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# MEANING OF THE WORD “FRIVOLOUS”

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<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Authorities on the word “frivolous”</b> .....	<b>5</b>
2.1	Supreme Court on “frivolous”: 28 U.S.C. §1915(d).....	5
2.2	Connecticut Supreme Court.....	6
2.3	Legal Dictionary.....	6
2.4	What the IRS Thinks is “frivolous”.....	7
2.5	Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11(b).....	13
2.6	Tests of Frivolousness: 28 U.S.C. §1915.....	13
2.7	F.R. App. 38: Sanctions for Frivolous Appeals.....	15
2.8	Supreme Court Rule 39: Frivolous Appeals.....	15
2.9	26 U.S.C. §6702: Frivolous returns.....	16
<b>3</b>	<b>How Abuse of the Word Promotes and Encourages Communism</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Why Abuse of the Word “Frivolous” Violates the Requirement for Reasonable Notice</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Preventing the Use of the Word “Frivolous” by the Government</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Defending Yourself Against Charges of Being “Frivolous”</b> .....	<b>20</b>
6.1	Example Defense #1 to charge of “frivolous” from government.....	24
6.2	Example Defense #2 to request for Sanctions Based on “frivolous” arguments.....	25
6.2.1	Motion for sanctions:.....	25
6.2.2	Response to motion for sanctions:.....	26
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Resources for further study and rebuttal</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Questions that Readers, Grand Jurors, and Petit Jurors Should be Asking the Government</b> .....	<b>30</b>

## TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

### **Constitutional Provisions**

Article 1, Section 10.....	26
Article III.....	27
Fifth Amendment.....	30
First Amendment.....	21, 23, 26, 27, 28
U.S. Constitution, First Amendment.....	26

### **Statutes**

18 U.S.C. §§1510, 1512, 1513.....	30
26 U.S.C. §151.....	10, 12
26 U.S.C. §6702.....	16
26 U.S.C. §7701(a)(26).....	28
26 U.S.C. §7701(a)(31).....	11
28 U.S.C. §1915.....	13
28 U.S.C. §1915(d).....	5
28 U.S.C. §2402.....	23
28 U.S.C. §3002(15)(A).....	30
28 U.S.C.S. §1915.....	13

28 U.S.C.S. §1915(d) .....	14
4 U.S.C. §72 .....	25, 28
44 U.S.C. §1505(a).....	27
5 U.S.C. §552(a)(1) .....	27
5 U.S.C. §552a(a)(2) .....	10
5 U.S.C. §553(a).....	27
50 U.S.C. §841 .....	17
8 U.S.C. §1101(a)(21).....	23
8 U.S.C. §1401 .....	23
Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act, 28 U.S.C. §1602 et seq.....	28
I.R.C. Subtitle A.....	12, 28
Internal Revenue Code .....	32
Statutes At Large.....	27

**Regulations**

26 CFR §1.1441-1(c)(3).....	10, 11
26 CFR §1.872-2 .....	10
26 CFR §601.702(a)(2)(ii) .....	27
Federal Register.....	28
Treasury Regulations.....	32

**Rules**

F.R. App. 38 .....	15
F.R.Civ.P. 11 .....	22
F.R.Civ.P. 11(b) .....	13
F.R.Civ.P. 11(b)(1).....	13, 29
F.R.Civ.P. 11(b)(2).....	13, 29
F.R.Civ.P. 11(b)(4).....	13, 29
Fed.R.App.Proc. 38 .....	25, 26
Fed.R.Civ.P. 11(b).....	29
Fed.R.Civ.P. 11, Notes .....	13, 27, 29
Fed.R.Ev. 610.....	29
Fed.Rule.Civ.Proc. 11 .....	19, 22, 27
Fed.Rule.Ev. 610.....	12
Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 38.....	29
Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11(b) .....	13
Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 11(c).....	13
Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6).....	5
Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(b)(6).....	20, 30
S.Ct Rule 42.2 .....	15
S.Ct. Rule 39 .....	15
S.Ct. Rule 39.8 .....	16
Supreme Court Rule 39 .....	29

**Cases**

Adkins v. E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., 335 U.S. 331, 342, 69 S.Ct. 85, 90, 93 L.Ed. 43 (1948) .....	5
Boag v. MacDougall, 454 U.S. 364, 365, n., 102 S.Ct. 700, 701, n., 70 L.Ed.2d 551 (1982).....	6
Brady v. U.S., 397 U.S. 742 (1970) .....	27
Brooks v. General Motors Assembly Division, Mo.App., 527 S.W.2d 50, 53.....	21
Bryant v. Civiletti, 214 U.S.App.D.C. 109, 110-111, 663 F.2d 286, 287-288, n. 1 (1981).....	6
Burgin v. Forbes, 293 Ky. 456, 169 S.W.2d 321, 325 .....	27
Casper v. Commissioner, 805 F.2d 902, 906-07 (10th Cir. 1986).....	25, 28
City of Boerne v. Florez, Archbishop of San Antonio, 521 U.S. 507 (1997).....	11

