

Contracts & Client Agreements

Getting your agreements in writing — the smart way



Culpeper County Economic Development created this guide to help local business owners protect themselves with solid, written agreements. Note: This guide is for general informational purposes only — please consult a licensed attorney, accountant, or other qualified professional for advice specific to your business.

WHY IT PAYS TO PUT IT IN WRITING

- Verbal agreements rely on memory, and memories don't always match. A signed contract gives both sides something to point back to if there's ever a disagreement.
- Contracts aren't just for big deals — freelancers, vendors, suppliers, and everyday clients should all get something in writing.
- A clear contract can help resolve a disagreement before it becomes a dispute and gives you legal footing if a client doesn't pay for work you've completed.

WHAT A SOLID CONTRACT SHOULD COVER

- Clear, specific terms — exactly what's being delivered, by whom, and by when.
- A plan for disagreements — how disputes will be handled (for example, mediation or arbitration) before they happen, not after.
- Termination conditions — how and when either party can end the agreement.
- Payment terms, including what happens if a client doesn't pay.

USING AI TO GET A HEAD START ON CONTRACTS

More small businesses are using AI tools to draft a first version of a contract — building an outline, brainstorming key terms, or summarizing obligations. Starting with a draft instead of a blank page can reduce the number of hours (and the cost) of having an attorney write a contract from scratch.

A few things to keep in mind:

- Never enter confidential client information, personal data, or trade secrets into a public AI tool.
- AI can get legal language wrong, including referencing terms or case law that aren't real. Any legal language it generates should be verified, not taken at face value.
- AI-generated drafts should always be reviewed by a legal professional before you rely on them. Treat AI as a starting point for your contract, not a substitute for legal review.

FREE HELP WITH YOUR CONTRACTS

Need a legal professional to look over a contract? The Community Investment Collaborative (CIC) hosts free, one-on-one office hours where you can sit down with a legal professional, including through their Resource Fair. Call 434-218-3481 or email info@icville.org to see if your business qualifies for an appointment.

Not sure what belongs in a contract for your specific industry? Free one-on-one business advising is available through the Small Business Development Center at cvsbdc.org.

Want to dig deeper? CVSBD's free online legal resource library covers contracts, business entities, and intellectual property at cvsbdc.org/legal-regulations-structures-contracts-agreements.