

School Excursions to the Downing Centre: Which Courts Are the Most Exciting?

Lawyers, defendants and their families are not the only ones who attend the Downing Centre – it is also a popular destination for school excursions.

Since courts are open for anyone to enter and watch, students are free to wander in and out of courtrooms – with the exception of the Children’s Court and ‘closed courts’, which will have a sign on the door.

The Downing Centre is the busiest courthouse in NSW, so there’s usually something interesting going on inside at least one of the courtrooms.

Visiting the Downing Centre is a great chance to see how our criminal justice system works – but some courtrooms aren’t generally as exciting as others.

Some interesting cases are reported in the media – and you will often see film crews set up outside the entrance of the Downing Centre, eager to film famous or notorious defendants as they enter and leave. If there is a particular case you want to see, noticeboards are on display which list the names of defendants in alphabetical order.

The main District Court noticeboard is on ground level directly ahead after you enter the courthouse, and the main Local Court noticeboard is on level 4, outside the lifts.

In the District Court

If you want to see a trial with a jury, this is the place to go. You may get to see a jury deliver a verdict, witnesses being cross-examined or other fascinating parts of a trial.

Many serious cases are heard in the District court, and if a person is pleading 'not guilty' a jury will ordinarily determine their innocence or guilt. This court is generally more formal than the Local Court, so you will see Judges and Barristers in their wigs and robes. Unlike Local Court Magistrates who wear black robes and no wigs, Judges wear wigs and robes with red on them.

The District courtrooms are located on five levels, from lower ground to level 3. Courtroom 3.1 (on level 3) is probably best avoided, especially in the morning. It is often packed and many short procedural matters are heard there. The courtroom is frequently so busy in the morning that you may have a hard time squeezing in, let alone taking in what is happening!

Trials may be held in any of the courtrooms from lower ground to level 2; but be warned, jury trials are not like on TV – they often take weeks or even months to complete and you may only get a snippet of the proceedings, and may not have enough information to understand what is going on.

So perhaps the best bet is to look for a courtroom without a jury, as you may get to see a defendant's sentencing proceeding from start to finish. A sentencing is where a person pleads guilty or is found guilty and the Judge decides their penalty.

In the Local Court

Less serious cases are generally heard and finalised in the Local Court. Unlike District Court trials, Local Court cases are finished within a day; in fact, many sentencing proceedings take just 10 or 15 minutes.

Courtroom 4.4 is a Registrar's court, which means it is presided over by an administrative officer rather than a Magistrate. It is where adjournments and other procedural matters occur, so you are more likely to see an interesting case in another courtroom.

Courtroom 4.5 gets plenty of action – it is where many short sentencing cases and mental health applications are heard, so you will be able to quickly get an idea of what the case is about, and can observe several defendants receiving penalties for their offences.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, courtroom 5.2 hears relatively serious Local Court cases, which have been taken over from the police by the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (or ‘DPP’). Although the courtroom is often busy with short procedural matters in the mornings, you may be able to see people being sentenced later in the day.

If you would like to see witnesses being asked questions on the witness stand, your best bet is to head into one of the many hearing courts; such as 4.1, 4.2, 4.7 and 4.8. The questioning of witnesses occurs during ‘defended hearings’, which is where a defendant pleads not guilty and the Magistrate must decide their guilt or innocence.

If you want to hear about cases involving domestic violence, courtroom 5.2 hears those types of cases on Wednesdays.

Commonwealth cases, such as Centrelink fraud and tax evasion, are heard in courtroom 5.5.

Court Opening Hours

The [Downing Centre opening hours](#) are 8:30 to 4:30pm, Monday to Friday. However, Judges and Magistrates do not sit the whole time. Most court proceedings start at 9:30 or 10am. There is a break for morning tea between 11.40am and 12noon, and for lunch between 1pm and 2pm. The final sitting period for the day is 2pm to 4pm.

Tips on Court Etiquette

Court is a formal place, and there are rules which everyone must follow when entering or leaving a courtroom. These

include:

- Making sure your phone is switched off before entering the courtroom,
- Bowing your head when you enter or leave the courtroom if a Registrar, Magistrate or Judge is sitting,
- Standing when a Registrar, Magistrate or Judge enters or leaves,
- Not taking photos or using recording devices while inside a courthouse (in fact, this is a criminal offence). However, you are permitted to take notes or draw pictures,
- Not taking drinks or food inside the courtroom, and
- Not talking or making noise when inside the courtroom. If you must talk, keep it to a minimum and whisper.

Learning some of the legal jargon used inside the courtroom may help you to understand what the lawyers, Magistrates and Judges are talking about. [Click here](#) to learn the basics.

We hope you enjoy your visit to the Downing Centre!