkeeper to Furnish Reasonably Safe Premises and Furniture for Guests (Renumbered JI-Civil 8051) (1994)
- 8020 Duty of Owner or Possessor of Real Property to Nontrespasser User (2020)
- 8025 Trespass: Owner's Duty to Trespasser; Duty to Child Trespasser (Attractive Nuisance) (2022)
- 8026 Trespass: Special Verdict (2016)
- 8027 Trespass: Child Trespasser (Attractive Nuisance): Special Verdict (2013)

## **WIS JI-CIVIL**

- 8030 Duty of Owner of a Building Abutting on a Public Highway (2006)
- 8035 Highway or Sidewalk Defect or Insufficiency (2021)
- 8040 Duty of Owner of Place of Amusement: Common Law (1994)
- 8045 Duty of a Proprietor of a Place of Business to Protect a Patron from Injury  
Caused by Act of Third Person (2012)
- 8050 Duty of Hotel Innkeeper: Providing Security (1994)
- 8051 Duty of Hotelkeeper to Furnish Reasonably Safe Premises and Furniture for  
Guests (2020)
- 8060 Adverse Possession Not Founded on Written Instrument (Wis. Stat. § 893.25)  
(7/2023)
- 8065 Prescriptive Rights by User: Domestic Corporation, Cooperative Association, or  
Cooperative (Wis. Stat. § 893.28(2)) (1/2023)

## **Eminent Domain**

- 8100 Eminent Domain: Fair Market Value (Total Taking) (1/2023)
- 8101 Eminent Domain: Fair Market Value (Partial Taking) (2012)
- 8102 Eminent Domain: Severance Damages (2008)
- 8103 Eminent Domain: Severance Damages: Cost-To-Cure (2007)
- 8104 Eminent Domain: Unity of Use - Two or More Parcels (2007)
- 8105 Eminent Domain: Lands Containing Marketable Materials (2008)
- 8107 Eminent Domain: Severance Damages; Unity of Use (Renumbered JI-Civil  
8104) (2008)
- 8110 Eminent Domain: Change in Grade (2022)
- 8111 Eminent Domain: Access Rights (1/2023)
- 8112 Eminent Domain: Air Rights (1/2024)
- 8115 Eminent Domain: Special Benefits (2008)
- 8120 Eminent Domain: Comparable Sales Approach (2022)
- 8125 Eminent Domain: Inconvenience to Landowner [Withdrawn 2008]
- 8130 Eminent Domain: Income Approach (2008)
- 8135 Eminent Domain: Cost Approach (2008)
- 8140 Eminent Domain: Legal Nonconforming Use, Lot or Structure (Definitions)  
(2007)
- 8145 Eminent Domain: Assemblage (2007)

**Table of Cases Cited (7/2024)**

**Index (7/2024)**

**[ This page is intentionally left blank ]**

## WIS JI-CIVIL

### TABLE OF CASES CITED

118<sup>th</sup> Street Kenosha, LLC v. Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation, 8100, 8111  
260 North 12<sup>th</sup> Street, LLC v. State of Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation, 8100, 8101  
1325 N. Van Buren, LLC v. T-3 Grp., Ltd., 2400

#### A

A. E. Inv. Corp. v. Link Builders, Inc., 1005, 1022.4, 8020  
A.G. v. Travelers Ins. Co., 3110  
Abbott v. Truck Ins. Exch. Co., 1000, 1280  
ABC Outdoor Advertising, Inc. v. Dolhun's Marine, Inc., 3030  
Abdella v. Catlin, 2800  
Ackley v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1105A  
Acme Equip. Corp. v. Montgomery Coop. Creamery Ass'n, 3220, 3230  
Adams v. Maxcy, 2200  
Affett v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transport. Corp., 1796  
Affiliated F. M. Ins. Co. v. Constitution Reinsurance Corp., 3051  
Afflerbaugh v. Geo. Grede & Bro., 1025.7  
Ahola v. Sincock, 1023, 1145  
Aicher v. Wis. Patients Comp. Fund, 1023, 1870, 1895, 1897  
Aikens v. Wisconsin, 2820  
Albert v. Waelti, 1023.14  
Alden v. Matz, 1133, 1132  
Allen v. Bonnar, 1760  
Allen v. Chicago N.W. Ry., 1803, 8100  
Allen v. Ross, 3117  
Allen v. Wisconsin Public Service Corp., 950  
Allen & O'Hara v. Barrett Wreckers, Inc., 2820  
Allie v. Russo, 8060  
Allis-Chalmers Mfg. Co. v. Eagle Motor Lines, 1026.5  
Alpirn v. Williams Steel & Supply Co., 3056  
Alsteen v. Gehl, 1511, 2725  
Alsum v. WISDOT, 8102, 8103, 8120, 8130, 8135  
Alt v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 2760  
Alvarado v. Sersch, 1005  
Alwin v. State Farm Fire and Casualty Co., 1390  
American Family Mut. Ins. Co. v. Dobrzynski, 215  
American Family Mut. Ins. Co. v. Golke, 400  
American Family Mut. Ins. Co. v. Osusky, 3112  
American Family Mut. Ins. Co. v. Shannon, 152  
American Fidelity & Casualty Co. v. Travelers Indem. Co., 1350  
American Ins. Co. v. Rural Mut. Casualty Ins. Co, 3117  
American Nat'l Red Cross v. Banks, 1025.5  
American States S. Co. v. Milwaukee N. R. Co., 8100, 8120  
American Steam Laundry Co. v. Riverside Printing Co., 3725  
American Tobacco Co. v. United States, 2802, 2804  
Andersen v. Andersen, 260  
Anderson v. Alfa-Laval Agri, Inc., 3240  
Anderson v. Anderson, 4080  
Anderson v. Continental Ins. Co., 1707, 2725, 2761, 3044  
Anderson v. Eggert, 260  
Anderson v. Hebert, 2500, 2501, 2505A, 2507, 2511, 2513

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Anderson v. Seelow, 100  
Anderson v. Stricker, 1144, 1210  
Anderson v. Tri-State Home Improvement Co., 2400, 2405, 2405.5  
Anderson v. Yellow Cab Co., 1025  
Andraski v. Gormley, 1125  
Anello v. Savignac, 2000  
Ansani v. Cascade Mountain, Inc., 1393  
Ansul v. Employers Ins. Co. of Wausau, 3116  
Antoniewicz v. Reszczynski, 1901, 8012, 8015, 8020, 8025  
Antwaun A. v. Heritage Mut. Ins. Co., 1005, 1009  
Apex Hosiery Co. v. Leader, 2800  
Appleton Chinese Food v. Murken Ins., 1023.6  
Appleton Elec. Co. v. Rogers, 3063  
Appleton State Bank v. Lee, 3048, 3076  
Arbet v. Gussarson, 1500  
Arents v. ANR Pipeline Company, 8100, 8101, 8102, 8103  
Arjay Investment Co. v. Kohlmetz, 3028  
Arledge v. Scherer Freight Lines, 1026  
Armstrong v. Milwaukee Ins. Co., 1390, 1391  
Arndt Brothers Minkery v. Medford Fur Foods, 3200  
Arnold v. National Bank of Waupaca, 2400  
Arnold v. Shawano County Agricultural Soc’y, 1815  
Arsand v. City of Franklin, 1600, 4000, 4030, 4060  
Ashley v. American Auto Ins. Co., 1090, 1758, 1760  
Atlee v. Bartholomew, 3020  
Attoe v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 3057  
Augsburger v. Homestead Mutual Ins. Co., 1390, 1391  
Augustine v. Anti-Defamation League B’nai B’rith, 2780, 2800  
Ault v. International Harvester Co., 358  
Auric v. Continental Cas. Co., 1023.5  
Austin v. Ford Motor Co., 1277  
Autumn Grove Joint Venture v. Rachlin, 3044  
Ayala v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1500

### B

Bach v. Liberty Mut. Fire Ins. Co., 1610, 1760  
Bachand v. Connecticut Gen. Life Ins. Co., 2520, 2722  
Bachman v. Salzer, 2401  
Backus v. Waukesha County, 8100, 8111  
Bade v. Badger Mut. Ins. Co., 3057, 3074  
Badger Cab Co. v. Soule, 2620  
Badger Furniture Co. v. Industrial Comm’n, 4030, 4060  
Bagnowski v. Preway, Inc., 1022.4  
Baier v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1157  
Baierl v. Hinshaw, 1001  
Bailey v. Bach, 100, 1285  
Bailey v. Hagen, 1310  
Bailey v. Hovde, 205, 3040  
Baird v. Cornelius, 1046  
Baker v. Herman Mut. Ins. Co., 1075  
Baker v. Northwestern Nat’l Casualty, 2760, 2770, 3725  
Balas v. St. Sebastian’s Congregation, 1900.4  
Baldewein Co. v. Tri-Clover, Inc., 2769  
Ballard v. Lumbermen’s Mut. Casualty Co., 410, 1760, 1815  
Bank of Calif., v. Hoffmann, 4020  
Bank of Sheboygan v. Fessler, 3040



## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Bank of Sun Prairie v. Esser, 2401, 3068  
Bank of Sun Prairie v. Opstein, 3057  
Bankert v. Threshermen's Mut. Ins. Co., 1013, 1014  
Bannach v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1350  
Barker Barrel Co. v. Fisher, 1310  
Barlow v. DeVilbiss Co., 3200  
Barnard v. Cohen, 2520, 2722  
Barnes v. Lozoff, 1022.4, 1812  
Barney v. Mickelson, 1023  
Barr v. Granahan, 3020  
Barragar v. Industrial Comm'n, 1605, 4045  
Barry v. Employers Mut. Casualty Co., 1022.6, 1900.4  
Bartelt v. Smith, 4080  
Barth v. Downey Co., 1022.2  
Barthel v. Wisconsin Elec. Power Co., 1901  
Basche v. Vanden Heuvel, 1725  
Battice v. Michaelis, 1191  
Bauer v. Wisconsin Energy Corp., 8065  
Bay View Packing Co. v. Taff, 2511, 2500  
Beacon Fed. Sav. & Loan Ass'n v. Panoramic Enter., Inc., 3020  
Becker v. Barnes, 315  
Beer v. Strauf, 1105  
Beers v. Bayliner Marine Corp., 400  
Behringer v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1735  
Bekkedal v. City of Viroqua, 1  
Bell v. County of Milwaukee, 1838  
Bell v. Duesing, 1012, 1582  
Belling v. Harn, 3110  
Bellrichard v. Chicago & N. W. Ry., 1336, 1405, 1408, 1409  
Below v. Norton, 2400, 2418, 2419  
Bembister v. Aero Auto Parts, 1336  
Benke v. Mukwonago Mut. Ins. Co., 2761  
Benkoski v. Flood, 2418, 2720  
Bensend v. Harper, 180  
Bentley v. Foyas, 2401, 2402  
Bentzler v. Braun, 1114, 1277, 1300  
Bergevin v. Chippewa Falls, 1900.4  
Bergman v. Hupy, 2507  
Berner Cheese Corp. v. Krug, 1707.1  
Bernhagen v. Marathon Fin. Corp., 4028  
Betchkal v. Willis, 1005, 1009, 1350  
Betehia v. Cape Cod Corp., 3200, 3204, 3248  
Beul v. ASSE International, Inc., 2005.5  
Beuttler v. Marquardt Management Services Inc., 2400, 2401, 2402, 2403  
Bey v. Transport Indem. Co., 1065  
Beyak v. North Central Food Systems, Inc., 8045  
Bielski v. Schulze, 1006, 1383  
Biersach v. Wolf River Paper & Fiber Co., 1580, 1585, 1590  
Bigelow v. West Wis. Ry. Co., 8102, 8103, 8105  
Binsfeld v. Curran, 1045  
Bird v. Kleiner, 2400  
Biskupic v. Cicero, 2500  
Bishop-Babcock Co. v. Keeley, 3034  
Black v. General Elec. Co., 260  
Blahnik v. Dax, 100  
Blair v. Staats, 1582  
Blaisdell v. Allstate Ins. Co., 1766

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Blankavag v. Badger Box & Lumber Co., 405  
Bleyer v. Gross, 1758  
Bloom v. Krueger, 4040  
Bloomer v. Bloomer, 1796  
BMW of North Am., Inc., v. Gore, 1707.1, 1707.2  
Bockemuhl v. Jordan, 4020  
Bode v. Buchman, 410  
Boelter v. Ross Lumber Co., 1705  
Bohn v. Leiber, 3079  
Bohn Mfg. Co. v. Reif, 3034  
Bohnsack v. Huson-Ziegler Co., Inc., 1605  
Boles v. Milwaukee County, 1880  
Bolick v. Gallagher, 1722A  
Booth v. Frankenstein, 410, 1135, 1140  
Borello v. United States Oil Co., 950  
Borg v. Downing, 3220  
Boschek v. Great Lakes Mut. Ins. Co., 3116  
Bourassa v. Gateway Erectors, Inc., 1051, 1767, 1768, 1796  
Bourestom v. Bourestom, 1112  
Bovi v. Mellor, 1144  
Bowen v. American Family Ins. Co., 1897  
Bowen v. Industrial Comm'n, 410  
Bowen v. Lumbermens Mut. Casualty Co., 1510, 1511, 1770, 1855  
Bowers v. Treuthardt, 1065, 1325, 1610  
Boynton Cab Co. v. ILHR Dep't, 1025  
Bradford v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 1025  
Bradley v. Harper, 1025.5  
Brain v. Mann, 1760  
Brandenburg v. Briarwood Forestry Services, LLC, 1022.6  
Bratt v. Peterson, 3074  
Braun v. Wisconsin Elec. Power Co., 8102, 8103, 8105  
Brekken v. Knopf, 2005.5  
Brest v. Maenat Realty, 3040  
Brethorst v. Allstate, 2761  
Breunig v. American Family Ins. Co., 1021, 1021.2  
Brew City Redevelopment Group v. The Ferchill Group, 2808, 2820  
Brice v. Milwaukee Auto Ins. Co., 1010, 1582  
Bridgeport Mortgage & Realty Corp. v. Whitlock, 3045  
Bridgkort Racquet Club v. University Bank, 1796  
Briese v. Maechtle, 1010  
Briggs v. Miller, 3010, 3020  
Bright v. City of Superior, 4015  
Bristol v. Eckhardt, 2605  
Britz v. American Ins. Co., 3117  
Broadbent v. Hegge, 3057  
Brockmeyer v. Dun & Bradstreet, 2750  
Brodis v. Hayes, 1022.6, 4060  
Brons v. Bischoff, 1900.4  
Brooks v. Hayes, 1022.6, 4060  
Brooten v. Hickok Rehab. Servs., LLC, 2020  
Brown v. Dibbell, 1023.4  
Brown v. Maxey, 1707, 1707.1, 3051  
Brown v. Milwaukee Terminal Ry. Co., 1920, 1922, 1928  
Brown v. Muskego Norway School Dist. Group Health Plan, 4035, 4045  
Brown v. Oneida Knitting Mills, Inc., 3082  
Brown v. Travelers Indem. Co., 1055, 1501  
Brown v. Wisconsin Natural Gas Co., 1002, 1003

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Browne v. State, 2115  
Brownsell v. Klawitter, 2600, 2620  
Brueggeman v. Continental Casualty Co., 1910  
Brunette v. Slezewski, 1806  
Brunke v. Popp, 1006  
Bruner v. Heritage Co., 2200, 2800  
Brunner v. Van Hoof, 1145  
Brusa v. Mercy Health Sys., Inc., 1023  
Bruss v. Milwaukee Sporting Goods Co., 3250  
Bruttig v. Olsen, 1013, 1014  
Bryan v. Noble, 3072  
Buchberger v. Mosser, 3115  
Buchholz v. Rosenberg, 3700  
Buckett v. Jante, 3028  
Buckman v. E. H. Schaefer & Assoc., Inc., 3086  
Buckner v. General Casualty Co., 3115  
Bump v. Voights, 1885  
Bunbury v. Krauss, 3074  
Bunkfeldt v. Country Mut. Ins. Co., 1140  
Burant v. Ortloff, 1045  
Burch v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 1021  
Burg v. Cincinnati Cas. Ins. Co., 1120  
Burke v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Co., 1005, 1009  
Burke v. Tesmer, 1165  
Burkhalter v. Hartford Accident & Indem. Ins. Co., 1155, 1157  
Burkhardt v. Smith, 8060  
Burkman v. New Lisbon, 3079  
Burmeister Woodwork Co. v. Friedel, 2722  
Burnside v. Evangelical Deaconess Hosp., 1024  
Bursack v. Davis, 2100  
Burton v. Sherwin-Williams Co., 3295  
Burzlaff v. Thoroughbred Motorsports, Inc., 3303  
Bushweiler v. Polk County Bank, 1025.5, 1025.7  
Buss v. Clements, 3117, 3118  
Butler v. Industrial Comm'n, 4045  
Butts v. Ward, 1320  
Butzow v. Wausau Memorial Hosp., 1710, 1722A, 1723  
Buxbaum v. G. H. P. Cigar Co., 3725  
Buza v. Wojtalewicz, 8060  
Bychinski v. Sentry Ins., 1796, 1797  
Byerly v. Thorpe, 1052  
Byrnes v. Metz, 1731

### C

Calaway v. Brown County, 8101, 8120  
Calero v. Del Chemical, 2500, 2501, 2511, 2513, 2520, 2552  
Calhoun v. Lasinski, 1000  
Calhoun v. Western Casualty & Sur. Co., 3117  
California Wine Ass'n v. Wisconsin Liquor Co. of Oshkosh, 3024, 3049, 3083, 3084  
Callan v. Peters Constr. Co., 1056, 1901, 1904  
Callies v. Reliance Laundry Co., 1835  
Calumet Cheese Co. v. Chas. Pfizer & Co., 3200  
Cameron v. Union Auto Ins. Co., 1895  
Camp v. Anderson, 1511  
Campbell v. Spaeth, 1032  
Campenni v. Walrath, 1390

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Camper Corral v. Alderman, 1023.6  
Canifax v. Hercules Powder Co., 3200  
Converters Equip. Corp. v. Condes Corp., 2500  
Capello v. Janeczko, 410, 1052, 1054  
Capital Sand & Gravel Co. v. Waffan Schmidt, 305  
Capital Investments, Inc. v. Whitehall Packing Co. Inc., 3049, 3051  
Carazalla v. State, 8110, 8125  
Carl v. Spickler Ent. Ltd, 3302  
Carlson v. Drews of Hales Corners, Inc., 1760, 1902  
Carlson & Erickson v. Lampert Yards, 205  
Carr v. Amusement, Inc., 410, 1900.4  
Carson v. Beloit, 1023, 1385  
Carson v. Pape, 2115  
Cary v. Klabunde, 1315  
Casper v. American International South Ins. Co., 1005  
Cass v. Haskins, 3016  
Cedarburg Light & Water Comm'n v. Allis-Chalmers, 3240  
Central Corp. v. Research Products Corp., 2769  
Century Fence Company v. American Sewer Services, Inc., 2722  
Champion Companies v. Stafford Development, 3700  
Chandelle Enters., LLC v. XLNT Dairy Farm, Inc., 8060  
Chapleau v. Manhattan Oil Co., 1804, 1805  
Chapman v. Zakzaska, 2400  
Chapnitsky v. McClone, 1506  
Charolais Breeding Ranches, Ltd. v. FPC Securities Corp., 2780  
Charolais v. FPC Securities, 2780  
Chart v. General Motors Corp., 325, 358  
Chernetski v. American Family Mutual Insurance Co., 1153, 1555, 1157, 1558, 1159, 1160, 1165, 1170, 1175, 1180, 1185, 1190, 1190.5, 1191, 1193.5, 1195, 1205, 1210, 1220, 1225, 1230, 1235, 1240, 1245, 1250, 1255, 1260, 1270  
Chicago & N.W. R. Co. v. James, 4015  
Chicago & N.W. Ry. v. Railroad Comm'n of Wisconsin, 1412  
Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pac. R.R. Co. v. Chicago & N.W. Transp. Co., 3070  
Chille v. Howell, 1153  
Chmill v. Friendly Ford-Mercury, 3301, 3302  
Christ v. Exxon Mobil Corp., 950  
Christians v. Homestake Enter., Ltd., 1011, 8025, 8027  
Christianson v. Downs, 1023  
Christus Lutheran Church of Appleton v. Wisconsin Dept. of Transportation, 8100  
Chrysler Corp. v. Lakeshore Commercial Fin. Corp., 2780  
Chudnow Constr. Corp. v. Commercial Discount Corp., 3020  
Cierzan v. Kriegal, 3110  
Cincoski v. Rogers, 1870  
Cirillo v. Milwaukee, 1381  
City of Franklin v. Badger Ford Truck Sales, 3290  
City of Hartford v. Godfrey, 1220, 1225  
City of Milwaukee v. Allied Smelt Corp., 410  
City of Milwaukee v. NL Industries, Inc., 1920, 2800  
City of Milwaukee v. Roadster LLC, 8104  
City of Milwaukee Post No. 2874 VFW v. Redevelopment Authority, 8100  
City of Stoughton v. Thomasson Lumber Co., 400  
Clark v. Corby, 1901  
Clark v. Leisure Vehicles, Inc., 1500  
Clarmar Realty Company, Inc. v. Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee, 8100, 8101, 8145  
Claypool v. Levin, 950  
Cluskey v. Thranow, 2401  
Coakley v. Prentiss-Wabers Stove Co., 3254  
Cobb v. Simon, 2100

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Cochran v. Allyn, 1600  
Coenen v. Van Handel, 215, 1280  
Cogger v. Trudell, 1861  
Cohan v. Associated Fur Farms, Inc., 3200  
Cohen v. Lachenmaier, 3020  
Cole v. Schaub, 1756  
Coleman v. Garrison, 1742  
Colla v. Mandella, 1145  
Collier v. State, 215  
Collins v. Eli Lilly Co., 1707, 3295  
Collova v. Mutual Serv. Casualty Ins. Co., 1730  
Colton v. Foulkes, 1022.4  
Commerce Ins. Co. v. Merrill Gas Co., 1002, 1145  
Commonwealth Tel. Co. v. Paley, 4005  
Concrete Equip. Co. v. Smith Contract Co., Inc., 3207  
Coney v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 410  
Congreve v. Smith, 1920  
Connar v. West Shore Equip. of Milwaukee, Inc., 1900.2  
Conrad Milwaukee Corp. v. Wasilewski, 3012, 3042  
Conrardy v. Sheboygan County, 315  
Consolidated Papers, Inc. v. ILHR Dep't, 305  
Continental Cas. Co. v. Wisconsin Patients Comp. Fund, 3028  
Continental Ore Co. v. Union Carbide & Carbon Corp., 2806  
Convenience Store Leasing and Management v. Annapurna Marketing, 3070  
Cook v. Cook, 2500  
Cook v. McCabe, 3062  
Cook v. Wisconsin Tel. Co., 1096  
Cooper v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 230  
Copperweld Corp. v. Independence Tube Corp., 2808  
Corbitt v. Stonemetz, 3054  
Cords v. Anderson, 1007.5, 1796, 1797  
Corning v. Dec Aviation Corp., 325  
Correa v. Woodman's Food Market, 1900.4  
Coryell v. Conn, 1767, 1768  
Costa v. Neimon, 2406  
Costas v. City of Fond du Lac, 1920, 1928, 1930, 1932  
Couillard v. Van Ess, 1911, 8020  
Cramer v. Theda Clark Memorial Hosp., 1385  
Crane v. Sears Roebuck & Co., 3200, 3262  
Cranston v. Bluhm, 2800  
Crest Chevrolet-Oldsmobile Cadillac, Inc. v. Willemsen, 1383, 1731, 8045  
Criswell v. Seaman Body Corp., 1051, 1911  
Cronin v. Cronin, 1870  
Cross v. Leuenberger, 1910  
Crotteau v. Karlgaard, 1708, 2006  
Crowder v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 155  
Crown v. General Motors Corp., 3200  
Crown Life Ins. Co. v. LaBonte, 3044  
Cruis Along Boats, Inc., v. Standard Steel Prods. Mfg. Co., 1804  
Crye v. Mueller, 1090, 1153, 1155, 1157, 1158, 1160, 1165, 1190, 1191, 1192, 1195, 1225, 1354  
Cudd v. Crownhart, 2780  
Culton v. Van Beek, 1080  
Culver v. Webb, 1285  
Cunnien v. Superior Iron Works Co., 1055  
Curtis Land & Loan Co. v. Interior Land Co., 3014  
Cutler Cranberry Co. v. Oakdale Elec. Coop., 1806  
Czapinski v. St. Francis Hosp., 1897