Cleveland Bd. of Ed. v. LaFleur (1974) 414 US 632, 639-640, 94 S.Ct. 1208, 1215.....	12
Cohn v. Commissioner, 101 F.2d 486, 486-87 (7th Cir. 1996).....	25
Coppedge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 447, 82 S.Ct. 917, 922, 8 L.Ed.2d 21 (1962) .....	5
Denton v. Hernandez, 504 U.S. 25, 112 S.Ct. 1728 (U.S.Cal.,1992).....	6
Galpin v. Page, 18 Wall. 350, 368-369 .....	19
Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520-521, 92 S.Ct. 594, 596, 30 L.Ed.2d 652 (1972).....	6
Hale v. Henkel, 201 U.S. 43 (1906) .....	30
Heart of Atlanta Motel, Inc. v. United States, 379 U.S. 241 (1964).....	11
Holden v. Hardy, 169 U.S. 366 (1898).....	18
Holden v. Hardy, 169 U.S. 366, 389 .....	18
In re Becraft, 885 F.2d at 550.....	25, 28
In re Becraft,885 F.2d 547, 548 n.2 (9th Cir. 1989).....	25
James v. Bowman, 190 U.S. 127, 139 (1903) .....	11
Kyler v. Everson, 442 F.3d 1251, 1253-54 (10th Cir. 2006).....	26
Liebowitz v. Aimexco Inc., Colo.App., 701 P.2d 140, 142.....	21
Liebowitz v. Aimexco, Inc., Colo.App. 701 P.2d 140, 142.....	6, 19, 29
Long v. Rasmussen, 281 F. 236 (1922).....	11
Newblock v. Bowles, 170 Okl. 487, 40 P.2d 1097, 1100.....	27
Noll v. Carlson, 809 F.2d 1446 (CA9 1987) .....	6
Northern Pipeline Const. Co. v. Marathon Pipe Line Co., 458 U.S. 50, 102 S.Ct. 2858 (1983).....	26
People of Territory of Guam v. Fegurur, 800 F.2d 1470 (9th Cir. 1986).....	26
Poindexter v. Greenhow, 114 U.S. 270; 5 S.Ct. 903 (1885).....	18
Potter v. McCall, 433 F.2d 1087, 1088 (CA9 1970) .....	6
Powell v. Alabama, 287 U.S. 45 (1932).....	19
Schoffner v. Commissioner, 812 F.2d 292, 294 (6th Cir. 1987) .....	25, 28
Stearman v. Commissioner, 436 F.3d 533, 539 (5th Cir. 2006).....	26
Stearman v. Commissioner, 436 F.3d 533, 539-40 (5th Cir. 2006).....	25, 28
Tello v. Commissioner, 410 F.3d 743, 745 (5th Cir. 2005).....	26
Texaco, Inc. v. Golart, 206 Conn. 454, 463-464, 538 A.2d 1017 (1988).....	6, 29
Trowbridge v. Commissioner, 378 F.3d 432, 433 (5th Cir. 2004) .....	26
U.S. v. Collins, 920 F.2d 619 (1990).....	28
United States v. Collins, 920 F.2d 619, 629 (10th Cir. 1990) .....	25
United States v. Conkins, 9 F.3d 1377, 1382 (9th Cir. 1993).....	26
United States v. Grunewald, 353 U.S. 391, 425, 77 S. Ct. 963, 984, 1 L. Ed. 2d 931 (1957).....	26
United States v. Guest, 383 U.S. 745 (1966).....	11
United States v. Harris, 106 U.S. 629, 639 (1883) .....	11
United States v. Reese, 92 U.S. 214, 218 (1876).....	11
Vlandis v. Kline (1973) 412 U.S. 441, 449, 93 S.Ct 2230, 2235 .....	12

