Digitally signed by Illinois Supreme Court - Reporter of Decisions
Reason: I attest to the accuracy and integrity of this document
Date: 2026.10.16 08:33:01 -05'00'

**Rule 286. Appearance and Trial**

**(a) Appearance.** A defendant in a small claim must attend court, in person or remotely as provided for in Rule 45, at the time and place specified in the summons or as otherwise ordered by the court upon proper notice to all parties. A defendant need not file a written appearance before the first court date, but the court may order the defendant to file a written appearance at or after the first court date.

**(b) Answer.** A defendant in a small claim is not required to file an answer to the complaint. The allegations of the complaint shall be considered denied and any defense may be proved as if it were specifically pleaded. However, a court in its discretion may order the defendant to file an answer after the first court date in order to promote a fair adjudication of the merits.

**(c) Informal Hearings in Small Claims.** In any small claim, the court may, on its own motion or on the request of any party, adjudicate the dispute at an informal hearing. At the informal hearing, the court may relax the rules of procedure and rules of evidence, but it shall not disregard rules related to hearsay and privilege. The court may call any person appearing in person or remotely at the hearing to testify and may conduct or participate in direct and cross-examination of any witness or party. At the conclusion of the hearing the court shall render judgment and explain its reasoning to all parties.

Amended June 12, 1987, effective August 1, 1987; amended April 1, 1992, effective August 1, 1992; amended Feb. 2, 2023, eff. immediately; amended Oct. 16, 2026, eff. Jan. 1, 2027.

Committee Comments

(Revised Oct. 16, 2026)

Paragraph (a) was amended effective January 1, 2027, to no longer require small claims to be tried on the day set for appearance and to better align the rule with actual practice and support procedural fairness. The court retains the option to try the case on the day set for appearance to accommodate self-represented litigants who are present and wish to have their case tried on the appearance date.

Paragraph (c) was added effective August 1, 1987. The rule authorized the court on its own motion or on motion of any party to conduct an informal hearing to decide small claims cases where the amount claimed by any party does not exceed $1,000. This paragraph was amended in 1992 to delete the condition setting an upper limit on the value of cases in which an informal hearing may be had, and again in 2026 to clarify informal hearing procedures.