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Czarnetzky v. Booth, 1080

### D

D.L. v. Huebner, 358, 410, 1019  
D.L. Anderson's Lakeside Leisure Co., Inc. v. Anderson, 2790, 2791  
Dabareiner v. Weisflog, 1797  
Dahl v. Ellis, 1260  
Dahlberg v. Jones, 1385, 1385.5  
Dakter v. Cavallino, 1005  
Dalton v. Meister, 1707, 2500, 2516, 2520, 2800  
Darst v. Fort Dodge D.M. & S.R.R., 3074  
Dauplaise v. Yellow Taxicab Co., 1025  
Davis v. Allstate Ins. Co., 1075, 2761  
Davis v. Feinstein, 1050  
Davis v. Nuzum, 2400  
Dawson v. Jost, 410  
DeBaker v. Austin, 1354  
DeBruine v. Voskuil, 1023  
DeChant v. Monarch Life Ins. Co., 410, 2761  
Degenhardt v. Heller, 2004  
Dehnart v. Waukesha Brewing Co., 3710, 3735  
De Keuster v. Green Bay & W. R.R., 215  
Dekeyser v. Milwaukee Automobile Ins. Co., 1030  
Delaney v. Supreme Inv. Co., 8030  
Delap v. Institute of Am., Inc., 3048  
Delmore v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 1046, 1047, 1047.1  
Delong v. Sagstetter, 1350  
Delvaux v. Vanden Langenberg, 100, 1580, 8045  
Denil v. Coppersmith, 1391  
Denil v. Integrity Mut. Ins., 1815  
Denny v. Mertz, 2500, 2501, 2505, 2505A, 2509, 2516, 2520  
Denzer v. Rouse, 1023.5  
DeRuyter v. Wisconsin Elec. Power Co., 1605, 4035  
DeSombre v. Bickel, 3052, 3700  
Desotelle v. Continental Casualty Co., 4035  
DeThorne v. Bakken, 1023.5, 1023.5A  
Devine v. McGowan, 1403  
Dick v. Heisler, 190  
Dickman v. Schaeffer, 1766  
Dickson v. Pritchard, 3725  
Diemel v. Weirich, 1767, 1768  
Diener v. Heritage Mut. Ins. Co., 1114  
Dieter v. Chrysler Corp., 3301  
Dietz v. Hardware Dealers Mut. Fire Ins. Co., 3115, 3116  
Digicorp, Inc. v. Ameritech Corp., 2400  
DiMiceli v. Klieger, 2500, 2505  
Dippel v. Sciano, 1924, 1930, 3200, 3260, 3260.1, 3268  
Docter v. Furch, 3044  
Dodge v. Dobson, 410  
Doern v. Crawford, 3110  
Dombeck v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. Ry., 1405, 1407, 1408, 1409  
Dombrowski v. Albrent Freight & Storage Corp., 1500  
Dombrowski v. Tomasino, 1  
Donlea v. Carpenter, 1350, 1795  
Donovan v. Barkhausen Oil Co., 2200, 2200.1, 2200.2  
Doolittle v. Western States Mut. Ins. Co., 1750.2

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Douglas v. Dewey, 1900.4  
Doyle v. Engelke, 1383  
Doyle v. Teasdale, 3072  
Drake v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1157  
Draper v. Baker, 1707  
Draper v. United States, 2115  
Dreazy v. North Shore Publishing Co., 3022  
Droege v. Daymaker Cranberries, Inc., 8060  
Duffy Law Office v. Tank Transport, 1023.5, 1023.5A, 1023.8  
Dumas v. Koebel, 2550, 2725, 2780  
Dumer v. St. Michael's Hosp., 1385  
Duncan v. Steeper, 2900  
Dunn v. Pertzsch Const., Inc., 3074  
Durand West, Inc. v. Milwaukee W. Bank, 3020  
Dutcher v. Phoenix Ins. Co., 1047.1  
Dwyer v. Jackson Co., 8051  
Dykstra v. Arthur G. McKee & Co., 1900.4, 1904

### E

E. L. Chester Co. v. Wisconsin Power & Light Co., 1003  
Eastern States Retail Lumber Dealers' Ass'n v. United States, 2800  
Eckel v. Richter, 4035  
Eckstein v. Northwestern Mut. Life Ins. Co., 3074  
Edeler v. O'Brien, 1105A  
Eden v. LaCrosse Lutheran Hosp., 1385  
Edlebeck v. Hooten, 1610  
Edward E. Gillen Co. v. John H. Parker Co., 3060  
Egan v. Travelers Ins. Co., 1715  
Ehlers v. Colonial Penn. Ins. Co., 3117  
Eide v. Skerbeck, 8040  
Einhorn v. Culea, 1005  
Eleason v. Western Casualty & Sur. Co., 1021.2  
Ellsworth v. Schelbrock, 202, 1723, 1756  
Elmer v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 2600  
Elmergreen v. Kern, 3020  
Emerson v. Riverview Rink & Ballroom, 8040, 8045  
Employers Ins. Co. v. Pelczynski, 3112  
Employers Mut. Ins. Co. v. Industrial Comm'n, 4030  
Enea v. Pfister, 1600  
Engel v. Dunn County, 1804, 3700  
Engsberg v. Hein, 1144  
Engstrum v. Sentinel Co., 1095  
Erdmann v. SF Broad. of Green Bay, Inc., 2500  
Erickson v. Prudential Ins. Co., 1014, 1014.5  
Ernst v. Greenwald, 350  
Ertl v. Ertl, 2900  
Esch v. Chicago M. & St. P. R. Co., 8100  
Estate of Ansell, 3024  
Estate of Briese, 3020  
Estate of Cavanaugh v. Andrade, 1031  
Estate of Chayka, 3044  
Estate of Daniels, 3110  
Estate of Gooding, 8100  
Estate of Hatten, 3020  
Estate of Holt v. State Farm, 1861  
Estate of Lade, 1812

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Estate of Lube, 3012  
Estate of Miller v. Storey, 2420  
Estate of Nale, 1812  
Estate of Neumann, 400, 405  
Estate of St. Germain, 3024  
Estate of Schoenkerman, 3020  
Estate of Starer, 1610  
Estate of Steffes, 1812  
Estate of Stromstead, 1825  
Estate of Voss, 1812  
Estate of Zellmer, 3061  
Estate of Zhu v. Hodgson, 1153, 1555, 1157, 1558, 1159, 1160, 1165, 1170, 1175, 1180, 1185, 1190, 1190.5, 1191, 1193.5, 1195, 1205, 1210, 1220, 1225, 1230, 1235, 1240, 1245, 1250, 1255, 1260, 1270  
Everlite Mfg. Co. v. Grand Valley Machine & Tool Co., 3030  
Ewen v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 1012, 1861  
Ewers v. Eisenzopf, 3202, 3220, 3225, 3230  
Ewing v. Goode, 1023

### F

Fabick, Inc. v. JFTCO, Inc., 2790  
Fahrenberg v. Tengel, 415, 1707, 2520  
Fairbanks v. Witter, 1708  
Farley v. Salow, 3049  
Farm Credit Bank of St. Paul v. F&A Dairy, 2200  
Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co. v. Gast, 1500  
Farrell v. John Deere Co., 1723  
Faultersack v. Clintonville Sales Corp., 4020  
Fawcett v. Gallery, 1605, 4045  
Featherly v. Continental Ins. Co., 410, 1760, 1762  
Federal Pants, Inc. v. Stocking, 2780  
Fee v. Heritage Mut. Ins. Co., 1825  
Fehrman v. Smirl, 415, 1024, 1145  
Fenelon v. Butts, 1708  
Ferdon v. Wisc. Patients Compensation Fund, 1023, 1870, 1895, 1897  
Ferraro v. Koelsch, 2750  
Ferris v. Location 3 Corp., 2400  
Field v. Vinograd, 1230, 1582  
Fieldhouse Landscape v. Gentile, 1812  
Fields v. Creek, 1501  
Fifer v. Dix, 1390  
Filipiak v. Plombon, 1910  
Finch v. Southside Lincoln-Mercury, Inc., 2780  
Finke v. Hess, 1023  
Finken v. Milwaukee County, 1025  
Fire Ins. Exchange v. Cincinnati Ins. Co., 1390  
Firemen's Fund Ins. Co. v. Schreiber, 1025.7, 4035  
First Credit Corp. v. Behrend, 2401  
First Nat'l Bank v. Hackett, 2400  
First Nat'l Bank of Oshkosh v. Scieszinski, 2401, 2402  
First Trust Co. v. Holden, 3020  
First Wisconsin Land Corp. v. Bechtel Corp., 1806  
First Wisconsin Nat'l Bank v. Oby, 3020  
First Wisconsin Nat'l Bank of Milwaukee v. Wichman, 2790  
First Wisconsin Trust Co. v. L. Wiemann Co., 3095  
Fischer v. Cleveland Punch and Shear Work Co., 1760  
Fischer v. Fischer, 60, 61, 1825



## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Fischer v. Ganju, 1023  
Fisher v. Lutz, 4015  
Fisher v. Simon, 1022.4  
Fitzgerald v. Badger State Mut. Casualty Co., 1900.4  
Fitzgerald v. Meissner & Hicks, Inc., 1815  
Fiumefreddo v. Mclean, 1024  
Fleming v. Thresherman's Mut. Ins. Co., 1383, 1580, 8045  
Fletcher v. Ingram, 1025.5  
Flies v. Fox Bros. Buick Co., 3200, 3240  
Flynn v. Audra's Corp., 8045  
Foellmi v. Smith, 1052, 1140, 3074  
Foerster, Inc. v. Atlas Metal Parts Co., 2769  
Foley v. City of West Allis, 1277, 1278, 1722A  
Fond du Lac County v. Helen E.F., 7050, 7050A, 7060, 7061  
Fondell v. Lucky Stores, Inc., 1001, 1900.4, 1904  
Foote v. Douglas County, 3116  
Ford, Bacon & Davis, 1580  
Ford Motor Co. v. Lyons, 2808  
Forrer v. Sears Roebuck & Co., 3084  
Fortier v. Flambeau Plastics Co., 1924, 1930  
Foseid v. State Bank of Cross Plains, 2780, 3044  
Foss v. Madison Twentieth Century Theaters, 2401  
Foster v. Fidelity & Casualty Co. of N. Y., 3117  
Fouse v. Persons, 1710, 1756  
Fox v. Boldt, 3202  
Fox v. Iowa Health System, 2550  
Francois v. Mokrohisky, 1023  
Frank v. Metropolitan Life Ins. Co., 3018  
Frankland v. Peterson, 1144, 1210  
Franz v. Brennan, 1707  
Fredrickson v. Kabat, 2007  
Freeman v. Dells Paper & Pulp Co., 4005  
Freeman v. Morris, 3022  
Freuen v. Brenner, 1750.2  
Frey v. Dick, 1035  
Fricano v. Bank of America, 2418  
Frinzi v. Hanson, 2500  
Frion v. Coren, 1910  
Frion v. Craig, 115  
Froh v. Milwaukee Medical Clinic, S.C., 1023, 1385  
Fuchs v. Kupper, 1707  
Fuchsgruber v. Custom Accessories, 3290  
Fultz v. Lange, 1605, 4045  
Fun-N-Fish, Inc. v. Parker, 3058

### G

Gabriel v. Gabriel, 3074  
Gage v. Seal, 1105A  
Gall v. Gall, 3054  
Gallagher v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 1405  
Galst v. American Ladder Co., 3242  
Gamble-Skogmos v. Chicago & N.W. Transp. Co., 1410  
Garceau v. Bunnell, 1105A, 1730  
Garcia v. Samson's, Inc., 4015  
Garfoot v. Fireman's Fund Ins. Co., 400  
Garlick v. Morley, 4005, 4015

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Garner v. Charles A. Krause Milling Co., 3220  
Garrett v. City of New Berlin, 1510 1511  
Garrison v. State of Louisiana, 2511  
Gaspord v. Hecht, 1090  
Gauerke v. Rozga, 2400, 2402  
Gauthier v. Carbonneau, 1580, 1585, 1590  
Gay v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Light Co., 1145  
Geis v. Hirth, 1030, 1105A  
Geise v. Montgomery Ward, Inc., 180, 191, 1600, 1837  
Geldnich v. Burg, 4035, 4040  
Gelhaar v. State, 420  
Gename v. Benson, 1812  
Gendanke v. Wisconsin Evaporated Milk Co., 3076  
General Elec. Co. v. N.K. Ovalle, Inc., 3074  
Georgeson v. Nielsen, 4000, 4027  
Georgia Casualty Co. v. American Milling Co., 1145  
Gerbing v. McDonald, 1756  
Gerlat v. Christianson, 1013  
Gerovac v. Hribar Trucking, Inc., 3024  
Gerrard Realty Corp. v. American States Ins. Co., 3117  
Gertz v. Robert Welch, Inc., 2500, 2505, 2509, 2516, 2520  
Gervais v. Kostin, 1600  
Gessler v. Erwin Co., 3060, 3078  
Gewanski v. Ellsworth, 4035  
Gibson v. American Cyanamid, 3295  
Gibson v. Overnite Transportation Company, 2507  
Gibson v. Streeter, 1090  
Gilberg v. Tisdale, 1056  
Gill v. Benjamin, 3066  
Gillund v. Meridian Mut. Ins. Co., 2550, 2551  
Gilman v. Brown, 1806  
Gladfeldter v. Doemel, 1707  
Glamann v. St. Paul Fire & Marine Ins., 1023.5  
Gleason v. Gillihan, 1055, 1060, 1191  
Godfrey Co. v. Crawford, 3058  
Godoy v. E.I. du Pont De Nemours et al, 3260.1  
Goebel v. General Bldg. Serv. Co., 1145  
Goehmann v. National Biscuit Co., 1075  
Goetz v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 3012  
Goldberg v. Berkowitz, 1010  
Goldenberg v. Daane, 1140  
Goller v. White, 2900  
Gonzalez v. City of Franklin, 1010, 1582, 1795  
Gordon v. Milwaukee County, 1023  
Gosse v. Navistar Int'l Transp. Corp., 3300  
Gouger v. Hardtke, 2001  
Gould v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 1021  
Graass v. Westerlin & Campbell Co., 3244  
Graf v. Neith Co-op. Dairy Products Association, 3028  
Grana v. Summerford, 1141, 1350, 1354, 1355, 1580, 1585, 1590  
Grand Trunk W. R.R. v. Lahiff, 3072  
Granger v. Chicago M. & St. P. Ry., 3072  
Gray v. Wisconsin Tel. Co., 1395  
Greco v. Bueciconi Eng'r Co., 3200  
Green Bay Broadcasting v. Redevelopment Authority, 8100, 8101  
Green Bay-Wausau Lines, Inc. v. Mangel, 1355  
Green Spring Farms v. Spring Green Farms, 1

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Green v. Kaemph, 3062  
Green v. Rosenow, 1756  
Green v. Smith & Nephew AHP, Inc., 3200, 3260, 3260.1  
Greene v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1285  
Greenlee v. Rainbow Auction/Realty Co., 3028  
Greenville Coop. Gas Co. v. Lodesky, 1350  
Greiten v. LaDow, 3240, 3260  
Gremban v. Burke, 1010  
Griebler v. Doughboy Recreational, Inc., 8020  
Grimes v. Snell, 1840  
Gritzner v. Michael R., 1005, 1013, 1397  
Grognet v. Fox Valley Trucking Serv., 425  
Grossenbach v. Devonshire Realty, 8012  
Grosso v. Wittemann, 1380, 1381  
Grube v. Daun, 1005, 1009, 2403  
Gruen Indus., Inc. v. Biller, 3074  
Gruenberg v. Aetna Ins. Co., 2761  
Grunwald v. Halron, 1001  
Grutzner v. Kruse, 1070  
Grygiel v. Monches Fish & Game Club, Inc., 1810  
Guardianship and Protective Placement of Shaw, 7060  
Guardianship of Meyer, 1021  
Guderyon v. Wisconsin Tel. Co., 1115, 1310  
Guentner v. Gnagi, 1812  
Guerra v. Manchester Terminal Corp., 2150  
Guillaume v. Wisconsin-Minnesota Light & Power Co., 230  
Gumz v. Northern States Power Company, 950  
Gunderson v. Struebing, 2100  
Gundlach v. Chicago & N. W. Ry., 1338  
Gunning v. King, 1265  
Gustavson v. O'Brien, 1023.5  
Gutzman v. Clancy, 2006  
Guzman v. St. Francis Hospital, Inc., 1707.1, 1897  
Gyldenvand v. Schroeder, 2400, 2405, 2405.5, 2406

### H

H.A. Friend & Co. v. Professional Stationery, Inc., 2200  
Haag v. General Accident Fire & Life Assurance Corp., 1035  
Habrich v. Industrial Comm'n, 4060  
Habrouck v. Armour & Co., 1500, 3242  
Haentz v. Toehr, 2402  
Hafemann v. Milwaukee Auto Ins. Co., 1055  
Hajec v. Novitzke, 2600  
Hale v. Stoughton Hosp. Ass'n, Inc., 2780  
Hales v. City of Wauwatosa, 1049  
Hamed v. Milwaukee County, 1025  
Hamilton v. Reinemann, 1140  
Hamus v. Weber, 1048  
Hanes v. Hermesen, 1045, 1096  
Hannebaum v. DiRenzo & Bomier, 1900.4  
Hannemann v. Boyson, 1023.8  
Hannon v. Kelly, 3042  
Hansberry v. Dunn, 1012  
Hansche v. A. J. Conroy Co., Inc., 4005  
Hansen v. Crown Controls Corp., 1723  
Hansen v. Industrial Comm'n, 4045

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Hansen v. New Holland North America, Inc., 1723  
Hansen v. Texas Roadhouse, Inc., 1383  
Hanson v. Binder, 1582  
Hanson v. Matas, 1050  
Hanson v. Valdivia, 1861  
Hanz Trucking, Inc. v. Harris Bros. Co., 3057  
Hardware Dealers Mut. Fire Ins. Co. v. Home Mut. Ins. Co., 1191  
Hardware Mut. Casualty Co. v. Harry Crow & Son, Inc., 1105A, 1735  
Hardy v. Hoefflerle, 1277  
Hareng v. Blanke, 50, 195  
Hargrove v. Peterson, 1730, 1750.2, 1767, 1795  
Harrigan v. Gilchrist, 1  
Harris v. Kelley, 1880  
Harris v. Richland Motors, Inc., 4030, 4060  
Hartman v. Buerger, 2500  
Hartzheim v. Smith, 1045, 1080  
Harvey v. Wheeler Transfer and Storage Co., 1803  
Harvot v. Solo Cup, 1  
Harweger v. Wilcox, 2400  
Hastings Realty Corp. v. Texas Co., 8111  
Hatch v. Smail, 1501  
Hauer v. Union State Bank of Wautoma, 3044  
Hausman v. St. Croix Care Center, 2750  
Havens v. Havens, 1140  
Hawarden v. The Youghioghney & Lehigh Coal Co., 2820  
Hayton v. Appleton Machine Co., 4080  
Heath v. Madsen, 1010  
Heck & Paetow Claim Service, Inc. v. Heck, 4080  
Heckel v. Standard Gateway Theater, 1900.4  
Hegarty v. Beauchaine, 1023  
Heikkila v. Standard Oil Co., 1080  
Heilgeist v. Chasser, 2600  
Heims v. Hanke, 1722A, 4025, 4030  
Heldt v. Nicholson Mfg. Co., 1900.2  
Helleckson v. Loiselle, 1750.2  
Hellenbrand v. Bowar, 3200, 3230  
Hellenbrand v. Hilliard, 1804  
Helmbrecht v. St. Paul Ins. Co., 1023.5  
Henricksen v. Mc Carroll, 1025.6  
Henrikson v. Strapon, 1707.1  
Henry v. United States, 2115  
Henschel v. Rural Mut. Casualty Ins. Co., 1065  
Henthorn v. M.G.C. Corp., 1125, 1145  
Herbst v. Hansen, 3110  
Herbst v. Wuennenberg, 2100  
Heritage Farms, Inc. v. Markel Ins. Co., 1757  
Herman v. Milwaukee Children's Hosp., 1796, 1797, 1837, 1845, 1880  
Hernandez v. United States, 2802  
Herro v. Department of Natural Resources, 8100, 8101  
Herro v. Northwestern Malleable Iron Co., 1861  
Herro v. Steidl, 1870  
Herzberg v. Ford Motor Co., 3260  
Hess Bros., Inc. v. Great N. Pail Co., 3063, 3064, 3065  
Hess v. Holt Lumber Co., 3014  
Hett v. Ploetz, 2500  
Heuer v. Wiese, 2200  
Heuser v. Community Insurance Corp., 1380

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Hibner v. Lindauer, 1112  
Hickman v. Wellauer, 1804  
Hicks v. Nunnery, 1023.5  
Hietpas v. State, 8115  
Hildebrand v. Carroll, 1025.7  
Hilker v. Western Automobile Ins. Co., 2760  
Hillman v. Columbia County, 2550  
Hillstead v. Smith, 1114  
Hilmes v. Stroebel, 2007  
Hinrichs v. Dow Chemical Co., 2400  
Hintz v. Mielke, 1255  
Hipke v. Industrial Comm'n, 1900.4  
Hocking v. City of Dodgeville, 1900.4  
Hodgson v. Wisconsin Gas & Light Co., 1051  
Hoeft v. Friedel, 1075, 1600  
Hoekstra v. Guardian Pipeline, 8100, 8101, 8102, 8120, 8135  
Hoff v. Wedin, 1010  
Hofflander v. St. Catherine's Hospital, 1007, 1021, 1385.5, 1902  
Hoffman v. Danielson, 3076  
Hoffman v. Dixon, 3220  
Hoffman v. Halden, 2800  
Hoffman v. North Milwaukee, 1049  
Hoffman v. Pfingsten, 3022  
Hoffman v. Red Owl Stores, Inc., 3020, 3074  
Holbach v. Classified Ins. Corp., 1277  
Holschbach v. Washington Park Manor, 8030  
Holton v. Burton, 1023  
Holytz v. Milwaukee, 2900, 8035  
Holzem v. Mueller, 1045  
Home Fire & Marine Ins. Co. v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1155, 1157  
Home Protective Services, Inc. v. ADT Security Services, Inc., 2769  
Home Sav. Bank v. Gertenbach, 3020, 4015  
Hommel v. Badger State Inv. Co., 1902  
Hornback v. Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 1005  
Horst v. Deere & Company, 3260, 3260.1  
Hortman v. Becker Constr. Co., Inc., 1900.4, 1901, 1904  
Household Fin. Corp. v. Christian, 2401, 2402  
Hoven v. Kelble, 1023, 1024  
Howard v. State Farm Mut. Auto Liab. Co., 1730  
Howe v. Corry, 1076  
Hrubes v. Faber, 1023  
Huchting v. Engel, 1010  
Huck v. Chicago, St. Paul M. & O. Ry., 1026.5, 3051  
Huebner v. State, 2115  
Hunt v. Clarendon Nat'l Ins. Service, Inc., 1025  
Hunter v. Sirianni Candy Co., 1210  
Husting v. Dietzen, 180  
Hutching v. Engel, 2000  
Hyer v. Janesville, 230  
Hyland v. GCA Tractor & Equip. Co., 3200, 3205  
Hynek v. Kewaunee, G.B. & W. Ry., 1405