**Other Authorities**

Black’s Law Dictionary, Sixth Edition, p. 1221.....	28
Black’s Law Dictionary, Sixth Edition, p. 1434.....	28
Black’s Law Dictionary, Sixth Edition, p. 581.....	27
Black’s Law Dictionary, Sixth Edition, p. 668.....	7, 21, 24, 29, 31
Cites on the term “frivolous”.....	30
Federal Pleading Attachment, Litigation Tool #01.001 .....	19
Flawed Tax Arguments to Avoid, Form #08.004.....	30
Great IRS Hoax, Form #11.302.....	20
I.R.M. 4.10.7.2.8 .....	10
Internal Revenue Manual .....	7, 32
IRM 4.10.7.2.9.8 (05/14/99).....	12
IRS Internal Revenue Manual .....	7, 12
IRS Internal Revenue Manual, Section 4.10.12 .....	30
Meaning of the Words “includes” and “including”, Form #05.014 .....	18
Opening Brief, Section 4.2.....	27
Reasonable Belief About Income Tax Liability, Form #05.007.....	12, 31

Rebutted Version of IRS “The Truth About Frivolous Tax Arguments”, Form #08.005 .....	7, 30
Requirement for Consent, Form #05.003 .....	11
Requirement for Reasonable Notice, Form #05.022 .....	18
Rutter Group Practice Guide-Federal Civil Trials and Evidence, paragraph 8:4993, page 8K-34.....	12
Tax Fraud Prevention Manual, Form #06.008 .....	21
The Trade or Business Scam, Form #05.001.....	11
Thomas Jefferson to A. Coray, 1823. ME 15:482.....	23
Thomas Jefferson to Abbe Arnoux, 1789. ME 7:423, Papers 15:283 .....	23
Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, 1816. ME 15:35 .....	23
Thomas Jefferson: Notes on Virginia Q.XIV, 1782. ME 2:179 .....	23
Why Penalties are Illegal for Anything but Federal Employees, Contractors, and Agents, Form #05.010.....	12
Why Your Government is Either a Thief or You Are a “Public Officer” for Income Tax Purposes, Form #05.008.....	10, 11

1 **1 Introduction**

2 Those corresponding with or litigating against the government frequently are faced with the prospect of having their  
3 pleadings or legal contentions identified as “frivolous”. This tactic is most often employed by government counsel in an  
4 effort to avoid having to address any of the legal arguments raised by their opponent because they would be especially  
5 damaging to the government’s position. A number of techniques are useful in defending oneself from such a charge or  
6 preventing it to begin with. This memorandum of law will:

- 7 1. Provide legal authorities that establish the meaning of the word “frivolous”
- 8 2. Describe methods by which the word is abused.
- 9 3. Describe authorities useful in proving that the word is being abused.
- 10 4. Provide techniques for preventing the abuse of the word by the government in protecting or covering-up illegal  
11 activities by the government.

12 **2 Authorities on the word “frivolous”**

13 The following subsections shall provide various authorities on the meaning of the word “frivolous”.

14 **2.1 Supreme Court on “frivolous”: 28 U.S.C. §1915(d)**

15 *In enacting the federal in forma pauperis statute, Congress “intended to guarantee that no citizen shall be  
16 denied an opportunity to commence, prosecute, or defend an action, civil or criminal, in any court of the United  
17 States, solely because ... poverty makes it \*\*1733 impossible ... to pay or secure the costs” of litigation. [Adkins  
18 v. E.I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., 335 U.S. 331, 342, 69 S.Ct. 85, 90, 93 L.Ed. 43 \(1948\)](#) (internal quotation  
19 marks omitted). At the same time that it sought to lower judicial access barriers to the indigent, however,  
20 Congress recognized that “a litigant whose filing fees and court costs are assumed by the public, unlike a  
21 paying litigant, lacks an economic incentive to refrain from filing frivolous, malicious, or repetitive lawsuits.”  
22 [Neitzke, supra, 490 U.S. at 324, 109 S.Ct., at 1831](#). In response to this concern, Congress included subsection  
23 (d) as part of the statute, which allows the courts to dismiss an in forma pauperis complaint “if satisfied that the  
24 action is frivolous or malicious.”*

25 *Neitzke v. Williams, supra, provided us with our first occasion to construe the meaning of “frivolous” under*  
26 *§ 1915(d). In that case, we held that “a complaint, containing as it does both factual allegations and legal*  
27 *conclusions, is frivolous where it lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” Id., at 325, 109 S.Ct., at*  
28 *1831. In Neitzke, we were concerned with the proper standard for determining frivolousness of legal*  
29 *conclusions, and we determined that a complaint filed in forma pauperis \*32 which fails to state a claim*  
30 *under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6) may nonetheless have “an arguable basis in law” precluding*  
31 *dismissal under § 1915(d). 490 U.S., at 328-329, 109 S.Ct., at 1833. In so holding, we observed that the in*  
32 *forma pauperis statute, unlike Rule 12(b)(6), “accords judges not only the authority to dismiss a claim based*  
33 *on an indisputably meritless legal theory, but also the unusual power to pierce the veil of the complaint’s*  
34 *factual allegations and dismiss those claims whose factual contentions are clearly baseless.” Id., at 327, 109*  
35 *S.Ct., at 1833. “Examples of the latter class,” we said, “are claims describing fantastic or delusional*  
36 *scenarios, claims with which federal district judges are all too familiar.” Id., at 328, 109 S.Ct., at 1833.*

