What To Do When You Get A Notice

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A plain-language guide to identifying which documents carry legal weight, and what to do when you receive one.

START HERE

Silence is treated as an answer.

Courts, agencies, and companies assume that mail they send is mail you got. Confirming you read it is not part of their job. So when there is no answer, the record does not say *didn't see it*. It says *chose not to*.

Nobody calls to check.

THE FOUR KINDS THAT ALWAYS MATTER

You do not have to understand a document to know it matters. You only have to recognize it.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	WHY IT MATTERS
You signed for it	Certified mail, or anything you had to sign for. Someone wanted proof you got it, and that proof will be used.
It's from a court, agency, or government office	Deadlines start running from the date on the letter, not the date you opened it.
It has a date, a deadline, or the words “respond by”	The date is the whole point of the document.
It's from a lawyer, a landlord, or a collections company	These escalate on a schedule whether or not you are paying attention.

THE RULE

If it is one of those four, **it gets opened the same day it arrives.** Not read carefully. Just opened and looked at.

Then two questions only:

1. Is there a date on this?
2. Is it from one of the four kinds above?

Yes to either? Photograph it. Put it in your folder. Text the person on your card.

THE THREE STEPS

Recognize	This is one of the moments that carries legal weight.
Stop	Nothing gets signed, said, or ignored right now.

Escalate	Call the person on my card.

You are not being asked to know the answer. You are being asked to notice the question.

BUILD THE SYSTEM

You are not building a filing system. You are picking one spot.

One folder. One place it lives. That place never changes.

The folder does not get organized. Things go in it. Organizing is a separate skill and it is not required here.

If the folder is full of things that need action, that is normal. That is what the folder is for.

1. Open it	Same day it arrives. Not read carefully — just opened.
2. Photograph it	The backup for when the folder fails. Folders fail.
3. Folder it	One place, always. Even if you have not dealt with it.
4. Text someone	If it has a date on it, tell your person the same day.

SET THIS UP NOW

My folder lives	_____
	Be specific. “Kitchen” is not specific. “On top of the microwave” is.
My weekly alarm	Day: _____ Time: _____
	Set it on your phone right now. Label it “Open the folder.”
My person	_____
	Someone you can text a photo of a confusing letter.

WHEN IT BREAKS

It will break. A move, a bad month, a lost folder, a stretch where nothing gets done. That is not evidence that the system does not work for you — it is how systems work under pressure.

The move is to restart it, not to decide it failed.

WHAT IF I ALREADY MISSED SOMETHING?

This is the most important part of the guide.

If you have already missed a deadline, a date, or a response period — **that is a reason to call someone today, not a reason to keep avoiding it.** Almost everything is worse a month later. Very little gets worse by asking.

Call the person on your card. If you do not have one yet, call a legal aid office, or dial **2-1-1** and ask what free legal help exists near you.

WORDS YOU MIGHT SEE

Service / served	They officially delivered a document to you. Once it's served, the clock starts whether you read it or not.
Default	You lost automatically because you didn't respond in time.
Respond by	A deadline. Missing it usually has a consequence.
Failure to appear	You didn't show up when you were supposed to. Often leads to a warrant.
Waiver	Giving up a right — sometimes by signing, sometimes just by not using it.

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