### I

Ianni v. Grain Dealers Mut. Ins. Co., 1750.1, 1760, 1762  
Ide v. Wamser, 1090, 1506  
Idzik v. Reddick, 4005

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Illinois Cent. R.R. Co. v. Blaha, 3117  
Illinois Steel Co. v. Bilot, 8060  
Imark Industries, Inc. v. Arthur Young & Co., 1383, 1580, 8045  
Imnus v. Wisconsin Pub. Ser. Corp., 1900.4  
Ingram v. Rankin, 2201  
In Matter of Mental Condition of C.J., 7050, 7050A  
In Interest of C.E.W., 180, 191  
In Re Commitment of Dennis H., 7050  
In Re Estate of Schaefer, 4080  
In re Kelly M., 7050, 7050A  
In Re Paternity of M.J.B., 5001  
In Re Paternity of Taylor, R.T., 5001  
In Re Paternity of J.M.K., 5001  
In re Estate of Sheppard, 3070  
Insurance Co. of North Am. v. Cease Electric Inc., 400, 2400  
Insurance Co. of North Am. v. Kriek Furriers, Inc., 1025.7  
Irby v. State, 420  
Irish v. Dean, 3049  
Isgro v. Plankington Packing Co., 1265  
Ivancevic v. Reagan, 3072

### J

J. H. Clark Co. v. Rice, 2401, 2402  
J. F. McNamara Corp. v. Industrial Comm'n, 4035  
J.W. Cartage Co. v. Laufenberg, 1354, 1355  
Jackson v. Robert L. Reisinger & Co., 180  
Jacob v. West Bend Mut. Ins. Co., 1022.6, 3700, 4060  
Jacobs v. Major, 1810  
Jacobson v. Greyhound Corp., 1114  
Jacobson v. Milwaukee, 305  
Jacque v. Steenberg Homes, Inc., 1707.1, 1810  
Jadofski v. Town Kemper Ins. Co., 2762  
Jaeger v. Stratton, 1023  
Jagmin v. Simonds Abrasive Co., 400, 1145  
Jama v. Gonzalez, 1023.5  
Jandre v. Wisconsin Injured Patients and Families Compensation Fund, 1023.1  
Jandrt v. Milwaukee Auto Ins. Co., 205, 3072  
Janke Const. Co., Inc. v. Balcan Materials Co., 3074  
Jankee v. Clark County, 1007, 1021, 1385.5  
Jeffers v. Nysse, 1707  
Jenkinson v. New York Casualty Co., 3115  
Jennings v. Lyons, 3062, 3066, 3067  
Jensen v. Jensen, 1032  
Jessup v. LaPin, 3090  
Jewell v. Schmidt, 1825  
John Doe 1 v. Archdiocese of Milwaukee, 2401  
Johnson v. Agoncillo, 1023  
Johnson v. Calado, 2605  
Johnson v. Cintas Corp. No. 2., 115, 1007, 1014  
Johnson v. Fireman's Fund Indem. Co., 1155  
Johnson v. Heintz, 50, 1710, 1722A, 1723  
Johnson v. Holmen Canning Co., 4035  
Johnson v. McDermott, 1113  
Johnson v. Misericordia Community Hosp., 1384, 1760  
Johnson v. Pearson Agri-Systems, Inc., 1796  
Johnson v. Prideaux, 1140

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Johnson v. Ray, 205, 1506, 1700, 2008, 2155  
Johnson v. St. Paul & W. Coal Co., 1835, 1845  
Jolin v. Oster, 1  
Jonas v. State, 8104, 8107  
Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co., 2150  
Jones v. Fisher, 1707  
Jones v. Jenkins, 3051  
Jones v. Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., 3222  
Jones v. State, 63  
Joplin v. John Hancock Mut. Life Ins. Co., 3057  
Jorgenson v. Northern State Power Co., 1395  
Jungbluth v. Hometown, Inc., 2771  
Justmann v. Portage County, 8102, 8103, 8120

### K

K & S Tool & Die Corp. v. Perfection Mach. Sales, Inc., 2418  
Kablitz v. Hoeft, 1715, 1720  
Kaesler, Adm'r v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Light Co., 1880  
Kaiser v. Board of Police & Fire Commissioners of Wauwatosa, 2750  
Kalkopf v. Donald Sales & Mfg. Co., 1019, 3260  
Kamp v. Curtis, 4035  
Kamrowski v. State of Wis., 8120  
Kansas City Star Co. v. ILHR Dep't, 2722, 3045,  
Karls v. Drake, 2401, 2402  
Karsteadt v. Phillip Gross H. & S. Co., 3200, 3246  
Kathan v. Comstock, 3220  
Kaufman v. Postle, 1143  
Kaufman v. State Street Ltd. Partnership, 1900.4  
Keegan v. Chicago, M., St. P. & P. R.R., 1336, 1403, 1405  
Keeley v. G.N.R. Co., 2507  
Kehl v. Economy Fire & Casualty Co., 1707.1  
Kehm Corp. v. United States, 3060  
Keith v. Worcester & D. V. St. R.R., 1050  
Keithley v. Keithley, 1885  
Kelley v. Ellis, 3022  
Kelley v. Hartford Casualty Ins. Co., 1024  
Kelley v. State, 195  
Kellogg v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 1030  
Kelly v. Berg, 1007.5, 1105A  
Kemper Independence Insurance Company v. Islami, 3110  
Kempf v. Boehring, 1014  
Kempfer v. Automated Finishing, Inc., 2750  
Kempfer v. Bois, 1140  
Ken-Crete Prod. Co. v. State Highway Comm'n, 8100, 8101, 8103  
Kennedy-Ingalls Corp. v. Meissner, 3200, 3211, 3225, 3230  
Kenwood Equip., Inc. v. Aetna Ins. Co., 110  
Kerkman v. Hintz, 1023, 1023.8, 1023.9  
Kerl v. Rasmussen, 4025, 4030, 4040, 4055, 4060  
Kernz v. J.L. French Corp., 3010  
Kerwin v. Chippewa Shoe Mfg. Co., 1500  
Kettner v. Wausau Ins. Co., 4060  
Kiefer v. Fred Howe Motors, Inc., 2000  
Killeen v. Parent, 2401, 2402  
Kim v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 1800  
Kimble v. Land Concepts, Inc., 1707.1  
Kincaide v. Hardware Mut. Casualty Co., 1144

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Kincannon v. National Indem. Co., 1705, 1797  
Kink v. Combs, 410  
Kinsman v. Panek, 1310  
Kirby v. Corning, 4027  
Klassa v. Milwaukee Gas Light Co., 1511  
Kleckner v. Great Am. Indem. Co., 325  
Kleeman v. Chicago & N.W.R. Co., 4035  
Kleinke v. Farmers Coop. Supply & Shipping, 1510  
Kleist v. Cohodas, 1315  
Kleven v. Cities Serv. Oil Co., 3086  
Kline v. Johanneson, 1120  
Klinefelter v. Ditch, 8060  
Klingbeil v. Saucerman, 1023.5  
Klink v. Cappelli, 1762  
Klipstein v. Raschein, 205  
Kluck v. State, 2115  
Klug v. Flambeau Plastics Corp., 3049  
Klug v. Sheriffs, 3026  
Knapke v. Grain Dealers Mut. Ins. Co., 1904, 3057  
Kneeland-McClurg Lumber Co. v. Industrial Comm'n, 4060  
Knief v. Sargent, 1023  
Knoke v. City of Monroe, 8035  
Knowles v. Stargel, 1265  
Knutson v. Fenelon, 1840  
Koback v. Crook, 1009  
Kochanski v. Speedway Superamerica, 410, 1900.4  
Koehler v. Thiensville State Bank, 1145  
Koehler v. Waukesha Milk Co., 1855  
Koele v. Radue, 1760  
Koepsell's Olde Popcorn Wagons, Inc. v. Koepsell's Festival Popcorn Wagons, Ltd., 2790  
Koetting v. Conroy, 1391  
Koffman v. Leichtfuss, 1756  
Kohler v. Dumke, 1582  
Kohloff v. State, 63  
Kohls v. Glassman, 3118  
Kojis v. Doctors Hosp., 2900  
Kolbeck v. Rural Mut. Ins. Co., 1806, 3117  
Kolpin v. Pioneer Power & Light, 950, 1019  
Koltka v. PPG Indus., Inc., 1870  
Korenak v. Curative Workshop Adult Rehabilitation Center, 1900.4  
Korth v. American Family Ins. Co., 1837  
Kosnar v. J. C. Penney Co., 1900.4  
Kottka v. PPG Indus., Inc., 1815  
Kowalczyk v. Rotter, 8045  
Kowalke v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 180, 1032, 1052, 1140, 1705, 1760, 1767, 1768  
Kowalke v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Light Co., 3072  
Kozlowski v. John E. Smith's Sons Co., 3262  
Kraft v. Charles, 1285  
Kraft v. Steinhafel, 1023.5, 4035  
Kraft v. Wodill, 2401  
Krainz v. Strle, 1114  
Kramer v. Alpine Valley Resort, Inc., 3074  
Kramer v. Chicago, M., St. P. & P. Ry., 1501, 1796  
Kramer v. Hayward, 3024  
Kramschuster v. Shawn E., 1014  
Kranzush v. Badger State Mut. Casualty Co., 2760, 2761  
Kraskey v. Johnson, 1070, 1155, 1157



## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Kraus v. Mueller, 8060  
Kraus v. Wisconsin Life Ins. Co., 3061  
Krause v. Milwaukee Mut. Ins. Co., 230, 1105A  
Krause v. V. F. W. Post 6498, 1900.4, 1904, 3290  
Krause v. Western Casualty & Sur. Co., 4040  
Krebsbach v. Miller, 3112  
Kremer v. Rule, 1805  
Kreyer v. Driscoll, 3052  
Krieg v. Dayton-Hudson Corp., 2600, 2605  
Krolikowski v. Chicago & N.W. Transp. Co., 1403  
Kruck v. Wilbur Lumber Co., 1840  
Kruckenberg v. Krukar, 8060  
Krudwig v. Kaepke, 2007  
Krueger v. AllEnergy Hixton, LLC, 1920  
Krueger v. Steffen, 1800, 1801, 1805, 3725  
Krueger v. Tappan, 358  
Krueger v. Winters, 180  
Kruse v. Horlamus Indus., 200, 205, 1008, 8060  
Kryzko v. Gaudynski, 4025  
Kuehn v. Kuehn, 200, 205  
Kuehnemann v. Boyd, 1023  
Kuentzel v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1105A  
Kuhlman, Inc. v. G. Heileman Brewing Co., Inc., 1730, 1731, 1806  
Kujawski v. Arbor View Health Care Center, 1023.7, 1385  
Kukuska v. Home Mut. Hail-Tornado Ins. Co., 3016  
Kurz v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. Ry., 1408, 1410, 1413  
Kurz v. Collins, 3115, 3116  
Kutsugeras v. Avco Corp., 1723  
Kuzel v. State Farm Mut. Ins. Co., 1610

### L

L.L.N. v. Clauder, 1383  
L. L. Richards Mach. Co. v. McNamara Motor Express, 1026.5, 1804  
La Fave v. Lemke, 1120  
La Fleur v. Mosher, 1511  
Laabs v. Bolger, 8060  
LaChance v. Thermogas Co. of Lena, 1760  
LaCombe v. Aurora Medical Group, Inc., 1023  
LaCrosse Plow Co. v. Brooks, 3202  
LaCrosse Plow Co. v. Helgeson, 3202  
Ladd v. Uecker, 2500  
Ladewig v. Tremmel, 1390, 1397  
Laehn Coal and Wood Co. v. Koehler, 2401, 2402  
Lagerstrom v. Myrtle Werth Hospital - Mayo Health System, 1757, 1850  
Lake to Lake Dairy Coop. v. Andrews, 1070  
Lambert v. Hein, 2400  
Lambert v. Wensch, 1815, 1816  
Lambrecht v. Estate of Kaczmarczyk, 1021.2, 1145  
Lamming v. Galusha, 1920  
Lampertius v. Chmielewski, 1075  
Landess v. Borden, Inc., 3074  
Landrey v. United Serv. Auto Ass'n, 1035  
Langhoff v. Milwaukee & Pr. du Ch. R. Co., 1030  
Langlade County v. D.J.W, 7050, 7050A  
Larry v. Commercial Union Ins. Co., 1381  
Larsen v. Wisconsin Power & Light Co., 1003

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Larson v. Superior Auto Parts, 3018  
Lathan v. Journal Co., 2500, 2505  
Laughland v. Beckett, 2500, 2501, 2505, 2505A, 2507, 2511, 2513  
Laurent v. Plain, 1600  
Lauson v. Fond du Lac, 1310, 1315, 1320  
Lautenschlager v. Hamburg, 1715  
Lawlis v. Thompson, 3028  
Lawrence v. E. W. Wylie Co., 1090  
Lawrence v. Jewell Cos., Inc., 2500  
Layton School of Art & Design v. WERC, 205  
Le Mere v. Le Mere, 1075  
Le Sage v. Le Sage, 1600  
Lecander v. Billmeyer, 1024  
Lechner v. Ebenreiter, 4015, 4050, 2600, 2605  
Leckwe v. Ritter, 1096  
Leckwee v. Gibson, 1055, 1065, 1070, 1105A, 1141, 1153, 1175  
Lee v. Bielefeld, 2400  
Lee v. Lord, 4050  
Lee v. Milwaukee Gas Light Co., 8030  
Lee v. National League Baseball Club, 8045  
Legue v. City of Racine, 1031  
Leibl v. St. Mary's Hosp. of Mil., 1766  
Leipske v. Guenther, 1391, 8112  
Leitinger v. DBart, Inc., 1756  
Leitner v. Milwaukee County, 1900.4, 1904  
Lemacher v. Circle Constr. Co., 1022.2  
LeMay v. Oconto, 1049  
Lembke v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1285  
Leonard v. Employers Mut. Liab. Ins. Co., 1155, 1157  
Lestina v. West Bend Mut. Ins. Co., 2020  
Leuchtenberg v. Hoeschler, 3014  
Levin v. Perkins, 3020  
Lewandowski v. Continental Casualty Co., 195, 1023.5  
Lewandowski v. Preferred Risk Mut. Ins. Co., 261  
Lewis v. Coursolle Broadcasting, 2511, 2500  
Lewis v. Leiterman, 1075, 1325, 1610  
Lewis v. Physicians Ins. Co., 1023, 4030  
Libowitz v. Lake Nursing Home, Inc., 3086  
Liebe v. City Fin. Corp., 2780  
Lieberman v. Weil, 3083  
Lievrouw v. Roth, 180, 1105A, 1707.1, 1710  
Ligman v. Bitker, 1337  
Liles v. Employers Mut. Ins. of Wausau, 1055  
Lincoln v. Claflin, 2802  
Lind v. Lund, 1070  
Linden v. Cascade Stone Co., 2400  
Linden v. City Car Co., 4035  
Linden v. Miller, 1000  
Lindloff v. Ross, 1023  
Lippert v. Chicago & N. W. Ry. Co., 8104, 8107  
Lisowski v. Milwaukee Auto Mut. Ins. Co., 1045, 1050  
Listman Mill Co. v. William Listman Milling Co., 2790  
Little v. Maxam, Inc., 3260  
Lloyd v. S. S. Kresge Co., 1901  
Lobermeier v. General Tel. Co. of Wis., 410, 1730  
Loeb v. Board of Regents, 8100, 8140  
Londre v. Continental Western Ins. Co., 3110

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Lorbecki v. King, 180  
Loser v. Libal, 1730  
Lovesee v. Allied Dev. Corp., 1580, 1585, 1590  
Lubner v. Peerless Ins. Co., 410  
Luby v. Bennett, 2605  
Lueck v. Heisler, 2100  
Luessen v. Oshkosh Elec. Light & Power Co., 1890  
Lukens Iron & Steel Co. v. Hartmann-Greiling Co., 3058  
Lumbermen's Mut. Cas. Co. v. S. Morgan Smith Co., 3200  
Lund v. Keller, 2200  
Lundin v. Shimanski, 1707  
Lundquist v. Western Casualty & Sur. Co., 410, 1065, 1090  
Luther Hosp. v. Garborg, 1825  
Lutz v. Shelby Mut. Ins. Co., 1105A, 1750.2, 1767, 1768

### M

M & I Marshall & Ilsley Bank v. Pump, 2770  
M. Capp Mfg. Co. v. Moland, 1026.5  
MS Real Estate Holdings, LLC v. Fox Family Trust, 3049  
Maben v. Rankin, 1742  
Macherey v. Home Ins. Co., 205  
Machesky v. Milwaukee, 3012  
Maci v. State Farm Fire & Casualty Co., 8020  
Mack v. Decker, 1045  
Mack Trucks, Inc. v. Sunde, 3200  
Mackensie v. Miller Brewing Co., 2401  
Mackenzie Fandrey v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 1500  
MacLeish v. Boardman Clark LLP, 1023.5  
Madison Metropolitan Sewerage Dist. v. Committee, 1922  
Madison Trust Co. v. Helleckson, 2401, 2402  
Madison v. Geier, 205, 1107  
Madix v. Hockgreve Brewing Co., 4060  
Maeder v. Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 2750  
Magin v. Bemis, 1070  
Maichle v. Jonovic, 2006  
Mair v. Trollhaugen Ski Resort, 1900.4  
Maitland v. Twin City Aviation Corp., 8112  
Majestic Realty Corp. v. Brant, 1022.6, 8030  
Majorowicz v. Allied Mut. Ins. Co., 2760  
Malco v. Midwest Aluminum Sales, 1707  
Maleki v. Fine-Lando Clinic, 2800, 2820  
Malik v. American Family Ins. Co., 1391  
Maloney v. Wisconsin Power, Light & Heat Co., 1796, 1861  
Malzewski v. Rapkin, 2400, 2401, 2402  
Management Computer Serv. v. Hawkins, Ash, Baptie, 3010, 3051  
Mandell v. Bryam, 4050  
Maniaci v. Marquette Univ., 2100, 2600, 2605, 2620  
Mann v. Reliable Transit Co., 1320  
Manning v. Galland-Henning Pneumatic Malting Drum Mfg. Co., 3046  
Manzanares v. Safeway Stores, Inc., 2150  
Marathon County v. Zachary W., 7050, 7050A  
Mark McNally v. Capital Cartage, Inc., 3086  
Market Street Assoc. Ltd. Ptrshp. v. Frey, 3044  
Marlatt v. Western Union Tel. Co., 4050  
Marmolejo v. DILHR, 4035, 4045  
Marquez v. Mercedes-Benz USA, 3300

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Marsh Wood Prod. Co. v. Babcock & Wilcox Co., 3200, 3240  
Marshfield Clinic v. Discher, 1825  
Martell v. National Guardian Life Ins. Co., 3040  
Martens v. Reilly, 2800  
Martin v. Outboard Marine Corp., 2500, 2501, 2516  
Maskrey v. Volkswagenwerk Aktiengesellschaft, 1723, 1760, 1797  
Maslow Cooperage Corp. v. Weeks Pickle Co., 202, 1705, 3700  
Mastercraft Paper Co. v. Consolidated Freightways, 1026.5  
Matson v. Dane County, 1012  
Matter of Commitment of C.J.A. 7050A  
Matter of Commitment of C.S., 7050  
Matter of Commitment of J.W.K. 7050A  
Matter of Marks v. Gray, 4045  
Matteson v. Rice, 2400, 3220  
Matthews v. Schuh, 1190.5  
Matuschka v. Murphy, 1023  
Maurin v. Hall, 1023, 1870, 1895, 1897  
May v. Skelly Oil Co., 1580, 1900.4  
Mayo v. Wisconsin Injured Patients and Families Compensation Fund, 1023, 1870, 1895, 1897  
MBS-Certified Public Accountants, LLC v. Wisconsin Bell, Inc., 2418  
McAleavy v. Lowe, 3200  
McAllister v. Kimberly-Clark Co., 1707  
McCaffery v. Minneapolis, St. P. & S.S.M. Ry., 1796  
McCarthy v. Thompson, 325  
McCartie v. Muth, 1766  
McCarty v. Weber, 215  
McCluskey v. Steinhorst, 2005, 2008  
McConaghy v. McMullen, 2006  
McConville v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1047, 1047.1 1500, 1591, 1592  
McCrossen v. Nekoosa Edwards Paper Co., 1051.2, 1105A, 1705, 1885, 1890, 1892  
McDonnell v. Hestnes, 3115, 3116  
McEvoy v. Group Health Cooperative, 2761  
McGaw v. Wassman, 265  
McGee v. Kuchenbaker, 1285  
McGowan v. Story, 100  
McGuiggan v. Hiller Bros., 1580, 1585, 1590  
McKone v. Metropolitan Life Ins. Co., 4020  
McLaughlin v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. Ry., 1410  
McLean v. McLean, 3020  
McLuckie v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. Ry., 1408  
McMahon v. St. Croix Falls Sch. Dist., 1385.5  
McManus v. Donlin, 1023  
McNally v. Goodenough, 1900.4, 1901  
McNamara v. Village of Clintonville, 1720  
McNeil v. Jacobson, 1005, 1009  
Mead v. Ringling, 1812  
Medford Lumber Co. v. Industrial Comm'n, 4060  
Medley v. Trenton Inv. Co., 1022.6, 4010  
Meeme Mut. Home Protective Fire Ins. Co. v. Lorfeld, 3072  
Megal v. Green Bay Area Visitor & Convention Bureau, et al., 1900.4  
Meier v. Meurer, 2500  
Meihost v. Meihost, 1381  
Meke v. Nicol, 1707  
Memphis v. Greene, 2150  
Mendelson v. Blatz Brewing Co., 2780, 3068  
Menge v. State Farm Mut. Automobile Ins. Co., 1105A  
Menominee River Boom Co. v. Augustus Spies Lumber & Cedar Co., 3020

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Meracle v. Children's Serv. Soc., 1705  
Merco Distrib. Corp. v. Commercial Police Alarm Co., Inc., 1500  
Merco Distrib. Corp. v. O & R Engines, Inc., 110  
Merkle v. Behl, 1505  
Merkley v. Schramm, 1050  
Merriman v. Cash-Way, Inc., 1900.4  
Mertens v. Lake Shore Yellow Cab & Transfer Co., 1070  
Meshane v. Second Street Co., 1707  
Metcalf v. Consolidated Badger Coop., 1582  
Methodist Manor Health Center, Inc. v. Py, 2200  
Metropolitan Sav. & Loan Ass'n v. Zuelke's, Inc., 2200, 2201  
Metropolitan Ventures v. GEA Assoc., 3044  
Meyer v. Laser Vision Inst., LLC, 3028  
Metz v. Medford Fur Foods, 3200, 3260  
Metz v. Rath, 1105A  
Metzinger v. Perry, 1708  
Meurer v. ITT Gen. Controls, 145  
Meyer v. Ewald, 2600, 2605, 2610, 2611  
Meyer v. Laser Vision Inst., LLC, 3028  
Meyer v. Norgaard, 1023.6  
Meyer v. Val-Lo-Will Farms, 1051.2  
Meyers v. Matthews, 1600, 4001, 4030  
Meyers v. Wells, 3030  
Mezera v. Pahmeier, 1354  
Michaels v. Green Giant Co., 1760  
Mid-Continent Refrigerator Co. v. Straka, 1707  
Midwestern Helicopter v. Coolbaugh, 2200, 2201  
Mikaelian v. Woyak, 1047  
Milaeger Well Drilling Co. v. Muskego Rendering Co., 3058  
Milbauer v. Transport Employes' Mut. Benefit Soc'y, 260, 265  
Miller & Rose v. Rich, 4060  
Miller v. Conn, 3074  
Miller v. Epstein, 4035  
Miller v. Joannes, 1  
Miller v. Keller, 1010  
Miller v. Kim, 1023  
Miller v. Neale, 1806  
Miller v. Paine Lumber Co., 1900.2  
Miller v. Tainter, 1880  
Miller v. Wadkins, 2900  
Miller v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., 1383, 1384  
Millonig v. Bakken, 215, 1000, 1112, 1145, 1285  
Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp. v. Milwaukee County, 106  
Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp. v. Royal Transit Co., 1112  
Milwaukee Boiler Co. v. Duncan, 3202  
Milwaukee Constructors II v. Milwaukee Metro Sewerage District, 400  
Milwaukee County v. Schmidt, Gardner, and Erickson, 1023.5  
Milwaukee Metro. Sewerage Dist. v. City of Milwaukee, 1920, 1922, 1924, 1926, 1928, 1930, 1932  
Milwaukee Mirror & Art Glass Works v. Chicago, 1025.7  
Milwaukee Rescue Mission, Inc. v. Redevelopment Authority of the City of Milwaukee 8135  
Milwaukee Tank Works v. Metals Coating Co., 100  
Milwaukee Transport Services, Inc. v. Family Dollar Stores of Wisconsin, Inc. 1605, 4035, 4040  
Milwaukee Trust Co. v. Milwaukee, 305  
Milwaukee Western Fuel Co. v. Industrial Commission, 4035, 4045  
Miranovitz v. Gee, 2401, 2402  
Misiewicz v. Waters, 1105A  
Mittelstadt v. Hartford Accident & Indem. Co., 1000

