

How does a bill become a law? How long is a legislative session? What is a legislative session anyway?

Lawmakers have made their way to Olympia to kick off 60 days of lawmaking. A host of issues will likely come up in the session, which is set to start Jan. 8, and if you're following along for the first time, you may have a lot of questions.

Well, we've got you covered. This guide should help you follow along with all the action over the next few months.

### **What is the Legislature?**

The Washington State Legislature consists of two chambers: the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House has 98 members, and the Senate has 49. Both chambers are controlled by Democrats.

### **What is the legislative session?**

The session is the three or four (or sometimes more) months of the year when the Legislature can debate and pass bills, which can then become law when the governor signs them.

Some states have full-time legislatures that are in session most of the year, but Washington's is part-time.

Lawmakers are called into session in early January until what's known as "sine die," which means they adjourn indefinitely (or until next January). Sometimes, the governor or lawmakers can call a "special session," which is extra time that they can use to pass essential laws, but these are often only used for emergency circumstances, such as finishing the budget or [addressing this year's looming deadline on the state's drug possession law](#).

### **When is the session?**

This year's session runs 60 days – from Jan. 8 to March 7.

But the length of the session alternates every year. In odd-numbered years, the Legislature is in session for 105 days and must write a state budget for the next two years. In even-numbered years, such as this year, the Legislature is in a short, 60-day session, where they don't have to write a full two-year budget but do often make adjustments to the one they passed the year prior.

This January, for example, lawmakers will have a lot more money than they anticipated last year, from sources such as unexpectedly high revenue from the state's new climate program. They will have to determine how to allocate that money before the 60 days are up.

### **What happens during the session?**

Short answer: a lot.

Debates are heated, disagreements are inevitable, spending is approved, laws are changed.

There are a lot of deadlines over the next 60 days. Here's what that looks like. (Cue Schoolhouse Rock's "I'm Just a Bill.")

After the session begins, lawmakers will begin introducing hundreds of bills that they hope will be passed into law. They'll have a few short weeks to move those bills through committees made up of subgroups of lawmakers.

In committees, bills receive a public hearing, a debate and a vote. If the bill is going to cost the state money, it must then go through the same process in a fiscal committee – committees specifically set up to determine how the state should budget.

The first cutoff for bills to make it through both committees comes about a month into the session. If a bill has not passed out of committee by that deadline, it is likely dead for the year.

In the week or so after the committee cutoff, lawmakers begin what is maybe the most exciting part of the legislative process: floor debates.

During this time, the entire chamber debates bills that have cleared committees, amends bills and eventually votes on whether to send the bill to the other chamber. If bills don't make it through a floor vote in the full chamber by the next cutoff, likely Feb. 13, they are likely dead for the year.

The "house of origin" cutoff significantly cuts down the number of bills that can be considered.

Following the house of origin cutoff, the process repeats, only this time bills that originated in the Senate now make their way through the House and vice versa.

In the last week of the session, lawmakers consolidate any changes made to bills in both chambers into one bill and vote on it one final time before sending it to the governor.

All of this leads up to sine die, the final day of the session, which this year will occur on March 7. At the end of the day, both chambers will swing down the gavel a final time and go home until next year.

Even though cutoffs seem like a strict deadline, lawmakers can often find creative ways to revive seemingly dead bills later in the session, if they deem the legislation important enough.

### **How can I track bills?**

The Washington State Legislature's website, [leg.wa.gov](http://leg.wa.gov), allows you to easily find and track pending legislation, amendments, vote counts and more.

[Search by bill number](#), topic or author, and you'll find the full text of bills, nonpartisan bill reports that explain what the law would do if passed, proposed amendments and a tracker of where the bill is in the process.

You can also [sign up to track specific bills](#) and get updates in your inbox.

**Can I watch?**

Yes! Whether it's in person or streaming, you can watch almost everything that happens under the dome.

TVW has gavel-to-gavel coverage with livestreams and archived videos of all committee hearings, floor sessions and press conferences.

And if you want to watch the action in person, the Washington State Capitol is open to the public, and anyone can watch floor action from the public galleries or sit in on committee hearings.

For the first time, 2024 will have American Sign Language interpreters on some TVW broadcasts. The Legislature is piloting a program where some House and Senate hearings will have picture-in-picture ASL interpretations on live streams.

**What can't I watch?**

You can't watch caucus meetings (which take up a lot of time and are closed-door meetings where compromises are worked out).

**How can I participate?**

If you're feeling strongly about a bill, let your legislators know.

You can find the legislators who represent your district here and contact your legislator directly by sending a message to their office through the Legislature's website.

You can also comment on a bill online or testify in a committee hearing in person or virtually.

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