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Mittleman v. Nash Sales, Inc., 4035  
Mixis v. Wisconsin Pub. Serv. Comm'n, 1145  
Modern Materials v. Advanced Tooling Spec., 2800  
Modl v. National Farmers Union Property & Casualty Co., 1145  
Moe v. Benelli U.S.A. Corp., 2769  
Mohns, Inc. v. BMO Harris Bank, 3028  
Mohs v. Quarton, 3700  
Mondl v. F.W. Woolworth, 1048, 1902  
Monrean v. Eastern Wis. Ry. & Light Co., 1012  
Monroe v. Chase, 2605  
Monsivais v. Winzenried, 8012  
Moore v. Relish, 1025.5  
Moore v. State, 415  
Moran v. Quality Aluminum Casting Co., 1815, 2900  
Morden v. Continental AG, 3240  
Morgan v. Pennsylvania Gen. Ins. Co., 1500  
Moritz v. Allied Mut. Fire Ins. Co., 1820  
Morris F. Fox & Co. v. Lisman, 3014  
Morris v. Resnick, 4080  
Morris v. Juneau County, 8035  
Mortgage Associates v. Monona Shores, 1  
Moulton v. Kershaw, 3012  
Mowry v. Badger State Mut. Casualty, 2760  
Mt. Pleasant v. Hartford Accident & Indemnity, 3118  
Mueller v. Bull's Eye Sport Shop, LLC, 400  
Mueller v. Harry Kaufmann Motorcars, Inc., 2401, 2418, 3068  
Mueller Real Estate Inv. Co. v. Cohen, 1804  
Mulder v. Acme-Cleveland Corp., 1383, 1900.2  
Mullen v. Larson-Morgan Co., 1900.4  
Mullen v. Reinig, 110  
Mullen v. Walczak, 1511  
Murawski v. Brown, 1402  
Murphy v. Columbus McKinnon Corp., 3260.1  
Murphy v. Nordhagen, 1023.8, 1023.9  
Murray v. Holiday Rambler, Inc., 145, 3201, 3205, 3220, 3222  
Murray v. Yellow Cab Co., 1000  
Muscoda Bridge Co. v. Grant County, 8100  
Muskevitch-Otto v. Otto, 3110  
Mustas v. Inland Constr. Inc., 315, 1901  
Myhre v. Hessey, 2605

### N

Naden v. Johnson, 3700  
Narloch v. State of Wis. Dept of Transp., 8102, 8103  
Nashban Barrel & Container Co. v. Parsons Trucking Co., 1730, 1800, 1801 1804  
National Auto Truckstops, Inc. v. WISDOT, 8111, 8120, 8130, 8135  
National Farmers Union Property & Casualty v. Maca, 3110  
Navine v. Peltier, 3034  
Neas v. Siemens, 2400, 2401, 2402  
Neave v. Arntz, 3220  
Nees v. Weaver, 3052  
Neff v. Barber, 1  
Neitzke v. Kraft-Phenix Dairies, Inc., 1051, 1900.4, 1902  
Nelsen v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 3010, 3032, 3050  
Nelson v. Boulay Bros. Co., 1803, 3208  
Nelson v. Davidson, 1023.6

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Nelson v. Hansen, 3290  
Nelson v. Pauli, 100  
Nelson v. Travelers Ins. Co., 1310  
Nesbitt v. Erie Coach Co., 3074  
Nessler v. Nowicki, 1155, 1157  
Nestle's Food Co. v. Industrial Comm'n, 4030, 4060  
Neuman v. Evans, 155  
Neumann v. Industrial Sound Engineering, Inc., 2600, 2605, 2610, 2611  
New Amsterdam Casualty Co. v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 325  
New Dells Lumber Co. v. Chicago St. P. M. & O. R. Co., 8135  
New York Times Co. v. Sullivan, 2500, 2511  
Nickel v. Hardware Mut. Casualty Co., 1815  
Niedbalski v. Cuchna, 1352  
Nielsen v. Spencer, 1013  
Nimlos v. Bakke, 1756  
Nimmer v. Purtell, 125  
Noffke v. Bakke, 2020  
Nolop v. Skemp, 1795  
Nolop v. Spettel, 3057  
Nommensen v. American Cont. Ins. Co., 200  
Nooyen v. Wisconsin Electric Power Company, 1900.4  
Nordahl v. Peterson, 1885, 3112  
Norfolk & Western Ry. Co. v. Liepelt, 1735  
Norfolk Monument Co. v. Woodlawn Memorial Gardens, Inc., 2804  
North Highland Inc. v. Jefferson Mach. & Tool Inc., 2800  
Northern Crossarm Co., Inc. v. Chemical Specialties, Inc., 3028  
Northern Supply Co. v. Vangard, 3207  
Northland Ins. Co. v. Avis Rent-a-Car, 1112  
Northrop v. Opperman, 8060  
Northwest Capital Corp. v. Kimpel, 3070  
Northwest Gen. Hosp. v. Yee, 1023  
Northwestern Blaugas Co. v. Guild, 3202  
Northwoods Dev. Corp. v. Klement, 8060  
Norton v. Kearney, 3040  
Nothem v. Berenschot, 1140  
Novell v. Migliaccio, 2401, 2418  
Novick v. Becker, 2605  
Novitzke v. State, 265  
Nowaczyk v. Marathon County, 8100, 8135  
Nowatske v. Osterloh, 1023, 1023.5, 1023.7, 1023.8, 1023.14, 1024, 1384

### O

O'Brien v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 215  
O'Connell v. Old Line Life Ins. Co., 1500  
O'Kon v. Laude, 8060  
O'Shea v. Lavoy, 1032  
Odgers v. Minneapolis, St. P. & S. S. M. Ry., 1336  
Ody v. Quade, 1140  
Oelke v. Earle, 1191  
Ogle v. Avina, 1060, 1107, 1153, 1175  
Ogodziski v. Gara, 1707  
Ohio Elec. Co. v. Wisconsin-Minnesota Light and Power Co., 3202  
Ohrmund v. Industrial Comm'n, 4040  
Ohrmundt v. Spiegelhoff, 2400, 2402  
Oleson v. Fader, 2006.5  
Olfe v. Gordon, 1023.5

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Ollerman v. O'Rourke Co., Inc., 2405, 2405.5  
Ollhoff v. Peck, 1391  
Ollman v. Wisconsin Health Care Liab. Ins. Plan, 405  
Olsen v. Milwaukee Waste Paper Co., 1080  
Olsen v. Moore, 4035  
Olson v. Red Cedar Clinic, 2550  
Olson v. Siordia, 1585, 1590  
Olson v. Whitney Bros. Co., 1900.4  
Olson v. Williams, 100  
Onderdonk v. Lamb, 2800  
Onsrud v. Paulsen, 3020  
Orlowski v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1756, 1757  
Ormond v. Wisconsin Power & Light Co., 1025  
Osborne v. Montgomery, 1005, 1384, 1500, 1835  
Otterstatter v. City of Watertown, 8100  
Otto v. Cornell, 1806, 8060  
Outagamie County v. Michael H., 7050, 7050A

### P

Pachowitz v. LeDoux, 2550  
Pacific Mut. Life Ins. Co. v. Haslip, 1707  
Padley v. Lodi, 1910  
Pagelsdorf v. Safeco Ins. Co. of Am., 8020  
Palisades Collection LLC v. Kalal, 1024, 1145  
Pallange v. Mueller, 3022  
Palmer v. Smith, 2006  
Palsgraf v. Long Island Railroad Co., 1005  
Pamperin v. Milwaukee Mutual Ins., 3110  
Panzer v. Hesse, 1260  
Papacosta v. Papacosta, 1105A  
Papenfus v. Shell Oil Co., 145  
Papke v. American Auto Ins. Co., 1870  
Pappas v. Jack O. A. Nelson Agency, Inc., 325  
Parchia v. Parchia, 1006  
Parks v. Wisconsin Cent. R. Co., 8102, 8103, 8105  
Parrish v. Phillips, 3117  
Patterman v. Patterman, 1390, 1391  
Patterson v. Edgerton Sand & Gravel Co., 1051, 1080, 1096  
Paul v. Hodd, 1000  
Paul v. Skemp, 1023  
Paulson v. Madison Newspapers, 1049  
Paulson v. Olson Implement Co., Inc., 3211  
Pavelski v. Roginski, 3112  
Pawlack v. Mayer, 1013  
Pawlowski v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 1390  
Payne v. Milwaukee Sanitarium Found., Inc., 1384, 1385, 1385.5  
Payne v. State, 100  
Peacock v. Wisconsin Zinc Co., 1806  
Pedek v. Wegemann, 1352, 1795  
Peeples v. Sargent, 1730, 1815  
Pence v. Slate, 1023.5  
Pennell v. Am. Family Mut. Ins. Co. 1500  
Pennington v. United Mine Workers of Am., 2804  
Peot v. Ferraro, 1705, 1707.1, 1870, 1885, 1890, 1895, 1897  
Perlick v. Country Mut. Casualty Co., 3057  
Perpignani v. Vonasek, 200, 205, 260



## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Perry Creek C. Corp. v. Hopkins Ag. Chem. Co., 3200  
Peter H. and Barbara J. Stueck Living Trust v. Easley, 8060  
Peter M. Chalik & Assoc. v. Hermes, 3086, 3740  
Peters v. Hall, 2600, 2605  
Peters v. Holiday Inns, Inc., 8050  
Peters v. Zimmerman, 1505, 1720  
Petersen v. Pilgrim Village, 3012  
Peterson v. Sinclair Refining Co., 1022.6  
Peterson v. Volkswagen of America, Inc., 3310  
Peterson v. Warren, 3117, 3118  
Petkus v. State, 8115  
Petoskey v. Schmidt, 1900.4  
Pettera v. Collins, 1070  
Pettric v. Gridley Dairy Co., 1900.4  
Petzel v. Valley Orthopedics Ltd., 1024  
Pfeifer v. Standard Gateway Theater, Inc., 230, 1090, 1153, 1155, 1157, 1158, 1160, 1165, 1190, 1191, 1192, 1195, 1225, 1354, 1500, 8045  
Pfister v. Milwaukee Free Press Co., 4050  
Phaneuf v. Industrial Comm'n, 4030, 4060  
Phelps v. Physicians Ins. Co. of Wisconsin, Inc., 1023, 1510  
Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. v. Hepps, 2500, 2501, 2505, 2505A  
Philip Morris USA v. Williams, 1707.1, 1707.2  
Phoenix Ins. Co. v. Wisconsin S. Gas Co., 8051  
Physicians Plus v. Midwest Mutual, 1920, 1922, 1924, 1926, 1928, 1930, 1932  
Pickett v. Travelers Indem. Co., 1056  
Pierce v. American Family Ins. Co., 1897  
Pierce v. Colwell, 1023.5  
Pierce v. Physicians Ins. Co. of Wis., 1510, 1511  
Pierz v. Gorski, 8060  
Pizzo v. Wiemann, 3200  
Plaintikow v. Wolk, 2401  
Plante v. Jacobs, 3052, 3700  
Pleasure Time, Inc. v. Kuss, 3700  
Pleucner v. Industrial Comm'n, 4060  
Plog v. Zolper, 1055, 1060, 1065, 1141, 1153, 1175, 1195, 1325, 1337, 1354  
PMT Machinery Sales, Inc. v. Yama Seiki USA, Inc., 2769  
Pokrojac v. Wade Motors, Inc., 3205  
Polar Mfg. Co. v. Integrity Mut. Ins. Co., 3105  
Poling v. Wisconsin Physicians Serv., 2761  
Pollock v. Vilter Mfg. Corp., 2600  
Polzin v. Helmbrecht, 2500, 2511, 2513, 2520  
Poneitowcki v. Harres, 1032  
Poole v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1280  
Portee v. Jaffee, 1510  
Porter v. Ford Motor Co., 3300  
Poston v. Burns, 2551  
Potter v. Potter, 1895  
Powers v. Joint School Dist. No. 3 of Price County, 1090, 1153, 1155, 1157, 1158, 1160, 1165, 1190, 1191, 1192, 1195, 1225, 1354  
Prange v. Rognstad, 1855, 1885  
Pressure Cast Prod. Corp. v. Page, 3710  
Price v. Ross, 2200, 2200.1  
Price v. Shorewood Motors, 4045  
Prill v. Hampton, 1051, 1880  
Prinsen v. Russos, 3200  
Prisuda v. General Casualty Co. of Am., 3112, 4020  
Pritchard v. Liggett & Myers Tobacco Co., 3230

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Production Credit Ass'n v. Equity Coop. Livestock, 2200  
Production Credit Ass'n v. Nowatzski, 2200, 2201  
Prunty v. Schwantes, 1890  
Przybyla v. Przybyla, 2725  
Przybylski v. Von Berg, 4015  
Puccio v. Mathewson, 1120  
Puhl v. Milwaukee Automobile Ins. Co., 1055, 1090, 1153, 1825  
Puls v. St. Vincent Hospital, 1024, 1145  
Pumorlo v. Merrill, 405, 1049  
Pure Milk Prod. Coop. v. National Farmers' Org., 2780

### Q

Quady v. Sickl, 1315  
Quinlan v. Coombs, 3110

### R

Raaber v. Brzoskowski, 1225  
Rabata v. Dohner, 260, 265  
Rabe v. Outagamie County, 1880  
Rabideau v. City of Racine, 1510, 2725  
Rademann v. State of Wisconsin Dept. of Transp., 8105, 8120, 8135  
Radloff v. National Food Stores, Inc., 8045  
Radue v. Dill, 2800, 2820  
Raim v. Ventura, 1019  
Rambow v. Wilkins, 315  
Randall v. Minneapolis, St. P. & S.S.M. Ry., 1412  
Ranous v. Hughes, 2500, 2507, 2552  
Rasmussen v. Garthus, 1010, 1582  
Raszeja v. Brozek Heating & Sheet Metal Corp., 1007  
Raymaker v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 8020  
Reber v. Hanson, 1012  
Recreatives, Inc. v. Myers, 3201, 3205, 3210  
Red Top Farms v. State Dept. of Transp., Div. of Highways, 8115  
Reda v. Sincaban, 2400, 2402  
Reddington v. Beefeaters Tables, Inc., 1901, 8012  
Redepenning v. Dore, 1705, 1758, 1767, 1768, 1796, 1820, 1861, 1880, 1885, 1890, 1892  
Reed v. Keith, 2513  
Reetz v. Advocate Aurora Health, 2550  
Regas v. Helios, 2200  
Reicher v. Rex Accessories Co., 230  
Reid v. Milwaukee Air Pump Co., 4027  
Reiher v. Mandernack, 8040  
Reinke v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. Ry., 1408, 1409  
Reinke v. Woltjen, 1760  
Reiter v. Dyken, 1580  
Rembalski v. John Plewa, Inc., 1024, 1145  
Renk v. State of Wis., 8102, 8103  
Repinski v. Clintonville Sav. & Loan Ass'n, 3710  
Reserve Supply Co. v. Viner, 1500  
Reshan v. Harvey, 1055  
Resseguie v. American Mut. Liab. Ins. Co., 315  
Retzlaff v. Soman Home Furnishings, 1500  
Reuhl v. Uszler, 1315  
Reyes v. Greatway Ins. Co., 1707.1  
Reyes v. Lawry, 155, 1591, 1595

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Richards v. Badger Mut. Ins. Co., 1740  
Richards v. Mendivil, 1024  
Rigby v. Herzfeldt-Phillipson Co., 4050  
Riley v. Chicago & N.W.Ry., 1402  
Rineck v. Johnson, 1870  
Rinehart v. Whitehead, 2006, 2007  
Ritter v. Farrow, 2790  
Robinson v. Briggs Transp. Co., 1115, 1120  
Robinson v. City of West Allis, 2008  
Robinson v. Kolstad, 1880  
Rock County v. Industrial Comm'n, 4040  
Rockweit v. Senecal, 8020, 1393  
Roeske v. Diefenbach, 410  
Roeske v. Schmitt, 1090  
Rogers v. Bradford, 3028  
Rolph v. EBI Cos., 3240, 3260  
Romberg v. Nelson, 1047.1, 1075  
Root v. Saul, 2006  
Rosche v. Wayne Feed, Continental Grain, 1803, 1806  
Rosen v. Milwaukee, 8120  
Rosenblatt v. Baer, 2500  
Ross v. Faber, 3222  
Ross v. Martini, 3110  
Rossow v. Lathrop, 1010  
Roth v. City of Glendale, 3051  
Rottman v. Endejan, 3048  
Rowe v. Compensation Research Bureau, Inc., 3067  
RTE Corp. v. Maryland Casualty Co., 3117  
Rubin v. Schrank, 2100  
Ruby v. Ohio Casualty Ins. Co., 1600  
Rud v. McNamara, 2401  
Rudy v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. R.R., 1026.5  
Ruka v. Zierer, 1045  
Rule v. Jones, 4000  
Rumary v. Livestock Mortgage Credit Corp., 230  
Runjo v. St. Paul Fire Marine Ins. Co., 1023  
Ruppa v. American States, Inc., 1904  
Russell Grader Mfg. Co. v. Budden, 3202  
Ryan v. Cameron, 1500  
Ryan v. Department of Taxation, 4030  
Ryan v. Estate of Sheppard, 3070  
Ryan v. Zweck-Wollenberg Co., 3240, 3242  
Ryder v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 3057

### S

S. A. Healy v. Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, 3051  
S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. v. Morris, 400, 425, 1732  
Sabinasz v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 1025, 1030  
Salladay v. Town of Dodgeville, 63  
Sample v. United States, 4035  
Sampson v. Laskin, 1500, 1900.4  
Samson v. Riesing, 3201, 3204, 3211  
Sandeem v. Willow River Power Co., 1051, 1885  
Sander v. Newman, 4080  
Sanderfoot v. Sherry Motors, Inc., 3117, 3118  
Sandford v. R. L. Coleman Realty Co., 2150

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Sands v. Menard, 3028  
Saros v. Carlson, 4015  
Sasse v. State, 152  
Sater v. Cities Serv. Oil Co., 4005  
Saveland v. Western Wis. R. Co., 4005  
Saxhaug v. Forsyth Leather Co., 1900.4  
Saylor v. Marshall and Ilsley Bank, 3082  
Scales v. Boynton Cab Co., 1025  
Scalzo v. Marsh, 305  
Scandrett v. Greenhouse, 2401, 2402  
Scarpace v. Sears Roebuck & Co., 2750, 2800  
Schabelski v. Nova Casualty Co., 2020  
Schaefer v. State Bar of Wis., 2500  
Schaefer v. Weber, 3200  
Schaller v. Marine Nat'l Bank of Neenah, 3044  
Schara v. Thiede, 2200  
Schauf v. Badger State Mut. Casualty Co., 3116  
Schemenauer v. Travelers Indem. Co., 350, 410  
Scherg v. Puetz, 3054  
Schey Enterprises, Inc. v. State, 8100, 8101  
Schicker v. Leick, 8030  
Schier v. Denny, 2605  
Schiller v. Keuffel & Esser Co., 1731  
Schiro v. Oriental Realty Co., 1920, 1922, 1928, 1930, 1932  
Schlewitz v. London & Lancashire Indem. Co., 1095  
Schlitz v. Equitable Life Assurance Soc'y, 3061  
Schlueter v. Grady, 1070, 1090  
Schmidt v. Jansen, 1070  
Schmidt v. Northern States Power Co., 950  
Schmidtke v. Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. of Am., 3072  
Schmiedeck v. Gerard, 1055, 1065  
Schmit v. Klumppan, 2620  
Schmit v. Sekach, 155, 1105A, 1591, 1595  
Schmorrow v. Sentry Ins. Co., 1900.4, 1910  
Schnabl v. Ford Motor Co., 1500  
Schneck v. Mutual Serv. Co., 3116  
Schneider v. Schneider, 3049  
Schneider v. State of Wisconsin, 8111  
Schoedel v. State Bank of Newburg, 2401, 2402  
Schoenauer v. Wendinger, 1158, 1220, 1225, 1255  
Schoenberg v. Berger, 325  
Schoenfeld v. Journal Co., 2500  
Schoer v. West Bend Mutual Ins. Co., 3110  
Schroeder v. Kuntz, 1315, 1320  
Schrubbe v. Peninsula Veterinary Serv., 1800, 1806  
Schubert v. Midwest Broadcasting Co., 3735  
Schubring v. Weggen, 1035  
Schueler v. City of Madison, 1255  
Schuh v. Fox River Tractor Co., 3262  
Schultz v. Industrial Coils, Inc., 2750  
Schultz v. Miller, 1760  
Schulz v. Chicago, M. St. P. & P. Ry., 1407, 1410  
Schulz v. General Casualty Co., 1105, 1855  
Schultz v. Strauss, 2507  
Schulz v. St. Mary's Hosp., 265, 315, 1762  
Schulze v. Kleeber, 1383, 2006, 8045  
Schuster v. Altenberg, 1023

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Schuster v. St. Vincent Hosp., 1384, 1385  
Schwalbach v. Antigo Elec. & Gas, Inc., 1803, 3200  
Schwartz v. City of Milwaukee, 1815, 8035  
Schwartz v. Evangelical Deaconess Soc'y of Wis., 3020  
Schwartz v. San Felippo, 1352  
Schwartz v. Schneuriger, 1140  
Schwartz v. Schwartz, 2605  
Schwarz v. Winter, 1354  
Schweidler v. Caruso, 1354, 1355, 1610  
Schwenn v. Loraine Hotel Co., 1910, 1911  
Scipior v. Shea, 180  
Scory v. LaFave, 1500  
Seaman v. McNamara, 3040  
Seavey v. Jones, 4000  
Seefeldt v. WISDOT, 8111  
Segnitz v. A. Grossenbach Co., 3026  
Seichter v. McDonald, 3110  
Seidl v. Knop, 4035  
Seidling v. Unichem, Inc., 3068  
Seif v. Turowski, 1105A  
Seifert v. Balink, 260, 1023  
Seitz v. Seitz, 1090, 1825  
Seitzinger v. Community Health Network, 3051  
Seligman v. Hammond, 353, 1135, 1140  
Sell v. General Elec. Supply Corp., 3014, 4005  
Selleck v. City of Janesville, 1710, 1815  
Sellmer Co. v. Industrial Comm'n, 4040  
Seltrecht v. Bremer, 1023.5  
Selzer v. Brunsell Bros., Ltd. 2400  
Sentry Ins. V. Royal Ins. Co. of America, 400  
Serkowski v. Wolf, 305  
Sevey v. Jones, 1600  
Shain v. Racine Raiders Football Club, Inc., 2020  
Shannon v. City of Milwaukee, 1383, 4035  
Shannon v. Shannon, 8020  
Sharp v. Case Corp., 1707.2, 3240, 3260  
Sharpe v. Hasey, 1910  
Shaw v. Wisconsin Power & Light Co., 1002  
Shaw v. Wuttke, 1010  
Shawver v. Roberts Corp., 100, 215, 3262  
Sherley v. Peehl, 3012  
Sherman v. Heiser, 430  
Shetney v. Shetney, 3022  
Shevel v. Warter, 4020  
Shier v. Freedman, 1023, 1023.7  
Shockley v. Prier, 1815, 1837, 1845  
Short Way Lines v. Sutton's Adm'r, 1050  
Shy v. Industrial Salvage Material Co., 3056, 3076  
Sidoff v. Merry, 2500  
Siebert v. Morris, 1013  
Silberman v. Roethe, 3074  
Simmons v. Industrial Comm'n, 4045  
Simon v. Van de Hey, 1105  
Singleton v. Kubiak & Schmitt, Inc., 1911  
Skaar v. Dept of Revenue, 4080  
Skebba v. Kasch, 3074  
Skindzelewski v. Smith, 1023.5

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Slattery v. Lofy, 1060, 1065  
Smader v. Columbia Wis. Co., 4015  
Smaxwell v. Bayard, 1391, 8020  
Smee v. Checker Cab Co., 202, 1705  
Smith v. Atco Co., 3200, 3240, 3242  
Smith v. Federal Rubber Co., 2600  
Smith v. Goshaw, 8020  
Smith v. Milwaukee County, 1020  
Smith v. Pabst, 1025.6, 1391  
Smith v. Poor Hand Maids of Jesus Christ, 1025.7  
Smith v. Sneller, 1050  
Smuda v. Milwaukee County, 8120  
Sniden v. Laabs, 3740  
Snider v. Northern States Power Co., 1022.6  
Snow v. Koepl, 2550  
Solberg v. Robbins Lumber Co., 215  
Soletski v. Krueger International, Inc., 1900.4  
Somers v. Germania Nat'l Bank, 3057  
Sommerfield v. Flury, 1032  
Sparling v. Thomas, 1350  
Spencer v. ILHR Dep't, 1710  
Spencer v. Kosir, 3079  
Spensley Feeds v. Livingston Feed & Lumber, Inc., 1  
Spheeris Sporting Goods, Inc. v. Spheeris on Capitol, 2790  
Spigelberg v. State of Wisconsin, 8104  
Spitler v. Dean, 950  
Spleas v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 1025, 1500  
Spoehr v. Mittlestadt, 2500  
Sprecher v. Monroe County Fin. Co. v. Thomas, 1731  
Sprecher v. Roberts, 4060  
Sprecher v. Weston's Bar, Inc., 1806  
St. Amant v. Thompson, 2511  
St. Clair v. McDonnell, 1113  
St. Mary's Hosp. Med. Center v. Brody, 1825  
St. Paul Fire & Marine Ins. Co. v. Burchard, 1075  
Stack v. Padden, 1825  
Stack v. Roth Bros. Co., 3020  
Staehler v. Beuthin, 1766  
Stahl v. Gotzenberger, 1  
Stahler v. Philadelphia & R.R., 1880  
Stamnes v. Milwaukee & State Line R. Co., 8105  
Staples v. Glienke, 1230, 1260  
Starobin v. Northridge Lakes, 2500  
State Bank of Viroqua v. Capitol Indem., 3117  
State ex rel. Brajdic v. Seber, 200  
State ex rel. Park Plaza Shopping Center, Inc. v. O'Malley, 410  
State ex rel. Schultz v. Bruendl, 1005, 1009  
State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. v. Campbell, 1707.1  
State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. v. Ford Motor Co., 2400  
State Farm Fire & Cas. Co. v. Amazon, 3200  
State Farm Fire & Cas. Co. v. Hague Quality Water, Int'l, 2400  
State of Wisconsin v. Abbott Laboratories, 1  
State v. Alexander, 80  
State v. Anderson, 80  
State v. Automatic Merchandisers of America, Inc., 2418  
State v. Blaisell, 2722  
State v. Caibaosai, 1035

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

State v. Camara, 2115  
State v. Chew, 2006.2  
State v. Cooper, 63  
State v. Darcy N. K., 57  
State v. Eaton, 1510  
State v. Genova, 2420  
State v. Henley, 3295  
State v. Herrington, 2115  
State v. Hess, 2722  
State v. Holt, 1005, 1009  
State v. Hutnik, 415  
State v. Joe Must Go Club, 1910, 3264  
State v. Keyes, 2722  
State v. Lederer, 420  
State v. Major, 420  
State v. City of Prescott, 2750  
State v. Robinson, 405  
State v. Schweda, 1, 3028  
State v. Sobkowiak, 2722  
State v. Smith, 2115  
State v. Tarrell, 63  
State v. Vogel, 420  
State v. Williamson, 405  
State v. Wolske, 1035  
State v. Wolter, 2722  
Statz v. Pohl, 1010, 1013  
Steel v. Ritter, 1803, 1804  
Steele v. Pacesetter Motor Cars, Inc., 3053  
Stefan Auto Body v. State Highway Comm., 8111  
Stefanovich v. Iowa Nat'l Mut. Ins. Co., 1900.4, 1904  
Steffen v. McNaughton, 4035  
Steffes v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1035  
Stehlik v. Rhoads, 1014, 1014.5, 1277, 1278  
Steinbarth v. Johannes, 1861  
Steinberg v. Jensen, 1500  
Steinhorst v. H. C. Prange Co., 1902  
Stelloh v. Liban, 2115  
Stephenson v. Universal Metrics, Inc., 1397  
Steuck Living Trust v. Easley, 8060  
Stevens v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1140  
Stevenson v. Barwineck, 2400, 2401, 2402  
Stewart v. City of Ripon, 1720  
Stilwell v. Kellogg, 1  
Stippich v. Morrison, 3116  
Stolze v. Manitowoc Terminal Co., 8120  
Stoppeworth v. Refuse Hideaway, Inc., 50  
Strack v. Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co., 1900.4  
Strahlendorf v. Walgreen Co., 3200, 3242  
Strait v. Crary, 1010  
Straub v. Schadeberg, 1096  
Strauss Bros. Packing Co. v. American Ins. Co., 1806  
Strelecki v. Fireman's Ins. Co. of Newark, 1815  
Strenke v. Hogner, 1707.1  
Strid v. Converse, 2600, 2605, 2620  
Strnad v. Cooperative Ins. Mut., 325  
Stroede v. Society Insurance, 8025  
Strong v. Milwaukee, 2100

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Strupp v. Farmers Mut. Automobile Ins. Co., 1600  
Stuart v. Weisflog's Showroom Gallery, Inc., 2400, 2720  
Stunkel v. Price Elec. Cooperative, 1922, 1928  
Struthers Patent Corp. v. Nestle Co., 400  
Sufferling v. Heyl & Patterson, 202, 1705  
Suhaysik v. Milwaukee Cheese Co., 1051, 1056  
Suick v. Krom, 315  
Sulkowski v. Schaefer, 1075, 1825, 1840, 1845  
Sullivan v. Minneapolis, St. Paul & S.S.M.R. Co., 200  
Sumnicht v. Toyota Motor Sales, 1500, 1723, 3260, 3260.1  
Sunnyslope Grading, Inc. v. Miller, Bradford & Risberg, Inc., 2400  
Super Value Stores, Inc. v. D-Mart Food Stores, Inc., 3044  
Surety Savings & Loan Association v. WISDOT, 8111  
Swanson v. Maryland Casualty Co., 1115, 1120  
Sweeney v. Matthews, 3200  
Sweet v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 1796  
Sweet v. Underwriters Casualty Co., 1032  
Swinkles v. Wisconsin Mich. Power Co., 1210  
Sykes v. Bensinger Recreation Corp., 1900.4  
Symes v. Milwaukee Mutual Ins. Co., 8045

### T

T.A.T. v. R.E.B., 5001  
Tackes v. Milwaukee Carpenters Health Fund, 1023.6  
Taker v. Ford Motor Co., 3201, 3211  
Talley v. Mustafa, 1383  
Tallmadge v. Boyle, 1023.5  
Tang v. C.A.R.S. Protection Plus, Inc., 3310  
Tanner v. Shoupe, 3240  
Tatera v. FMC Corp., 1022.2, 3242  
Tatur v. Solsrud, 1005, 1009  
Taylor v. Bricker, 3022  
Taylor v. Western Casualty & Sur. Co., 1580, 1585, 1590  
Teas v. Eisenlord, 1030, 1047.1, 1075, 1076  
Techworks, LLC v. Wille, 2401, 2402, 2403  
Tegen v. Chapin, 3200  
Tempelis v. Aetna Casualty & Surety Co., 3100  
Templeton v. Crull, 1391  
Tenney v. Cowles, 3220, 3225  
Tensfeldt v. Haberman, 1023.5  
Terry v. Journal Broadcast Corp., 1510, 2505, 2725  
Tesch v. Industrial Comm'n, 4060  
Tesch v. Wisconsin Pub. Serv. Corp., 1113  
Tew v. Marg, 3200, 3211  
The J. Thompson Mfg. Co. v. Gunderson, 3058  
The Lamar Co. v. Country Side Restaurant, 8060  
The Milwaukee & Mississippi R.R. Co. v. Elbe, 8115  
The Yacht Club at Sister Bay Condominium Ass'n, Inc. v. Village of Sister Bay, 1920  
Theama v. City of Kenosha, 1838  
Theatre Enterprises, Inc. v. Paramount Film Dist. Corp., 2804  
Theisen v. Milwaukee Auto Mut. Ins. Co., 353, 1021.2, 1046, 1047, 1047.1, 1075, 1140, 1500, 1591  
Theuerkauf v. Sutton, 1812  
Thieme v. Weyker, 1055  
Thomas v. Lockwood Oil Co., 4035  
Thomas v. Mallett, 3295  
Thomas v. Williams, 1707



## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Thompson v. Beecham, 2605, 2620  
Thompson v. Nee, 1113  
Thompson v. Village of Hales Corners, 3057  
Thoreson v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 410, 1230, 1840  
Thorp v. Mindeman, 3040  
Thurn v. LaCrosse Liquor Co., 4030  
Thurner Heat Treating Corp. v. Menco, Inc., 3710  
Tidmarsh v. Chicago M. & St. P. Ry., 1855  
Tietsworth v. Harley-Davidson, Inc., 2401, 2418  
Tillman v. Michigan-Wisconsin Pipe Line Co., 8100  
Tills v. Elmbrook Memorial Hosp., Inc., 1023.7  
Todorovich v. Kinnickinnic Mut. Loan & Bldg. Ass'n, 3010, 3014  
Tombal v. Farmers Ins. Exch., 1096, 1105A, 1153  
Tomberlin v. Chicago, St. P., M. & O. Ry., 1075  
Topham v. Casey, 1760  
Topolewski v. Plankinton Packing Co., 4050  
Topp v. Continental Ins. Co., 1900.4  
Topzant v. Koshe, 2201  
Totsky v. Riteway Bus Serv., Inc., 1005, 1009, 1105, 1105A, 1325, 1325A  
Tower Special Facilities, Inc. v. Investment Club, Inc., 2605  
Town of Fifield v. State Farm Ins. Co., 1803, 1806  
Trops v. City of Racine, 8020  
Treptau v. Behrens Spa, Inc., 1023  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church v. Tower Ins. Co., 1707.1  
Tri-State Home Improvement Co. v. Mansavage, 3700  
Tri-Tech Corp. v. Americomp Serv., 2419, 2420, 2722  
Trogun v. Fruchtman, 1023, 1023.7, 1024, 2005  
Troppe v. Scarf, 1742  
Truelsch v. Miller, 230  
Tucker v. Marcus, 1707  
Turk v. H. C. Prange Co., 1145, 1501, 3200  
Turner v. Industrial Comm'n, 4045  
Tuschel v. Haasch, 1350  
Tuteur, Adm'r v. Chicago & N. W. Ry., 1880  
TXO Prod. Corp. v. Alliance Resources Corp., 1707.1  
Tynan v. JBVBB, LLC, 3074

## U

Underwager v. Salter, 2500  
Underwood v. Paine Lumber Co., 4050  
Underwood v. Strasser, 415  
Underwood Veneer Co. v. London Guar. & Accident Co., 3117  
United America, LLC v. Wis. Dept. of Transportation, 8110  
United Concrete & Construction v. Red-D-Mix Concrete, Inc. 2401, 2403, 2418  
United States Fidelity & Guar. Co. v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 1025  
United States Fidelity & Guar. Co. v. Forest County State Bank, 4010  
United States v. Bausch & Lomb Optical Co., 2802  
United States v. Causby, 8112  
United States v. Crescent Amusement Co., 2808  
United States v. First Nat'l Bank & Trust Co. of Lexington, 2800  
United States v. National City Lines, 2802  
United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., 2802  
United States v. Patten, 2806  
United States v. Richards, 1920  
United States v. Sanno, 2802  
United States v. Standard Oil Co., 2800

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

United States v. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp., 2804  
United States v. Vasquez, 2115  
United States v. Walker, 2115  
United States v. Wise, 2802  
Utech v. Milwaukee, 8100  
Utica Mut. Ins. Co. v. Ripon Co-op., 1024, 1145

### V

Valiga v. National Food Co., 410, 3202, 3207, 3208  
Van Galder v. Snyder, 1225  
Van Gheem v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 1405  
Van Lare v. Vogt, Inc., 2400, 2401  
Van Matre v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Transp. Co., 1280  
Van Riper v. United States, 2802  
Van Wie v. Hill, 1157  
Vandehey v. City of Appleton, 2405, 2405.5  
Vanden Heuvel v. Schultz, 1096  
Vandenack v. Crosby, 1075  
Vanderbloemen v. Suchosky, 100  
Vandermark v. Ford Motor Co., 3200  
Vandervort v. Industrial Comm'n, 1910  
Venzke v. Magdanz, 3700  
Ver Hagen v. Gibbons, 1511  
Verbeten v. Huettl, 1132, 1133  
Verhelst Constr. Co. v. Galle, 1820  
Vetter v. Rein, 1804, 1805  
Victorson v. Milwaukee & Suburban Transp. Corp., 200, 410, 1019, 1025, 1760, 1815  
Village Food & Liquor v. H&S Petroleum, Inc., 1  
Vincer v. Esther Williams All-Aluminum Swimming Pool Co., 3260.1  
Viola v. Wisconsin Electric Power Co., 1900.4  
Vivid, Inc. v. Fiedler, 8130  
Vodrey Pottery Co. v. H. E. Home Co., 3225  
Voell v. Klein, 4005, 4010  
Vogel v. Grant-Lafayette Elec. Coop., 1922, 1928  
Vogel v. State, 420  
Vogel v. Vetting, 1155, 1580, 1585, 1590  
Vogelsburg v. Mason, 1902  
Vogt v. Chicago, M., St. P. & P. R.R., 180  
Voigt v. Voigt, 1140, 1280  
Voith v. Buser, 415, 2005.5  
Volbrecht v. State Highway Comm'n, 8102, 8105  
Volk v. Stowell, 3070  
Vonch v. American Standard Ins. Co., 1035  
Vosburg v. Putney, 1010, 2005  
Vultaggio v. General Motors, 3300, 3304

### W

W.G. Slugg Seed & Fertilizer v. Paulsen Lumber, 3700  
Wadzinski v. Cities Serv. Oil Co, 1025.6  
Wagner v. Allen Media Broadcasting, 2500  
Wagner v. Continental Casualty Co., 1022.2, 1022.6, 4060  
Wagner v. Mittendorf, 1725  
Wagner v. Wisconsin Municipal Mut. Ins. Co., 8020  
Wait v. Pierce, 2900  
Waldheim & Co., Inc. v. Mitchell St. Bank, 4015

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Waldman v. Young Men's Christian Ass'n, 1910  
Walk v. Boudheim, 1052, 1054  
Walker v. Baker, 1796  
Walker v. Bignell, 1005, 1009  
Walker v. Kroger Grocery & Baking Co., 1585, 1590  
Walker v. Sacred Heart Hospital, 1024, 1384  
Wall v. Town of Highland, 1048  
Walsh v. Wild Masonry Co., 1051  
Walter v. Four Wheel Drive Auto Co., 4005  
Wandry v. Bull's Eye Credit Union, 2750  
Wangen v. Ford Motor Co., 200, 205, 1707, 1707.1, 1850, 2500, 2520, 2725  
Wanta v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Light Co., 305  
Wappler v. Schench, 1076  
Waranka v. State Farm Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1870, 1895, 1897  
Warren v. American Family Mut. Ins. Co., 2760  
Washburn v. Milwaukee & Lake Winnebago R.R. Co., 8120  
Wasikowski v. Chicago & N. W. Ry., 1338  
Water Quality Store v. Dynasty Spas, Inc., 2769  
Waters v. Markham, 1032  
Waters v. Pertzborn, 1707.1  
Watland v. Farmers Mut. Auto Ins. Co., 1035  
Watts v. Watts, 3028  
Waube v. Warrington, 1510, 1511  
Waukesha County v. J.W.J., 7050, 7050A  
Wauwatosa Realty Co. v. Bishop, 3048  
Webb v. Wisconsin S. Gas Co., 1002  
Webber v. Wisconsin Power & Light Co., 1803, 1804  
Weber v. Hurley, 1022.6, 4060  
Weber v. Interstate Light & Power Co., 1002  
Weber v. Mayer, 1070  
Weber v. White, 1758  
Weber v. Young, 2100  
Weborg v. Jenny, 260, 1023, 1757  
Webster v. Krembs, 1760, 1835  
Webster v. Roth, 1403, 1408, 1409  
Wedell v. Holy Trinity Catholic Church, 2900  
Weggeman v. Seven-Up Bottling Co., 3200  
Weigell v. Gregg, 4005  
Weihert v. Piccione, 8045  
Weil-McLain Co. v. Maryland Casualty Co., 4005  
Weil v. Biltmore Grande Realty Corp., 3030  
Weinhagen v. Hayes, 4020  
Weise v. Polzer, 1500  
Weise v. Reisner, 2800  
Weiseger v. Wheeler, 4015  
Weiss v. Holman, 1395, 8030  
Weiss v. United Fire and Casualty Co., 2760, 2761  
Welch v. Milwaukee St. P. R.R., 8104  
Wells v. Chicago & N.W. Transp. Co., 1411  
Wells v. National Indemnity Co., 1762  
Wendt v. Manegold Stone Co., 8012  
Wendy M. v. Helen E.K., 3074  
Werdehoff v. General Star Indemnity Co., 2020  
Wergin v. Voss, 1920  
Werlein v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry & Transp. Corp., 1025  
Werner Transp. Co. v. Barts, 1300  
Werner Transp. Co. v. Zimmerman, 1210

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Werner v. Gimbel Bros., 1900.4, 1910  
Wertheimer v. Saunders, 1022.6  
West v. Day, 1840  
Westby v. Madison Newspapers, Inc., 2500  
Westcott v. Mikkelson, 1510, 1511  
Western Casualty & Sur. Co. v. Dairyland Mut. Ins. Co., 1125  
Westfall v. Kottke, 350, 1055, 1070, 1114, 1144, 1355, 1600  
Westmas v. Creekside Tree, 4000  
Weyauwega v. Industrial Comm'n, 4060  
Whipp v. Iverson, 2401, 3068  
White Hen Pantry v. Buttke, 2771  
White v. Benkowske, 3725  
White v. Leeder, 1391  
White v. Lunder, 1815, 1820  
White v. Minneapolis, St. P. & S. S. M. Ry., 1336  
White v. Stelloh, 3220, 3225  
White v. The Milwaukee City Ry. Co., 1705  
Whitty v. State, 415  
Widemshek v. Fale, 2520, 2722  
Wiener v. J.C. Penney Co., 3295  
Wiger v. Carr, 4027  
Wilcox v. Estate of Hines, 8060  
Will of Bate, 3032  
Will of Rice: Cowie v. Strohmeyer, 3057  
Williams v. American Transmission Co. LLC, 8065  
Williams v. Brown Mfg. Co., 3200  
Williams v. Journal Co., 2505  
Wills v. Regan, 1385  
Wilmet v. Chicago & N.W. Ry., 1411  
Wilson v. Koch, 1030, 1191  
Wilson v. Young, 1708  
Winkelman v. Beloit Memorial Hosp., 2750  
Winnebago County v. Christopher S., 7050  
Winnebago County v. Christopher S.(III), 7050, 7050A  
Winslow v. Brown, 2007  
Winston v Minkin, 3086, 3740  
Wintersberger v. Pioneer Iron & Metal Co., 1352  
Winzer v. Hartmann, 1023  
Wirsing v. Krzeminski, 2008, 2155  
Wischer v. Mitsubishi Heavy Industries America, Inc., 1707.1  
Wisconsin Bell, Inc. v. Labor & Indus. Review Comm'n, 2750  
Wisconsin Bridge and Iron Co. v. Industrial Comm'n, 1900.4  
Wisconsin Elec. Power Co. v. Zallea Bros., Inc., 3202, 3262  
Wisconsin Loan & Fin. v. Goodnough, 1010, 2000  
Wisconsin Natural Gas Co. v. Employers Mut. Liab. Ins. Co., 1021.2  
Wisconsin Natural Gas Co. v. Ford, Bacon & Davis Constr., 1580  
Wisnicky v. Fox Hills Inn & Country Club, 8020  
Wm. Beaudoin & Sons, Inc. v. Milwaukee County, 3070  
Wodill v. Sullivan, 1113  
Wojahn v. National Union Bank of Oshkosh, 3026  
Wojciechowski v. Baron, 1260  
Wojciuk v. United States Rubber Co., 3200, 3211, 3240  
Wolnak v. Cardiovascular & Thoracic Surgeons of Central Wisconsin, S.C., 2780  
Woodcock v. Home Mut. Casualty Co., 1125  
Wood v. Heyer, 3200  
Woodward v. City of Boscobel, 1720  
Wosinski v. Advance Cast Stone Co., 1511, 1707.1, 1855, 3074, 3710

## WIS JI-CIVIL CASES CITED

Wozny v. Basack, 3086  
Wright v. Hasley, 2725  
Wright v. Mercy Hosp., 1021, 1880  
Wunderlich v. Palatine Fire Ins. Co., 100  
Wurdemann v. Barnes, 1023  
Wurtzler v. Miller, 3290  
Wussow v. Commercial Mechanisms, Inc., 2520, 2722

### Y

Yanta v. Montgomery Ward & Co., Inc., 2750  
Yao v. Chapman, 1025.7  
Yaun v. Allis-Chalmers Mfg. Co., 3200, 3254  
Yelk v. Seefeldt, 2600, 2605  
Young v. Anaconda Am. Brass Co., 1051.2  
Young v. Professionals Ins. Co., 1023

### Z

Zabel v. Zabel, 1  
Zarder v. Humana Ins. Co., 2500  
Zarling v. LaSalle Coca-Cola Bottling Co., 3200  
Zartner v. Scopp, 1053, 1195, 1354  
Zastrow v. Journal Communications, Inc., 1  
Zawistowski v. Kissinger, 1707.1  
Zehren v. F. W. Woolworth Co., 1900.4, 1902, 1904  
Zeinemann v. Gasser, 1140, 1280  
Zeller v. Northrup King Co., 1707  
Zenner v. Chicago, St. P., M. & O. Ry., 315, 1210  
Ziegler Co., Inc. v. Rexnord, Inc., 2769  
Ziino v. Milwaukee Elec. Ry. & Transp. Co., 1145  
Zimmerman Bros. & Co. v. First Nat'l Bank, 3014  
Zinda v. Louisiana Pacific Corp., 2550, 2552  
Zindell v. Central Mut. Ins. Co., 1030, 1804  
Zintek v. Perchik, 1816  
Zinzow Constr. Co. v. Giovannoni, 3220  
Zoellner v. Fond du Lac, 1049  
Zoellner v. Kaiser, 1056, 1320  
Zombkowski v. Wisconsin River Power Co., 8100  
Zuelke v. Gergo, 3048  
Zummach v. Polasek, 4005  
Zweck v. D. P. Way Corp., 3051

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# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

## A

Abettor, liability of, battery, 2007  
Abrogation of tort immunities,  
    Law Note, 2900  
Absent witness, 410  
Abuse of privilege  
    defamation, nonconstitutional conditional privilege,  
        2507  
    defamation, constitutional, 2511, 2513  
    malicious prosecution, 2552  
Abuse of process, 2620  
Access rights, defined, eminent domain, 8111  
Accident, unavoidable, 1000  
Accrual of claim, 950  
Activation of latent disease or condition, 1720  
Adult and child, comparative negligence, 1582  
Adult child, death of, pecuniary loss, 1885  
Adverse possession  
    elements, 8060  
    burden of proof, 200  
Advice of counsel as defense, malicious prosecution, 2610  
Agency  
    agent's duty to principal, 4020  
    apparent authority of agent, 4005  
    defined, 4000  
    driver of automobile, 1600  
    general agent, defined, 4001  
    implied authority of agent, 4010  
    independent contractor, definition, 4060  
    master-servant, See Scope of employment ratification  
    by principal of agent's acts, 4015  
    servant, See Scope of employment special agent,  
    defined, 4002  
    termination, general, 4027  
    termination, notice to third party, 4028  
    volunteer, without compensation, 4025  
Agent, negligence of insurance, 1023.6  
Aggravation of injury, damages  
    injury because of medical malpractice, 1710  
    latent disease or condition, 1720  
    preexisting injury, 1715  
Agreement, See also Contracts  
    defined, 3010  
    release, avoidance of for mutual mistake of fact, 3012  
    supplemental instruction on, 195  
Air rights, defined, eminent domain, 8112  
Alcohol, See also Negligence  
    negligence of person consuming, 1035 (comment)  
    test for, in blood, 1008,  
Alcoholic, commitment of, 7070  
Allergy of user, implied warranty, 3209  
Alley, emerging from  
    stop, 1330  
    stop and yield right of way, 1270  
    yield right of way, 1175  
Ambiguous contracts, 3051  
Animal (dog) owner's or keeper's liability common law,  
    1391  
    statutory, 1390  
Animals, right of way, 1200

Apparent authority, agency, 4005  
Application for insurance, See Insurance  
Approaching car  
    at intersection, defined, 1195  
    on highway, defined, 1205  
Approaching nonarterial intersections, right of way, 1155  
    Approaching or entering intersection about same time,  
    1157  
Approach of emergency vehicle, right of way, 1210  
Arguments of counsel  
    instruction at close of evidence, 110  
    preliminary instruction, 50  
Arrest  
    defined, 2115  
    excessive force in, 2008, 2155  
    false, 2115  
    without a warrant, reasonable grounds, 2115  
Arterial, driver on, right of way, 1090  
Artificial condition as attractive nuisance, 1011  
Asking questions, by juror, 57  
Assault, 2004  
Assumption of due care by highway user, 1030  
Assumption, of duty, voluntary, 1397  
Attorney, See also Counsel  
    fees, 3760  
    malpractice, 1023.5  
    status as a specialist, 1023.5A  
Attractive nuisance, 1011, 8025  
Audible, defined, 1210  
Authority  
    apparent, agency, 4005  
    implied, agency, 4010  
Automobile, See also Vehicles  
    damage to, 1805  
    defective condition of, host's liability, 1032  
    driver of, agency, 1600  
    joint adventure (enterprise), 1610  
    Lemon Law, 3300, 3301, 3302, 3303, 3304  
    loss of use, damages  
        not repairable, 1801  
        repairable, 1800  
    Magnuson-Moss Act claim, 3310  
    owner's permission for use of, 3112  
    racing of, 1107  
Avoidance of contract for mutual mistake of fact, 3072

## B

Backing, lookout, 1060  
Bad faith by insurance company, 2760, 2761, 2762  
Bailment  
    defined, 1025.5  
    duty of bailee under for mutual benefit, 1025.7  
    duty of bailor for hire, 1025.6  
    negligence of bailee may be inferred, 1026  
    negligence of carrier presumed, 1026.5  
Bailor, negligence of gratuitous, 1025.8  
Battery,  
    defense of property, 2006.5  
    defined, 2005

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

excessive force in arrest, 2008, 2155  
Battery (continued)

- liability of aider and abettor, 2007
- offensive contact 2005.5
- punitive damages, 1708
- self-defense, 2006
- sports participant, injury, 2020

Bell, railroad, duty to ring within municipality, 1402  
Belt, safety, failure to use, 1277  
Benefit-of-the-bargain, 2405, 2405.5  
Benefits, special, defined, eminent domain, 8115  
Bifurcation, punitive damages, 1707.1 (comment)  
Blind persons

- duty of, 1050
- right of way, 1170

Blood test for alcohol, 1008  
Brakes, equipment, and maintenance of vehicles, 1054  
Breach of contract, 3053

- by purchaser, damages, 3750
- by seller, damages, 3755

Breach of warranty, See Products liability  
Building

- abutting on a public highway, owner's duty, 8030
- public, negligence of owner, safe-place statute, 1904

Building contractor, negligence of, 1022.4  
Building contracts, damages, 3700, 3701  
Burden of proof, See Evidence  
Bus, school

- flashing red signals, 1133
- stopped on highway, 1132

Business

- defined, safe-place statutes, 1910
- defined, strict liability (products), 3264
- injury to, 2820, 2822
- liability of proprietor, patron injured, act of third person, 8045
- loss of profits, damages, 1750.2, 1754, 1780
- nuisance arising out of operation of, 1924

Buyer, duty of, 3254  
Bystander recovery, 1510

## C

Camouflage

- lookout, 1056
- speed, 1320

Capitalization of rental income, eminent domain, 8130  
Care, ordinary, varies with circumstances, 1020  
Caregiver, duty of, 1021  
Carrier, common, 1025  
Castle Doctrine, 2006.2  
Cause

- defined, 1500
- informed consent cases, 1023.1, 1023.3, 1023.16, 1023.17
- normal response, 1501
- probable cause, malicious prosecution, 2605
- proximate, 1500
- relation of collision to physical injury, 1506
- risk contribution theory, 3295
- where cause of death is in doubt, 1505

Charge after verdict, 197  
Chemical tests, intoxication, 1008  
Child

- and adult, comparative negligence, 1582
- attractive nuisance, 1011, 8025
- death of adult child, pecuniary loss, 1885
- death of child, parents' loss of society and companionship, 1895
- death of minor child, pecuniary loss, 1890
- driver's duty when present, 1045
- injury to, parents' damages
  - for loss of child's services, 1835
  - for loss of society and companionship, 1837
  - for medical expenses, 1840
  - for services rendered to child, 1845
- injury to parent, 1838
  - loss of society and companionship for death of parent, 1897
- negligence of, 1010
- negligence of child compared with adult, 1582
- parents' duty
  - negligent entrustment, 1014
  - to control, 1013
  - to protect, 1012
- trespasser, 8025, 8027

Chiropractor

- determining treatability, 1023.9
- duty to inform patient, 1023.15, 1023.16, 1023.17
- negligence of, 1023.8, 1023.9

Circumstantial evidence, 230  
Civil rights, See Federal civil rights  
Civil theft

- by contractor, 2722
- by contractor of movable property of another, 2420

Closing instruction, 190, 191  
Collateral source, 1756, 1757  
College degree, delay in obtaining, 1760  
Commitment

- of a mentally disabled person, 7050
- of an alcoholic, 7070

Common carrier, negligence of, defined, 1025  
Common motor carrier

- defined, 1339
- stop at all railroad crossings, 1339

Common scheme or plan, 1740  
Comparable sales, eminent domain, 8120  
Comparative negligence

- adult and child, 1582
- basis of comparison, 1580, 1585, 1590
- multiple driver-multiple guest comparison, 1591
- recommended questions, 1592
- when negligence or cause question has been answered by the court, 1595

Compensatory damages, See Damages  
Computer use, by jurors, 50  
Concerted action, 1740  
Condemnation, See Eminent domain  
Conditional privilege

- defamation, abuse of, 2509
- emergency vehicle, 1031
- invasion of privacy, abuse of, 2552



# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

Consortium, defined, 1815

## Conspiracy

- affiliated corporations, between, 2808
- defined, 2800
- evidence of to be viewed as a whole, 2806
- indirect proof, 2802
- injury to business, 2820, 2822
- overt acts, 2810
- proof of membership, 2802
- restraint of will, 2822

Construction workers, right of way, 1265

Constructive eviction, 3095

Consumer, duty of, 3254

Contact sports injury, 2020

## Contractor

- building, contract damages, 3701, 3700
- building, negligence of, 1022.4
- independent, defined, 4060
- liability of one employing, 1022.6
- theft by, 2722

## Contracts

- abandonment, mutual, 3078
- agreement, 3010
- ambiguous provisions, 3051
- avoidance for mutual mistake of fact, 3072
- breach, 3053
  - by purchaser, damages, 3750
  - by seller, damages, 3755
- building contracts, damages, 3700
- consideration, 3020
- damages, out-of-pocket rule, 3710
- definiteness and certainty, 3022
- definitions — "bona fide," 3045
- demand for performance, 3054
- duration, 3049
- estoppel, 3074
- frustration of purpose, 3070
- good faith, 3044
- hindrance or interference with performance, 3060
- implied contract
  - general, 3024
  - promise to pay reasonable value, 3026
  - unjust enrichment, 3028
  - implied promise of no hindrance, 3046
- impossibility
  - act of God, 3066
  - disability or death of a party, 3067
  - original, 3061
  - partial, 3063
  - superior authority, 3065
  - supervening, 3062
  - temporary, 3064
- insurance contracts, See Insurance
- interference with, 2780
- integration of several writings, 3040
- landlord-tenant, 3095
- modification
  - by conduct, 3032
  - by mutual assent, 3030
- novation, 3034

## offer

- acceptance, 3014
  - making, 3012
  - rejection, 3016
  - revocation, 3018
  - partial integration, contract partly written, partly oral, 3042
  - real estate listing contract
    - broker's commission on sale subsequent to expiration of contract containing "extension" clause, 3090
    - termination for cause, 3088
    - validity, performance, 3086
  - rescission for nonperformance, 3076
  - sale of goods, delivery or tender of performance, 3056
  - subsequent construction by parties, 3050
  - substantial performance, 3052
  - termination of servant's employment
    - additional consideration provided by servant, 3084
    - employer's dissatisfaction, 3083
    - indefinite duration, 3082
    - time as an element, 3048
  - tortious interference with, 2780
  - voidable contracts, duress, fraud, misrepresentation, 3068
  - waiver, 3057
  - waiver of strict performance, 3058
- Contribution, risk, 3295
- Contributory negligence
- defined, 1007
  - highway defect, 1048
  - of guest
    - intoxication, 1035
    - failure to protect, 1047
    - placing self in position of danger, 1049
    - of mentally disabled person, 1007, 1385.5
    - of patient and informed consent, 1007, 1023.4
    - of pedestrian, sidewalk defect, 1049 of rescuer, 1007.5
- Control and management, See Management and control
- Controlled intersection, right of way, 1150
- Conversion
- damages, 2201
  - destruction of property, 2200.2
  - dispossession, 2200
  - failure to return upon demand, 2200.1
- Corporate officers, liability of, 1005
- Costs, reproduction, eminent domain, 8125
- Counsel
- advice of, as defense, malicious prosecution, 2610
  - arguments of, 110
  - objection of, 115
  - reference to insurance company, 125
- Course of dealing, implied warranty, 3203, 3206
- Court
- appreciation of jury's services, 197
  - damage question answered by, 150
  - demeanor of, 120
  - finding in special verdict that one or more parties at fault, 108
  - negligence question answered by, 155

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

- order striking testimony, 130
- reference to insurance company, 125
- Credibility of witnesses, 50, 215
- Credible evidence, defined, 200
- Crops, damages for injury to, 1806
- Crossing arterial highway, lookout, 1065
- Crossing, railroad
  - duty of railroad to maintain open view, 1411
  - duty of train crew, 1405
- Crossing roadway, pedestrian's duties, See Right of way
- Crosswalk, pedestrian's rights and duties, See Right of way
- Custom and usage, evidence of in determining negligence, 1019

## D

### Damages

- activation of latent disease or condition, 1720
- aggravation of injury because of medical malpractice, 1710
- aggravation of preexisting injury, 1715
- attorney fees, 3760
- automobile
  - loss of use, 1800
  - property, 1805
- breach of contract
- building contracts, 3700, 3701
- burden of proof, 202
- by purchaser, 3750
- by seller, 3755
- bystander, 1510
- collateral source, 1756, 1757
- common scheme or plan, 1740
- compensatory, burden of proof as to, 202
- condemnation, See Eminent domain
- consortium, 1815
- contracts
  - building, 3700
  - breach by purchaser, 3750
  - breach by seller, 3755
  - general, 3710
- conversion, 2201
- crops, 1806
- damage question answered by the court, 150
- death, wrongful
  - estate's recovery for medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1850
  - estate's recovery for pain and suffering, 1855
  - of adult child, pecuniary loss, 1885
  - of child, parents' loss of society and companionship, 1895
  - of husband, all items, 1861
  - of minor child, pecuniary loss, 1890
  - of parent,
    - loss of society and companionship, 1897
    - pecuniary loss, 1880
  - of spouse, loss of society and companionship, 1870
  - of wife, medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1875

- of wife, pecuniary loss, 1861
- defamation
  - compensatory, 2516
  - punitive, 2520
- disability, past and future, personal injury, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1766, 1767, 1768
- divisible injuries from nonconcurrent or successive torts, 1722
- dog bite, 1390
- duty to mitigate, 1730, 1731
- earnings, loss of, as, 1760, 1762
- effects of inflation, 1797
- eminent domain
  - change in grade, 8110
  - loss of access, 8110
  - severance, 8105
  - unit rule, 8100, 8101
  - unity of use, two or more parcels, 8107
- emotional distress, 1770
- enhanced injury, 1723
- estate's recovery, 1850, 1855
- fraud and deceit, See Misrepresentation future profits, 3725
- general instruction on, 1700
- incidental, 3720
- income, loss of, as 1760, 1762
- income, not taxable as, 1735
- in general, 1700
- injury to child, parents' damages
  - for loss of child's services, 1835
  - medical expenses, 1840
  - services rendered to child, 1845
- injury to a growing crop, 1806
- injury to parent, 1838
- injury to spouse
  - loss of consortium, 1815
  - medical and hospital expenses, 1825
  - wife's responsibility for her own, 1830
  - nursing services, 1820
- loss of consortium, 1815
- loss of expectation, 3735
- misrepresentation
  - basis for liability and damages, 2400
  - fraud and deceit, measure of damages in sale or exchange of property, 2405
  - negligence, out-of-pocket rule, fraud, 2406
  - strict responsibility, 2405.5
- mitigate, duty to, 1730, 1731
- nominal, 1810
- not taxable as income, 1735
- personal injury
  - aggravation or activation of latent disease or condition, 1720
  - aggravation of injury because of medical malpractice, 1710
  - aggravation of preexisting injury, 1715
  - disability, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1766, 1767, 1768
  - earning capacity, impairment of, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1760, 1762
  - earnings, loss of
    - delay in obtaining a degree, 1760

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

- future, 1762
- past, 1760
- professional, 1785
- injuries from nonconcurrent or successive torts, 1722
- Damages (continued)
  - life expectancy and mortality tables, 1795
  - loss of business, profits, 1760, 1762
  - loss of professional earnings, 1760, 1762
  - malpractice, lack of informed consent, 1741
  - malpractice, offsetting benefit, 1742
  - medical and hospital expenses
    - future, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1758
    - past, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1756, 1757
  - pain and suffering
    - future, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1767, 1768
    - past, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1766, 1768
  - traumatic neurosis, 1770
  - present value of future damages, 1796
  - property
    - automobile
      - damage to, 1804
      - loss of use, 1800
    - personal
      - damage to, 1804
      - destruction of, 1803
  - punitive
    - when awarded, 1707, 1707.1
    - defamation, 2520
    - products liability, 1707A, 1707.2
    - question answered by the court, 150
    - severance
      - change in grade, 8110
      - defined, 8105
      - loss of access, 8110
    - subsequent event causing further injury, 1725
    - termination of real estate listing contract by seller, broker's recovery, 3740
- Deaf person, duty of, 1050
- Dealership, See Fair Dealership Law this index.
- Death
  - cause of in doubt, 1505
  - of adult child, pecuniary loss, 1885
  - of child, parents' loss of society and companionship, 1895
  - of husband, all items, 1861
  - of minor child, pecuniary loss, 1890
  - of parent,
    - pecuniary loss, 1880
    - society and companionship, 1897
  - of spouse, loss of society and companionship, 1870
  - of wife, medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1875
  - of wife, pecuniary loss, 1861
  - presumption of due care, 353
- Deceive, defined, 3105
- Defamation
  - compensatory damages, 2516
  - conditional privilege, abuse of privilege, 2507
  - defined, 2501
  - express malice, 2513
  - Law Note, 2500
  - media defendant, abuse of constitutional privilege, 2509
  - private individual versus media defendant, 2509
  - private individual versus private individual, 2501
  - public figure, 2511
  - punitive damages, 2520
  - truth as defense, 2505, 2505A
- Defective condition of car, host's liability, 1032
- Defects
  - highway, 8035
    - contributory negligence, 1048
  - if known in a product, then no implied warranty, 3207
  - sidewalk, 8035
    - contributory negligence, 1049
- Defense of property, 2006.5
- Degree, delay in obtaining, 1760
- Deliberation, process of, 191
- Demeanor of judge, jury to ignore, 120
- Dentist
  - duty to inform patient, 1023.15-1023.17
  - negligence of, 1023.14
- Depositions, use of, See Preliminary instructions before trial
- Destruction of personal property, 1803
- Deviation
  - ascertainment that movement can be made with reasonable safety, 1354
  - from clearly indicated traffic lanes, 1355
  - signal required, 1350
- Directional signals, 1350
- Disability, damages, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1766, 1767, 1768
- Disabled vehicle, parking, 1125
- Discharge, wrongful, 2750
- Discovery, 950
- Disease or condition, latent, aggravation or activation of, damages, 1720
- Dissenting jurors, to sign verdict, 180
- Distance between front and rear car, 1112
- Divided highway, pedestrians' rights, 1160
- Divisible injuries, 1722
- Doctor, See Physician
- Dog bite, 1390
- Dog owner or keeper, liability of
  - common law, 1391
  - statutory, 1390
- Domestic partner, 1861, 1870 (comment)
- Double damages, dog bite, 1390
- Drinking by driver or guest, relation to negligence, 1035
- Driver of automobile
  - drinking by, relation to negligence, 1035 duties
  - approaching intersection when yellow light shows, 1192
  - at railroad crossing, 1336, 1337
  - entering intersection with green light in his favor, 1191
  - following another, 1112
  - preceding another, lookout, 1114
  - preceding another, slowing or stopping, signalling, 1113
  - when children present, 1045
  - inattentive, 1070

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

obstructed view, 1310  
position on right side of roadway and exceptions,  
1135, 1140  
seat belt negligence, 1277  
as servant, 1600  
scope of employment, 1605  
Driver's manual, use by jury, 255  
Driveway  
emerging from a private driveway or other  
nonhighway access, 1355  
left turn into, 1352  
Due care, by highway users  
right to assume, 1030  
presumption of, 353  
Duties, See entries under specific titles  
Duty to inform patient  
cause, 1023.3, 1023.17  
chiropractor, 1023.15-1023.17  
dentist, 1023.15-1023.17  
medical, 1023.1-1023.4  
optometrist, 1023.15-1023.17  
podiatrist, 1023.15-1023.17  
special verdict, 1023.1, 1023.16  
Duty to sound horn, nonstatutory, 1096  
Duty, voluntary assumption of, 1397

## E

Earnings, loss of  
business profits, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1760, 1762  
delay in obtaining degree, 1760  
impairment of earning capacity, future, 1762  
past, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1760  
professional, 1760, 1762  
Easement, termination by abandonment, 3079  
Economic loss doctrine, 2419  
Economic waste, 3700  
Emergency doctrine, 1105A  
Emergency vehicle, approach of, right of way, 1210  
Emergency vehicle, conditional privilege, 1031  
Emerging from alley or other  
nonhighway, 1175, 1270, 1330, 1335  
Emerging from, defined, 1270  
Eminent domain, 8100-8145  
access rights, defined, 8111  
air rights, defined, 8112  
assemblage, 8145  
capitalization of rental income, 8120  
change in grade, 8110  
comparable sales, 8120  
cost approach, 8135  
fair market value  
defined, 8100  
lands containing marketable deposits, 8105  
partial taking, 8101  
income approach, 8130  
inconvenience to landowner, 8125 (withdrawn)  
legal nonconforming use, 8140  
reproduction costs, 8135  
severance damages, 8102, 8103  
special benefits, 8115

Taking of a Limited Easement, 8113  
unit rule, 8100, 8101  
unity of use, 8104  
Emotional distress  
bystander, 1510  
intentional infliction of, 2725  
negligent infliction of, 1510, 1511  
Employees of hospital, See Hospital employees  
Employer  
duty of, safe-place statute, 1900.2  
liability of one employing independent contractor,  
1022  
negligence of, safe-place statute, 1900.4  
negligent supervision, training, or hiring by, 1383  
vicarious liability of, 4055  
wrongful discharge, 2750  
Employment, See also Agency; Scope of employment safe  
place, 1900.2, 1900.4  
wrongful discharge, 2750  
Enhanced injuries, 1723  
Entering  
defined, 1175  
from alley or nonhighway access point, 1175  
or crossing through highway, 1065  
Enterprise, joint, automobile, 1610  
Entrustment, negligent, 1014, 1014.5  
Equipment and maintenance of vehicles  
brakes, 1054  
directional signals, 1350  
general duty, 1052  
headlights, 1053  
school bus, flashing red signals, 1133  
Equitable actions, right to jury trial, 1  
Estate's recovery  
for medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1850  
for pain and suffering, 1855  
Eviction, constructive, 3095  
Evidence  
burden of proof, 200  
adverse possession, 200, 205  
compensatory damages, 202  
defined, 100  
false imprisonment, 2105  
"fraud" standard, 205  
higher civil standard, 205  
medical or scientific treatise, 261  
middle, 205  
ordinary civil standard, 200  
preliminary instruction, 50  
circumstantial, 230  
credibility of witnesses, 215, 415  
driver's manual, use by jury, 255  
expert testimony, 260, 265  
failure to call witness, 410  
false testimony, 405  
falsus in uno, 405  
general, 260  
hypothetical question, 265  
inferences, permissive, 356  
Law Note, 349  
measurements, use of, 305

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

medical or scientific treatise, 261  
negative testimony, 315  
opinion of expert, 260  
physical facts, use of as, 325  
permissive inferences, 356,  
    Law Note, 349  
positive testimony, 315  
presumptions, 350-356 spoliation, 400  
subsequent remedial measures, 358  
summary of, 103  
Evidence (continued)  
    weight of, 215  
    witness  
        absence of, 410  
        impeachment of, 420  
        prior conviction of, 415  
        prior inconsistent statement of, 420  
        self-incrimination of, 425  
Exhibits, 50, 100  
Expert testimony  
    general, 260  
    hypothetical question, 265  
Express malice, defamation, 2518  
Express warranty, See Products liability

## F

Failure  
    of insured to cooperate, 3115  
    materiality of failure, 3116  
    to examine product, implied warranty, 3208  
    to give notice to insurer, 3117  
    to protest, guest, 1047  
    to see object in plain sight, 1070  
    to use safety belt, 1277  
    to use safety helmet, 1278  
    to yield roadway, slow moving vehicles, 1305  
Fair Dealership Law, 2769-2772  
Fair market value  
    defined, 1803, 8100, 8105  
    lands containing marketable deposits, 8102  
    testimony by owner, 260  
False arrest  
    felony, 2115  
False arrest  
    reasonable grounds to believe offense committed,  
        2115  
False imprisonment, 2100  
Falsely represent, defined, 3100  
False representative, See Insurance; Misrepresentation  
False testimony, willful, 405  
Falsus in uno, 405  
Fault, defined, ultimate fact verdict, 1001  
Federal civil rights  
    excessive force in arrest (in maintaining jail security),  
        2155  
    Section 1981 actions, 2150  
    Section 1982 actions, 2150  
    Section 1983 actions, 2151  
Fees, attorney, 3760  
Felony, false arrest for, 2115

Fitness for particular purpose, warranty, 3202  
Five-sixths verdict, 180  
Fixed speed limits, 1290  
Flammable liquid, defined, 1339  
Flashing traffic signal  
    red, 1133  
    yellow, 1090  
Following car, operation of, 1112  
Franchise, wrongful termination of, 2770  
Fraud, See also Misrepresentation  
    elements of, 2400, 2419  
Frequentener  
    defined, 1900.4, 1901  
    injury to, safe-place statute, 1900.4  
    negligence of, safe-place statute, 1902  
Front car  
    duty of preceding driver to following driver, 1114  
    slowing, stopping and signalling, 1113  
Funeral  
    burial expenses, wrongful death, 1850  
    procession, right of way, 1180  
Future and past disability, damages, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1766,  
    1767, 1768  
Future damages, present value of, 1796

## G

Gas company  
    duties relating to company's pipes, mains, and meters,  
        1003  
    duties relating to customer's pipes or appliances, 1002  
Gender-Neutral Language, 5  
General agent, defined, 4001  
General benefit, eminent domain, 8115  
General disability, one question as to, 1750.2  
General verdict, submission on, 106  
Good faith,  
    duty of, 3044  
    Lemon law, 3300  
Gratuitous bailor, negligence of, 1025.8  
Green arrow, traffic signal, 1185  
Green light, entering intersection with, 1191  
Green or go, traffic signal, 1190  
Gross negligence, See also Negligence  
    defined, intoxication not involved, 1006  
    reckless conduct, 1006, 2020  
Growing crop, damage to, 1806  
Guardianship, 7054, 7055, 7056, 7060, 7061  
Guest  
    automobile  
        active negligence, management and control,  
            1047.1  
        drinking of intoxicants, relation to negligence,  
            1035  
        failure to protest, contributing negligence, 1047  
        lookout  
            duty of with respect to, 1075  
            duty to warn, 1076  
        placing self in position of danger, 1046

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

## H

Handicaps, physical, duty of persons with, 1050  
Headlights  
    automobile, 1053  
    railroads, 1412  
Helmet negligence, 1277 (comment), 1278  
Highway  
    defects, 8035  
    defects, contributory negligence, 1048 defined, 1325A  
    divided, defined, 1160  
  
Highway (continued)  
    entering from an alley or nonhighway access point,  
        1175  
    entering or crossing through highway, 1065  
    insufficiency, 8035  
    intersection, right of way, 1157  
    obstructions, public utility, non-energized facilities,  
        1395  
    users, right to assume due care, 1030  
    worker, right of way, 1265  
Hiring, Negligent, 1383  
Horn  
    duty to sound when passing vehicles proceeding in  
        same direction, statutory, 1144  
    failure to sound, duty, nonstatutory, 1096  
Horse, liability of owner or keeper, common law, 1391  
Hospital, negligence of, in granting staff privileges, 1384  
Hospital employees, negligence  
    injury resulting from patient's inability to look out for  
        own safety, 1385  
    registered nurses and licensed technicians performing  
        skilled services, 1023.7  
    suicide or injury resulting from escape or attempted  
        suicide, 1385.5  
Hospital expenses  
    estate's recovery for, 1850  
    injury to child, 1840  
    injury to spouse, 1825  
    personal injuries, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1756, 1757, 1758  
    wife's responsibility for own, 1830  
    wrongful death, 1850  
Hospital licensed technicians, See Hospital employees  
Host-guest relationship  
    agency, driver of automobile, 1600  
    contributory negligence of guest, placing self in  
        position of danger, 1046  
    contributory negligence of guest, riding with host,  
        1047  
    danger, 1046  
    defective condition of car, host's liability, 1032  
    drinking by driver, relation to negligence, 1035  
    driver's management and control, limited skill, 1110  
    guest's duty as to lookout, 1075  
    joint enterprise, automobile cases, 1610  
Hotel innkeeper  
    duty to furnish reasonably safe premises and furniture  
        for his guests, 8051  
    duty to provide reasonable security, 8050  
Household member, 3110

Household services, loss of, 1816, 1817  
Husband  
    death of, damages, all items, 1861, 1870  
    injury to, See Spouse  
Hypothetical question, expert testimony, 265

## I

Ignoring judge's demeanor, 120  
Illness without forewarning, 1021.2  
Immunity, abrogation of torts,  
    Law Note, 2900  
Impairment of earning capacity, See Earnings  
Impeachment of witness, prior inconsistent or  
    contradictory statements, 420  
Impeding traffic  
    by reason of slow speed, 1300 failure to yield  
        roadway, 1305  
Implied authority, agency, 4010  
Implied duty of good faith, 3044  
Implied warranty, See Products liability  
Imprisonment, See False imprisonment  
Improper use, implied warranty, 3210  
Imputed negligence, driver of automobile  
    agency, 1600  
    joint adventure (enterprise), 1610  
    scope of employment, 1605  
Inattentive driving, 1070  
Income, damages award, not taxable as, 1735  
Income, loss of, 1760, 1762  
Income approach, eminent domain, 8130  
Incompetent person, 7054-7061  
Inconvenience to landowners, eminent domain, 8125  
Independent contractor  
    defined, 4060  
    liability of one employing, 1022.6  
Inference,  
    self-incrimination, 425  
    spoliation, 400  
Inflation, effects of, 1797  
Infliction of emotional distress, 1510, 1511, 2725  
Informed consent, 1023.2, 1023.3  
    causation, 1023.3  
    contributory negligence, 1007, 1023.4  
        dentist, 1023.15-1023.17  
        optometrist, 1023.15-1023.17  
        podiatrist, 1023.15-1023.17  
    duty of chiropractor, 1023.15-1023.17  
    duty of physician, 1023.2  
    suggested verdict, 1023.1  
Injuries, divisible, 1722  
Injury  
    aggravation of, because of medical malpractice, 1710  
    caused by subsequent event, 1725  
    enhancement of, 1723  
    from failure to wear safety belt, 1277 from fright,  
        1510  
    personal, See Damages  
    preexisting, aggravation or activation of, 1715  
    relation of collision to physical injury, 1506  
    to child

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

parents' damages for loss of child's services, 1835  
parents' damages for medical expenses, 1840  
parents' damages for services rendered to child,  
1845  
to frequenter, safe place, 1900.4  
to spouse  
    medical and hospital expenses, 1825  
    wife's responsibility for own, 1830  
    nursing services, 1820  
    services, society, and companionship, 1815  
Inspection, no duty of, express warranty, 3222  
Insufficiency of highway or sidewalk, 8035  
  
Insurance  
    agent, negligence of, 1023.6  
    application for  
        false representations, 3100  
        misrepresentation with intent to deceive, 3100  
    bad faith by insurance company, 2760, 2761, 2762  
    breach of  
        affirmative warranty, 3100  
        promissory warranty, 3105  
    failure of condition, 3105  
    failure of insured to cooperate, 3115  
        materiality, 3116  
    failure to give notice to insurer, 3117  
        materiality, 3118  
    household member, 3110  
    resident covered by, 3110  
Intent, defined, 3100  
Intentional deceit, misrepresentation, 2401  
Intentional tort, 2000  
    infliction of emotional distress, 2725  
    interference with contract, 2780  
    liability of minor, 2000  
    mitigation of damages, 1732  
    verdict in cases involving  
        joint tortfeasors, 1580 (comment)  
Interrelationship of special verdict questions, 145  
Intersection  
    alley, stop emerging from, 1330  
    defined, 1325A  
    driver on arterial approaching, 1090  
    left turn at, 1195  
    lookout, 1090, 1191  
    of highways, right of way, 1157  
    pedestrians' right, 1158, 1159, 1160, 1165  
    right of way, See Right of way  
    stop at, 1325, 1325A  
Intoxicants  
    drinking by driver, 1035  
    drinking by guest, 1040  
Intoxication  
    chemical tests, 1008  
    not involved in gross negligence, 1006  
    of driver, 1035  
Intrusion, invasion of privacy, 2551  
Invasion of privacy, 2550, 2551, 2552  
Involuntary commitment of mentally ill person, 7050  
Involuntary commitment: mentally ill: recommitment  
alleging Wis. Stat. § 51.20(1)(am), 7050A

## J

Joint adventure, enterprise, automobile, 1610  
Joint and several liability, 1740  
Judge, See Court  
Juror  
    computer use by, 50  
    conduct during trial, 50  
    duties in general, 100-197  
    knowledge, 215  
    no obligation to discuss case, 197  
    questions, 57  
Jury  
    appreciation of services, 197  
    asking questions, 57  
    conduct of, 50  
    election of foreman, 190  
    not to discuss case after verdict, 197  
    note taking, 60, 61  
    reaching a verdict, 190  
    unable to agree, supplemental instruction, 195  
    use of driver's manual, 255  
    view, 152  
Jury trial, right to, 1  
Just compensation, eminent domain, 8100, 8105

## K

Keeper or owner of animal, liability of common law, 1391  
    statutory, 1390  
Knowledge of juror, 215

## L

Landlord-tenant, 3095  
Landowner, inconvenience to, eminent domain, 8125  
Latent disease or condition, activation or  
    aggravation of, 1720  
Lay witness, 268  
Leaving curb or place of safety, pedestrian, 1255  
Leaving vehicle  
    off the roadway, 1115  
    on the roadway, 1120  
        lights, 1130  
    on or off the roadway, exception to prohibition, 1125  
Left side of road, driving on, 1135  
    violation excused, 1140  
Left turn at intersection, 1195, 1352  
Legal nonconforming use, eminent domain, 8140  
Lemon Law, 3300, 3301, 3302, 3303, 3304  
Liability  
    of abettor, battery, 2007  
    of dog (animal) owner or keeper, common law, 1391  
    of dog owner or keeper, statutory, 1390  
    of employer, 4055  
    of host, defective condition of car, 1032  
    of minor, intentional tort, 2000  
    of one employing independent contractor, 1022.6

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

of principal for acts of agent, See Agency  
of proprietor for injury to patron caused by third person, 8045  
Libel, See Defamation  
Licensed technician, negligence of, 1023.7  
Life expectancy and mortality tables, 1795  
Lights, motor vehicle  
    directional signals, 1350  
    flashing red, school bus, 1133  
    headlights, equipment, and maintenance, 1053  
Limitations period, 950  
Limited skill and judgment of host driver, 1110  
Livestock  
    on highway, 1200 right of way, 1200  
Long term care providers, damages, 1757, 1815, 1870, 1897  
Loitering on roadway, thumbing rides, 1250  
  
Lookout  
    approaching flashing yellow traffic signal, 1090  
    ascertainment that movement can be made with reasonable safety, 1354  
    backing, 1060  
    camouflage, 1056  
    driver on arterial approaching intersection, 1090  
    entering intersection on green light, 1191  
    entering or crossing through highway, 1065  
    failure to see object in plain sight, 1070  
    guest, 1075  
    guest's duty to warn, 1076  
    limited duty  
        on private property, 1080  
        to rear, 1114  
    on through highway, 1090  
    passing, vehicles proceeding in same direction, 1141  
    pedestrian, 1095  
    turn or deviation, 1354  
Loss of  
    access, eminent domain, 8105  
    child's services, 1835  
    earnings, See Earnings  
    society and companionship of domestic partner, 1870 (comment)  
    society and companionship of spouse, 1815, 1870  
    society and companionship of parent, 1838  
    use of automobile, not repairable, 1801  
    use of repairable automobile, 1800

## M

Magnuson-Moss Claim, 3310  
Maintenance and equipment of vehicles, See Equipment and maintenance of vehicles  
Maintenance workers on highway, 1265  
Malice  
    defined, 1707  
    express, defamation, 2513  
    punitive damages, 1707, 1707A  
Malicious prosecution  
    advice of counsel as defense, 2610, 2611

elements, 2600, 2605  
instituting civil proceeding, 2605  
instituting criminal proceeding, 2600  
Malpractice  
    aggravation of injury because of medical malpractice, 1710  
    attorney, 1023.5, 1023.5A  
    cause, medical, informed consent cases, 1023.3  
    chiropractor, 1023.8, 1023.9  
    dentist, 1023.14  
    nurse, 1023.7  
    physician, 1023  
    professional, 1023.5  
    psychiatrist, 1023 (comment)  
    res ipsa loquitur, 1024  
Management and control  
    defined, 1105  
    in an emergency, 1105A  
    negligence of guest, active, 1047.1  
Manufacturer, negligence of, See Products liability  
Market value, property damaged, 1804, 1805  
Master and servant, See Servant  
Measurements, evidence, 305  
Medical expenses, See Hospital expenses  
Medical negligence, 1023  
    informed consent, 1023.2  
    informed consent, cause, 1023.3  
    res ipsa loquitur, 1024  
Medical technician, See Hospital employees  
Medical treatise, 261  
Meeting and passing  
    position on highway, 1135  
    violation excused, 1140  
Meeting at intersection of highways, right of way, 1155  
Member of household, 3110  
Mentally disabled, See also Protective placement  
    contributory negligence of, 1007, 1021, 1385.5  
    involuntary commitment, 7050  
    recommitment alleging § 51.20(1)(am), 7050A  
    negligence of, 1021  
Merchantability, defined, 3201  
Middle burden of proof, 205  
Military convoys, right of way, 1180  
Minor  
    attractive nuisance, 1011  
    death of, pecuniary loss, 1890  
    liability of, intentional tort, 2000  
    parents' duty  
        to control, 1013  
        to protect, 1012  
Misrepresentation, fraud  
    bases for liability and damages, 2400  
    damages, measure of, in actions involving sale or exchange of property, 2405  
    damages, out-of-pocket rule, negligent misrepresentation, 2406  
    intentional deceit, elements of fraud, 2401  
    negligence, 2403  
    property loss (Wis. Stat. § 895.80), 2419  
    strict responsibility, 2402  
        under Wis. Stat. § 100.18, 2418



# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

unfair trade practice, 2418  
verdicts suggested, 2402, 2403  
insurance  
    application with intent to deceive, 3105  
    in application for insurance, 3100  
Mistake of fact, mutual, avoidance of contract, because of, 3072  
Mitigation of damage,  
    breach of contract, 1731  
    intentional torts, 1732  
    negligence, 1731  
    physical injuries, 1730  
Modification or exclusion of the implied warranty, 3205  
Mortality tables and life expectancy, 1795  
Motor vehicles, See specific headings  
Moving from parked position, 1205  
Multiple driver-multiple guest comparison, 1591  
    recommended questions, 1592  
Municipality, creating or maintaining nuisance, 1922  
  
Mutual mistake of fact, avoidance of contract,  
    because of, 3072

## N

Negative testimony, defined, 315  
Negligence  
    attorney, 1023.5, 1023.5A  
    bailee, 1026  
        for hire, 1025.6  
        for mutual benefit, 1025.7  
        inferred, 1026  
    bailor, 1026.8  
    building contractor, 1022.4  
    bus driver, 1025  
    carrier  
        common, 1025  
        negligence presumed, 1026.5  
    children, 1010  
    chiropractor, 1023.8, 1023.9  
    common carrier, 1025  
    comparative, See also Comparative negligence  
        adult and child, 1582  
        basis of comparison, 1580  
        multiple driver-multiple guest comparison, 1591  
        recommended questions, 1592  
        where negligence or cause question has been  
        answered by the court, 1595  
    contributory, See also Contributory negligence  
        defined, 1007  
        highway defect, 1048  
        of guest  
            drinking by, 1035  
            failure to protest, 1047  
            in informed consent case, 1021  
            placing self in position of danger, 1046  
        of mentally disabled person, 1021  
        of plaintiff frequenter, safe-place statute, 1902  
        sidewalk defect, 1049  
    defamation, 2509  
    defined, 1005  
    dentist, 1023.14  
    diagnosis, 1023.4  
    driver, See individual headings  
    duty of  
        agent to principal, 4020  
        buyer, 3254  
        consumer, 3254  
        driver  
            approaching intersection when yellow light  
            shows, 1192  
            at railroad crossing, 1336  
            children, when present, 1045  
            drinking, 1035  
            entering intersection with green light in his  
            or her favor, 1191  
            entering or crossing arterial highway, 1065  
            following another car, 1112  
            front car, 1114  
            slowing, stopping, or signalling, 1113  
            highway defect or insufficiency, 1048  
            horn, to sound, 1012  
        lookout  
            defined, 1055  
            private property, 1080  
            management and control, 1047.1, 1105  
            speed, obstructed vision, 1310  
            speed, nighttime, 1315  
            to see defects, 1048  
    employer, in hiring, training, or supervising, 1383  
    employer, safe-place statute, 1900.4  
    frequenter, safe-place statute, 1902  
    gas company  
        relating to company's pipes, mains, and  
        meters, 1003  
        relating to customer's pipes or appliances,  
        1002  
    guest, See Contributory negligence; Guest  
    highway defect, 1049  
    hiring, 1383  
    hospital employees  
        employees, 1385, 1385.5  
        registered nurses and technicians, 1023.7  
    hotelkeeper, to furnish reasonably safe premises  
    and furniture for his guests, 8051  
    informed consent, 1023.1-1023.4, 1023.15-  
    1023.17  
    insurance agent, 1023.6  
    jurors, in general, 100-195  
    licensed technician, 1023.7  
    manufacturer, See Products liability mentally ill,  
    1021  
    mitigate damages, injured person, 1730, 1731  
    municipality, highway or sidewalk defects and  
    insufficiency, 8035  
    nurse, 1023.7  
    owner  
        of building on public highway, 8030  
        of land to user, 8020  
        of place of amusement, 8040  
        of place of business, duty to protect patrons,  
        8045

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

- of public building, safe place, 1904
  - of public business, not safe place, 8040
  - of vehicle, to equip and maintain, 1052
  - to trespasser, 8025
  - parent
    - to control minor child, 1013, 1014
    - to protect minor child, 1012
  - pedestrian, See also Right of way
    - lookout, 1095
    - sidewalk defect or insufficiency, 1049
  - physically handicapped persons, 1050
  - place of amusement, owner, 8040
  - place of business, owner's duty to protect patrons, 8045
  - possessor of land to user, 8012
  - private nuisance, 1920
  - proprietor for injury to patron caused by third person, 8045
- Negligence (continued)
- public utility, highway obstructions, non-energized facilities, 1395
  - railroad crossing, driver's duty, 1336
  - railroad, See Railroads
  - registered nurse, 1023.7
  - restaurant operator, sale of food containing harmful natural ingredients, 3248
  - risk contribution, 3294, 3295
  - school bus driver
    - and other drivers when bus is stopped, 1132
    - to display flashing red signals when bus is stopped, 1133
  - seller, See Products liability
  - sensory handicapped persons, 1050
  - sidewalk defect, 1048
  - subsequent remedial measures, 358
  - superior skills doctrine, 1005
  - supervision, 1383
  - teacher
    - to instruct or warn, 1380
    - to supervise students, 1381
  - technicians, 1023.7
  - training, 1383
  - worker, preoccupation in work minimizes duty, 1051
- emergency doctrine, 1105A
- employer, in hiring, 1383
- employer, in supervising, 1383
- employer, in training, 1383
- employer, safe place, 1900.2
- entrustment, 1014, 1014.5
- evidence of custom and usage, 1019
- fault, ultimate fact verdict, 1001
- frequenter, safe place, 1902
- gas company
  - relating to company's pipes, mains, and meters, 1003
  - relating to customer's pipes and appliances, 1002
- gross, See Gross negligence
- handicapped persons
  - physical, 1050
  - sensory, 1050
- highway defect or insufficiency, 1048
- highways and sidewalks, care of, 8035
- hospital
  - employees, 1385, 1385.5
  - registered nurses and technicians, 1023.7
- imputed, See Imputed negligence
- independent contractor, liability of one employing, 1022.6
- infliction of emotional distress, 1510, 1511
- informed consent, 1023.1, 1023.2, 1023.3, 1023.4
- intentional acts compared to, 1004, 2001
- lookout, 1055
- malpractice
  - attorney, 1023.5
  - chiropractor, 1023.08
  - dentist, 1023.14
  - physician, 1023
  - res ipsa loquitur, 1024
- management and control, 1047.1, 1105
- manufacturer, See Products liability
- mentally ill, 1021, 1385.5
- misrepresentation, 2403
- municipality
  - highway and sidewalk defect, 8035
  - highway and sidewalk insufficiency, 8035
  - nuisance, 1922
- owner, See Owner
- owner of animal
  - common law, 1391
  - statutory, 1390
  - per se*, 950
- physically handicapped person, 1050
- physician, malpractice by, 1023
- res ipsa loquitur, 1024
- plaintiff frequenter, 1902
- product user, 3268
- psychiatrist, 1023 (comment) question answered by court, 155
- res ipsa loquitur
  - defined, 1145
  - malpractice, physician, 1024
- rescuer, 1007.5
- restaurant operator, sale of food containing harmful natural ingredients, 3248
- right to assume due care by highway users, 1030
- seat belt, failure to use, 1277
- seller, See Products liability
- sensory handicapped persons, 1050
- sidewalk defect, duty of pedestrian, 1049
- speed, See Speed
- sports participant, 2020
- strict liability, 3260
- supplier, See Products liability
- taxicab driver, 1025
- teacher
  - instruct or warn, 1380
  - supervise students, 1381
- user, strict liability, 3260
- violation of safety statute, 1005, 1009

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

worker, preoccupation in work minimizes duty, 1051

Negligent

- conduct contrasted to intentional conduct 1004, 2001
- entrustment, 1014, 1014.5
- hiring, 1383
- infliction of emotional distress, 1510, 1511
- misrepresentation, 2403
- supervising, 1383
- training, 1383

Nominal damages, 1810

Nonconcurrent or successive torts

- divisible injuries from, 1722

Nonconforming use, legal, eminent domain, 8140

Nonexpert witness, 268

Nonhighway access, emerging from, 1270

No passing zone, vehicles proceeding in same direction, 1143

Normal response, cause, 1501

Notetaking by jury, 60, 61

Notice

- actual or constructive, as to defect, 1900.4
- of breach, implied warranty, 3211

Notice (continued)

- of municipality with respect to highway or sidewalk defects, 8035
- timeliness of, breach of warranty, 3211
- to third parties of termination of agency, 4028

Nuisance

- attractive, 1011, 8025
- private, 1920, 1922, 1924, 1926
- public, 1920, 1928, 1930, 1932

Nursing services

- personal injury, 1756, 1758
- injury to spouse, 1820

## O

Objections of counsel

- instruction at conclusion of trial, 115
- preliminary instruction, 50

Obstructed view, passing, 1142

Obstructed vision, driver, speed, 1310

- nighttime, 1315

Offensive bodily contact, battery, 2005.5

Offer, making, 3012

Opening instruction, 100

Opening statements of counsel, See Preliminary instructions before trial

Opinion of nonexpert witness, 268

Optometrist, duty to inform patient, 1023.15-1023.17

Order(s), See Court

Order of proof, See Preliminary instructions before trial

Ordinary burden of proof, 200, 202

Ordinary care

- defined, 1005
- varies with circumstances, 1020

Out-of-pocket

- rule damages, 3710
- negligence misrepresentation, 2406

Owner

- dog, 1390

duty to trespasser, 8025

duty to user, 8020

of building abutting on a public highway, 8030

of place of amusement, common law, 8040

of place of business, duty to protect patrons, 8045

of place of employment, safe place, 1900.4

of public building, safe place, 1904

of public business not under safe-place statute, 8040

of vehicle, 1600

permission for use of automobile, 3112

testimony of, to establish value, 260 (comment)

## P

Pain and suffering, damages

- estate's recovery for, 1855
- future, 1768
- past, 1766, 1768
- past and future disability, 1750.1, 1750.2, 1756, 1767

Parent

- damages
  - adult child, pecuniary loss, 1885
  - loss of society and companionship, 1895
- minor child
  - postmajority pecuniary loss, 1892
  - premajority pecuniary loss, 1890
- death of, pecuniary loss, 1880
- injury to child
  - loss of child's services, 1835
  - loss of society and companionship, 1837
  - medical expenses, 1840
  - services rendered to child, 1845
- injury to parent, 1838
- death of, child's loss of society and companionship, 1897
- duty of
  - to control minor child, 1013, 1014
  - to protect minor child, 1012
- paternity, 5001

Parked position, moving from, 1205

Parked vehicle

- disabled vehicle, 1125
- leaving off the roadway, 1115
- leaving on or off the roadway, exception to prohibition, 1125
- leaving on the roadway, 1120
- yield right of way to moving vehicles, 1205

Participation in a recreational activity, 1393

Parties to lawsuit, 50

Partnership, defined, 4080

Party's presence not required at trial, 430

Passenger, See Guest

Passing, vehicles proceeding in same direction

- lookout, 1141
- no passing zone, 1143
- obstructed view, 1142
- overtaken vehicle turning left, 1143
- signal, return to right-hand lane, 1144

Paternity, 5001

Pecuniary loss

- death of

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

- adult child, 1885
- domestic partner, 1861
- husband, 1861
- minor child, 1890
- parent, 1880
- spouse, 1861
- wife, 1861
- Pedestrian
  - crossing railroad tracks, 1337.5
  - lookout, 1095
  - right of way, See Right of way
  - sidewalk defect, contributory negligence, 1049
  - standing or loitering on highway, 1250
  - suddenly leaving curb or place of safety, 1255
  - walking on highway, position on highway, 1260
- Permission of owner for use of automobile, 3112
- Permissive inferences, 356
  - Law Note, 349
- Personal injury, See Damages
- Personal property, See Property damage
- Persons in specific situations, duties of, 1030-1355
- Persons with physical handicaps, duties of, 1050
- Physical danger
  - in field of, 1510
- Physical facts, 325
- Physical handicaps, duty of persons with, 1050
- Physical injury, relation of collision to, 1506
- Physician
  - duty to inform patient, 1023.2
  - medical malpractice, 1023
  - negligence of hospital in granting staff privileges to, 1384
  - standard of skill, 1023
- Place of business, owner's duty to protect patrons, 8045
- Place of employment, safe-place statute, 1910
- Plaintiff frequenter, negligence of, safe-place statute, 1902
- Podiatrist, duty to inform patient, 1023.15-1023.17
- Point of access, defined, 1175
- Position and method of turn to right or left, 1352
- Position on highway
  - on meeting and passing, 1135
  - violation excused, 1140
- Positive testimony, defined, 315
- Possessor
  - consent of to another's being on his premises, 8015
  - of land, duty to user, 8020
- Post-traumatic disorder, 1511, 1770
- Posted speed limit, 1290
- Preceding car
  - duty of driver to following driver, 1114
  - slowing, stopping, signalling, 1113
- Preexisting injury, aggravation of, 1715
- Preliminary instructions before trial, 50
- Preoccupation in work minimizes duty of worker, 1051
- Prescriptive rights by user, 8065
- Present value of future damages, 1796
- Presumption, negligence
  - res ipsa loquitur, 1145
  - res ipsa loquitur, malpractice, physician, 1024
- Presumptions
  - and permissive inferences
  - Law Note, 349
- basic fact conflict, possibility of nonexistence of presumed fact, 350
- basic fact conflict, presumed fact may be inferred, 354
- basic fact uncontradicted, possibility of nonexistence of presumed fact, 352
- due care by decedent, 353 medical expenses, 1756, 1757
- possibility of nonexistence of presumed fact, basic fact conflict, 350
- possibility of nonexistence of presumed fact, basic fact uncontradicted, 352
- presumed fact may be inferred, basic fact conflict, 354
- servant status from ownership of vehicle, 1600
- Principal, and agent, See Agency
- Prior conviction of witness, 415
- Prior inconsistent or contradictory statements, 420
- Privacy, invasion of, 2550, 2551, 2552
- Private driveway, emerging from or other nonhighway access, 1335
- Private nuisance, 1920, 1922, 1924, 1926
- Private property, lookout, limited duty on, 1080
- Privilege
  - against self-incrimination, 425
  - conditional, abuse of, defamation, 2507
  - invasion of privacy, 2552
  - public official, abuse of, defamation, 2509
- Probable cause, malicious prosecution, 2600, 2610
- Process, abuse of, 2620
- Procession, funeral, right of way, 1180
- Products liability
  - allergy of user, 3209, 3260 (comment)
  - basis, 3200
  - breach of warranty, notice of, implied warranty, 3211
  - business defined, strict liability, 3264
  - buyer, duty of, 3254
  - consumer, duty of, 3254
  - contributory negligence, strict liability, 3268
  - defect, use of product after defect known, 3207
  - exclusion by reason of course of dealing or usage of trade, 3206
  - exclusion or modification, 3205
  - express warranty
    - general, 3220
    - no duty of inspection, 3222
    - statement of opinion under Uniform Commercial Code, 3225, 3230
  - implied warranty
    - allergy of user, 3209
    - by reason of course of dealing or usage of trade, 3203
    - exclusion by reason of course of dealing or usage of trade, 3206
    - failure to examine product, 3208
    - fitness for particular purpose, 3202
    - food, sale of, 3204
    - improper use, 3210
    - merchantability, defined, 3201
    - notice of breach, 3211
    - use of product after defect known, 3207
  - negligence

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

duty of buyer, 3254  
duty of consumer, 3254  
duty of manufacturer, 3240  
duty of manufacturer to give adequate instructions as to the use of a complicated machine (product), 3244  
duty of manufacturer (seller) to warn of dangers with respect to intended use, 3242  
duty of manufacturer (seller) who undertakes to give instructions as to the use of a machine (product), 3246  
duty of restaurant operator in sale of food containing harmful natural ingredients, 3248  
duty of seller installing (servicing) a product, 3250  
duty of seller to warn of dangers of product with respect to intended use, 3242  
punitive damages, 1707A, 1707.2  
Restatement, Third, of Torts, 3260 (comment)  
risk contribution theory, 3294, 3295, 3296  
strict liability  
    comparative negligence, 3290, 3290.1  
    contribution, 3290 (comment)  
    contributory negligence of user, 3268, 3290, 3290.1  
    definition of business, 3264  
    duty of manufacturer to ultimate user, 3260, 3260.1  
Products liability (continued)  
    duty of manufacturer (supplier) to warn, 3260.1, 3262  
    duty of supplier to warn, 3260.1, 3262  
    suggested special verdict, 3290, 3290.1  
Professional earnings, loss of, 1760, 1762  
Proof, burden of, See Burden of proof  
Property  
    automobile  
        damages to, 1805  
        loss of use, not repairable, 1800  
        loss of use, repairable, 1801  
    eminent domain, See Eminent domain  
    personal  
        damage to, 1804  
        damage to, property not repairable, 1805  
        destruction of, 1803  
    relation of property owners to others, 1900.4, 1904, 8012  
    with market value, 1805  
    without market value, 1803  
Property loss through misrepresentation, 2419  
Proprietor of business, duty to protect person from injury by act of third person, 8045  
Prosecution, malicious, See Malicious prosecution  
Protective placement, 7060  
Protective services, 7061  
Protest, failure to on part of guest, 1047  
Proximate cause, 1500  
Psychiatrist, negligence of, 1023 (comment)  
Public building, safe-place statute, 1904  
Public business, not under safe-place statute, duties of owner, 8040

Public nuisance, 1920, 1928, 1930, 1932  
Public official, defamation, abuse of privilege, 2509  
Public utility, duty of, highway obstructions, nonenergized facilities, 1395  
Publication, defamatory effect of, 2514  
Puffing, 3225  
Punitive damages  
    defamation, 2520  
    intentional disregard, 1707.1  
    malice, 1707, 1707.1  
    mitigation of, by provocation of battery, 1708  
    outrageousness, 1707  
    products liability, 1707A, 1707.2  
Purchaser, breach of contract by, 3750

## Q

Quantum meruit, 1812  
Questions,  
    answered by the court  
    damages, 150  
    negligence, 155  
    by juror, 57  
    special verdict, interrelationship, 145

## R

Racing, 1107  
Railroads  
    crossing  
        driver's duty, 1336  
        duty of train crew approaching crossing, 1405  
        duty to maintain open view at, 1411  
        nonoperation of signals, 1338  
        signs, duty to maintain, 1410  
        special vehicles required to stop at all crossings, 1339  
        ultrahazardous or unusually dangerous, increased duty, 1413  
        vehicles stopping at signals, 1337  
    duty to blow whistle  
        outside municipality, 1402  
        within municipality, 1403  
    duty to ring bell within municipality, 1401  
    headlights, duty to have proper, 1412  
    pedestrian crossing tracks, 1337.5  
    speed  
        fixed limits, 1407  
        negligent, causation, 1409  
        no limit, 1408  
Ratification  
    by master of servant's wrongful acts done outside scope of employment, 4050  
    of agent's acts by principal, 4015  
Rear car, operation of, 1112  
Rear lookout, limited duty, 1114  
Reasonable grounds to believe offense committed, defined, 2115  
Recording played to the jury, 80  
Red traffic control light, 1193  
    flashing, 1193.5

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

signalling stop, 1193  
Reduce speed  
    obstructed vision, 1310  
    nighttime, 1315  
    reasonable and prudent speed, 1285  
Reference to insurance company by counsel, 125  
Registered nurse, See Hospital employees, negligence  
Relation of collision to physical injury, 1506  
Release, agreement, avoidance of for mutual mistake of  
    fact, 3072  
Rental income, capitalization of, 8130  
Representations, false, See Misrepresentation Reproduction  
    costs, eminent domain, 8135  
Res ipsa loquitur  
    defined, 1145  
    malpractice, medical, 1024  
    permissive inference, 356  
Rescuer, contributory negligence of, 1007.5  
Resident, defined, 3110  
Response, normal, cause, 1501  
Responsibility, strict, misrepresentation, 2402  
Restatement, Third, of Torts, effect on products liability,  
    3260 (comment)  
Restaurant operator, duty of, in sale of food containing  
    harmful natural ingredients, 3248  
Restraint of will, 2822  
Right-hand lane, return to, after passing, vehicles  
    proceeding in same direction, 1144  
Right of way  
    auto  
        at intersection of highways, nonarterial, 1155  
        at intersection of highways, nonarterial, ultimate  
            fact question, 1157  
        at intersection with through highway, 1153  
        emergency vehicle approach of, 1210  
        entering highway from an alley or nonaccess  
            points, 1175  
        funeral procession, 1180  
        green arrow, 1185  
        green or go signal, 1190  
        left turn at intersection, 1195  
        livestock, 1200  
        meeting at intersection, 1155  
        military convoy, 1180  
        moving from parked position, 1205  
        vehicles using alley or nonhighway access, 1270  
            when yield sign installed, 1275  
    highway worker, 1265  
    livestock, 1200  
    pedestrian  
        at intersections or crosswalks on divided  
            highways provided with safety zones, 1160  
        at uncontrolled intersections or crosswalks, 1165  
            blind pedestrian on highway, 1170  
        control signal, 1159, 1220  
        crossing at controlled intersection, 1158, 1225  
        crossing at place other than crosswalk, 1095,  
            1230  
        divided highways or highways with safety  
            zones, 1235

    duty of  
        at pedestrian control signals, 1220  
        crossing at controlled intersection or  
            crosswalk, 1225  
        crossing roadway at point other than  
            crosswalk, 1230  
        green arrow, facing, 1240  
        red or stop signal, facing, 1245  
        standing or loitering on highway, 1250  
        to stop when vehicle using alley or nonhighway  
            access, 1270  
        uncontrolled intersection or crosswalk, suddenly  
            leaving curb or place of safety, 1255  
        walking on highway, 1260  
        walk signal, 1159  
        when yield sign installed, 1275  
    persons working on highway, 1265  
Right side of roadway  
    meeting and passing, 1135  
Right side of roadway, meeting and passing  
    violation excused, 1140  
Right to assume due care by highway users, 1030  
Risk contribution theory, 3294, 3295, 3296  
Roadway, defined, 1160

## S

Safe-place statute  
    business, 1910  
    control, 1911  
    duty of employer, 1900.2  
    frequenter  
        defined, 1901  
        injury to, 1900.4  
    negligence of  
        employer, 1900.4  
        owner of place of employment, 1900.4  
        owner of public building, 1904  
    plaintiff frequenter, 1902  
    place of employment, defined, 1910  
    public building, defined, 1904  
    public business not under, duties of owner, 8040  
Safety belt, failure to use, 1277  
Safety, defined, 1900.4-1904  
Safety helmet negligence, 1277 (comment), 1278  
Safety statute, 1005, 1009 Safety zone, defined, 1160  
Sale of food, implied warranty, 3204  
Sales, comparable, eminent domain, 8120  
Scene, view of, by jury, 152  
Scientific treatises, 261  
School bus  
    flashing red warning lights, 1133  
    stop for, 1340  
    stopped, position on highway, 1132  
School zone, speed, 1290  
Scope of employment  
    driver, 1605  
    servant  
        defined, 4030  
        going to and from place of employment, 4040  
        master's ratification of wrongful acts done

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

- outside of, 4050
- while traveling, 4050
- Seat belt, failure to use, 1277
- Section 1983, 2151, 2155
- Self-defense
  - battery, 2006
  - defense of property, 2006.5
- Self-incrimination, 425
- Seller
  - breach of contract by, damages, 3755
  - negligence of, duty of, See Products liability
- Sensory handicaps, duty of persons with, 1050
- Servant, See also Scope of employment
  - defined, 4030
  - driver of automobile, 1600
- Services rendered to child, past and future, 1845
- Services, society and companionship
  - death of child, 1895
  - death of spouse, 1870
  - injury to spouse, 1815
- Severance damages, eminent domain, 8102, 8103
- Sidewalk
  - defect, contributory negligence, 1049
  - defects, 8035
  - insufficiency, 8035
- Signal, required
  - audible warning when passing, 1144
  - deviation, 1350
  - school bus, flashing red, 1133
  - slow or stop, 1113
- Signal, required (continued)
  - turn, 1350
- Signals, railroad crossing
  - non-operation of, 1338
  - stop at, all vehicles, 1337
- Signals, traffic control, See Traffic signals
- Signs
  - railroad crossing, duty to maintain, 1410
  - stop, 1325, 1325A
- Skidding, 1280
- Slander, See Defamation
- Slow moving vehicles, 1337
- Society and companionship
  - death of child, 1895
  - death of parent, 1897
  - death of spouse, 1870
  - injury to minor child, 1837
  - injury to parent, 1838
- Special agent, defined, 4002
- Special benefits, eminent domain, 8115
- Special circumstances, negligence under, 1020
- Special knowledge and skills doctrine, 1005 (comment)
- Special verdict
  - five-sixths verdict, 180
  - informed consent, 1023.1, 1023.15
  - Lemon Law, 3300
  - mentioned in court's opening statement, 100
  - questions, interrelationship, 145
  - recommended, comparative negligence, multiple
    - driver-multiple guest comparison, 1592
  - risk contribution, 3294

- suggested
  - misrepresentation, 2402, 2403
  - strict liability, 3290
- ultimate fact verdict, 107
  - when court finds one or more parties at fault, 108
- Speed
  - camouflage, 1320
  - driver on arterial not bound to reduce speed when
    - approaching intersection, 1090
  - failure to yield roadway, 1305
  - fixed limits, 1290
  - impeding traffic, 1300
  - obstructed vision, 1310
    - nighttime, 1315
  - posted limit, 1290
  - reasonable and prudent, reduced speed, 1285
  - school zone, 1290
  - slow-moving vehicles, 1305
  - special restrictions for certain vehicles, 1295
- Speed, railroads
  - fixed limits, 1407
  - negligent speed, causation, 1409
  - no limit, 1409
- Spendthrift, 7056
- Spoliation of evidence, 400
- Sports participant injury, 2020
- Spouse
  - death of
    - loss of society and companionship, 1870
    - medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1875
    - pecuniary loss, 1861, 1861
  - injury to
    - household services, loss of, 1816, 1817
    - medical and hospital expenses, 1825
      - wife's responsibility for own, 1830
    - nursing services, 1820
    - services, society, and companionship, 1815, 1816, 1817
- Standing on highway, pedestrian's duty, 1250
- Statement of opinion, express warranty, 3225
- Statement, slander, See Defamation
- Statute of Limitations, 950
- Stop
  - at intersection, 1325, 1325A
  - at railroad crossing signals, 1337
  - duty of preceding driver to signal, 1113
  - emerging from an alley, 1330
  - emerging from a private driveway or other
    - nonhighway access, 1335
  - for school bus, 1340
  - leaving vehicle off roadway, 1115
  - non-operation of railroad crossing signals, 1338
  - parking on or off roadway, exception to
    - prohibition, 1125
  - parking on roadway, 1120
  - pedestrian crossing railroad tracks, 1337.5
  - special vehicles at all railroad crossings, 1339
  - train whistle within municipality, 1403
- Stopped school bus, 1132
- Stopping and leaving vehicle

# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

off roadway, 1115  
on or off roadway, exception to prohibition, 1125  
on roadway, 1120  
Stricken testimony, 130  
Strict liability, See Products liability  
Strict responsibility, misrepresentation, 2402  
Submission on general verdict, 106  
Submission on ultimate fact verdict, 107  
    when court finds one or more parties at fault, 108  
Subsequent event causing further injury, 1725  
    Subsequent remedial measures, 358  
Successive or nonconcurrent torts  
    injuries from, 1722  
Suddenly leaving curb or place of safety, 1255  
Summary exhibit, 103  
Superior skills doctrine, 1005  
Supervising, negligence in, 1383  
Supplemental instruction on agreement, 195

## T

Taxicab driver, negligence of, 1339  
Teacher, duties  
    to instruct or warn, 1380  
    to supervise students, 1381  
Tenant, constructive eviction of, 3095  
Termination  
    agency  
        general, 4027  
        notice to third parties, 4028  
    dealership, 2770  
Termination (continued)  
    employment, See Wrongful discharge  
    franchise, 2770  
Testimony  
    expert  
        general, 260  
        hypothetical question, 265  
    negative, 315  
    positive, 315  
    stricken, 130  
Tests, intoxication, chemical, 1008  
Textbooks, 261  
Theft by contractor, 2722  
Through highway, lookout on, 1065, 1090  
Timeliness of notice, breach of warranty, 3211  
Tort, See individual heading  
Tortious interference with contract, 2780  
Traffic signals or signs flashing red, 1133  
    flashing yellow, 1090  
    green arrow, 1185  
    green light, 1190  
    pedestrian, duty of  
        pedestrian control, 1220  
        red light, pedestrian facing, 1245  
        stop sign, 1245  
        walk signal, 1159  
    red flashing, 1090  
    red light, 1245  
    stop sign, 1325, 1325A  
    yellow flashing, 1090

yellow light, 1192  
yield sign, 1275  
Training, negligence in, 1383  
Treatises, 261  
Trespass  
    nominal damages, 1810  
    verdicts, 8026, 8027  
Trespasser  
    attractive nuisance, 1011, 8025  
    children, 1011, 8025  
    consent, 8015  
    defined, 8012  
    duty of owner to, 8025  
Truth as defense to defamation, 2505, 2505A  
Turning movements  
    ascertainment that turn can be made with reasonable  
        safety, 1354  
    deviation from clearly indicated traffic lanes, 1355  
    directional signals, 1350  
    left turn, 1195  
    lookout, 1354  
    overtaken vehicle turning left, passing, 1143  
    position and method when not otherwise marked or  
        posted, 1352  
    signal required, 1350

## U

Ultimate fact question, attractive nuisance, 1011  
Ultimate fact verdict, See also Special verdict  
    fault, defined, 1001  
    submission on, 107, 108  
Ultimate verdict question, right of way at intersection of  
    nonarterial highways, 1157  
Ultrahazardous or unusually dangerous railroad crossings,  
    increased duty, 1413  
Unavoidable accident, 1000  
Uncontrolled intersection or crosswalk, right of way, 1165  
Unfair trade practice (Wis. Stat. § 100.18), 2418  
Uniform Commercial Code, express warranty under, 3230  
Unit rule, 8100, 8101  
Unity of use, two or more parcels, severance damages,  
    8104  
Unjust enrichment, 3028  
Unlawful, defined, false imprisonment, 2100  
Unreasonably dangerous, defined, 3200, 3260  
Usage of trade, implied warranty, 3203  
Use  
    improper, implied warranty, 3210  
    legal nonconforming, eminent domain, 8140  
    of product after defect known, 3207  
User, contributory negligence, strict liability, 3268

## V

Value, fair market, 8100  
    expert testimony to establish, 260  
Vehicles  
    distance between, 1112  
    equipment and maintenance of



# WIS JI-CIVIL INDEX

(References are to Instruction Numbers.)

- brakes, 1054
- general duty, 1052
- headlights, 1053
- horn, 1096
- following, 1112
- lemon law and, 3300, 3301, 3302, 3303, 3304
- parked, See Parked vehicles
- passing, proceeding in same direction, See Passing
  - position and method when turning, 1352
- slow moving, 1300, 1305
- stopping, See Stop; Stopping and leaving vehicle
- Vehicular traffic, defined, 1185
- Verdict
  - case involving intentional and negligent joint tortfeasors, 1580 (comment)
  - dissenting juror to sign, 180 five-sixths, 180
  - general, 106
  - product liability, 3290, 3290.1
  - risk contribution, 3295, 3296
  - special, question, interrelationship, 145
  - suggested special
    - misrepresentation, 2402, 2403
    - strict liability, 3290
  - ultimate fact
    - fault, 1001
    - submission on, 107
    - when court finds one or more parties at fault, 108
- Vicarious liability of employer, 4055
- View
  - by jury, 152
  - railroads duty to maintain open view, 1411
- Violation of safety statute, 1005, 1009
- Vision, obstructed, speed, 1310
  - nighttime, 1315
- Voluntary assumption of duty, 1397

## W

- Wages, See Earnings
- Walking on highway, pedestrian's duty, 1260
- Walk signal, pedestrian, 1159
- Warn
  - guest's duty to, 1076
  - teacher's duty to, 1380
- Warrant, arrest without, false arrest
  - felony, 2115
- Warranty claim, Magnuson-Moss, 3310
- Warranty, express or implied, See Products liability
- Weight of evidence, 215
- Whistle, railroads, duty to blow
  - outside municipality, 1402
  - within municipality, 1403
- Wife
  - death of
    - loss of society and companionship, 1870
    - medical, hospital and funeral expenses, 1875
    - pecuniary loss, 1861
  - injury to
    - medical and hospital expenses, 1825
    - wife's responsibility for own, 1830

- nursing services, 1820
- services, society, and companionship, 1815
- Witness
  - absent witness, 410
  - contradictory statements, 420
  - credibility of, 50, 215
  - expert testimony
    - general, 260
    - hypothetical question, 265
  - falsus in uno, willful false testimony, 405
  - impeachment of witness, prior inconsistent or contradictory statements, 420
  - opinion of nonexpert, 268
  - prior conviction, 415
  - self-incrimination, 425
  - spoliation of evidence by, 400
- Working on highway, 1265
- Worker
  - preoccupation in work minimizes duty, 1051
  - when required to work in unsafe premises, 1051.2
- Wrongful death
  - adult child, pecuniary loss, 1885
  - child, parents' loss of society and companionship, 1895
  - domestic partner, 1861, 1870 (comment)
  - estate's recovery
    - medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1850
    - pain and suffering, 1855
  - husband's death, all items, 1861
  - minor child, pecuniary loss, 1890
  - parent, child's loss of society and companionship, 1897
  - parent, pecuniary loss, 1880
  - spouse, loss of society and companionship, 1870
  - wife
    - medical, hospital, and funeral expenses, 1875
    - pecuniary loss, 1861
- Wrongful discharge, 2750
- Wrong side of road, driving on, 1135
  - violation excused, 1140

## Y

- Yellow flashing signal, 1090
- Yellow light, duty of driver, 1192
- Yield sign, 1275