37 *Petitioners contend that the decision below is inconsistent with the “unusual” dismissal power we recognized in*  
38 *Neitzke, and we agree. Contrary to the Ninth Circuit’s assumption, our statement in Neitzke that § 1915(d)*  
39 *gives courts the authority to “pierce the veil of the complaint’s factual allegations” means that a court is not*  
40 *bound, as it usually is when making a determination based solely on the pleadings, to accept without question*  
41 *the truth of the plaintiff’s allegations. We therefore reject the notion that a court must accept as “having an*  
42 *arguable basis in fact”, id., at 325, 109 S.Ct., at 1831, all allegations that cannot be rebutted by judicially*  
43 *noticeable facts. At the same time, in order to respect the congressional goal of “assur[ing] equality of*  
44 *consideration for all litigants,” Coppedge v. United States, 369 U.S. 438, 447, 82 S.Ct. 917, 922, 8 L.Ed.2d 21*  
45 *(1962), this initial assessment of the in forma pauperis plaintiff’s factual allegations must be weighted in favor*  
46 *of the plaintiff. In other words, the § 1915(d) frivolousness determination, frequently made sua sponte before*  
47 *the defendant has even been asked to file an answer, cannot serve as a factfinding process for the resolution of*  
48 *disputed facts.*

49 *As we stated in Neitzke, a court may dismiss a claim as factually frivolous only if the facts alleged are*  
50 *“clearly baseless,” 490 U.S., at 327, 109 S.Ct., at 1833, a category encompassing allegations \*33 that are*  
51 *“fanciful,” id., at 325, 109 S.Ct., at 1831, “fantastic,” id., at 328, 109 S.Ct., at 1833, and “delusional,” ibid.*  
52 *As those words suggest, a finding of factual frivolousness is appropriate when the facts alleged rise to the*  
53 *level of the irrational or the wholly incredible, whether or not there are judicially noticeable facts available to*

1 contradict them. An in forma pauperis complaint may not be dismissed, however, simply because the court  
2 finds the plaintiff's allegations unlikely. Some improbable allegations might properly be disposed of on  
3 summary judgment, but to dismiss them as frivolous without any factual development is to disregard the age-old  
4 insight **\*\*1734** that many allegations might be "strange, but true; for truth is always strange, Stranger than  
5 fiction." Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, canto XIV, stanza 101 (T. Steffan, E. Steffan & W. Pratt eds. 1977).

6 Although Hernandez urges that we define the "clearly baseless" guidepost with more precision, we are  
7 confident that the district courts, who are "all too familiar" with factually frivolous claims, Neitzke, supra,  
8 at 328, 109 S.Ct., at 1833, are in the best position to determine which cases fall into this category. Indeed, the  
9 statute's instruction that an action may be dismissed if the court is "satisfied" that it is frivolous indicates that  
10 frivolousness is a decision entrusted to the discretion of the court entertaining the in forma pauperis petition.  
11 We therefore decline the invitation to reduce the "clearly baseless" inquiry to a monolithic standard.

12 Because the frivolousness determination is a discretionary one, we further hold that a § 1915(d) dismissal is  
13 properly reviewed for an abuse of that discretion, and that it was error for the Court of Appeals to review the  
14 dismissal of Hernandez's claims de novo. Cf. Boag v. MacDougall, 454 U.S. 364, 365, n., 102 S.Ct. 700, 701, n.,  
15 70 L.Ed.2d 551 (1982) ( per curiam ) (reversing dismissal of an in forma pauperis petition when dismissal was  
16 based on an erroneous legal conclusion and not exercise of the "broad discretion" granted by § 1915(d));  
17 Coppedge, supra, 369 U.S., at 446, 82 S.Ct., at 921 (district court's certification that in forma pauperis  
18 appellant is taking appeal in good faith, as required by § 1915(a), \*34 is "entitled to weight"). In reviewing a §  
19 1915(d) dismissal for abuse of discretion, it would be appropriate for the Court of Appeals to consider, among  
20 other things, whether the plaintiff was proceeding pro se, see Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520-521, 92 S.Ct.  
21 594, 596, 30 L.Ed.2d 652 (1972); whether the court inappropriately resolved genuine issues of disputed fact,  
22 see supra, at 1733-1734; whether the court applied erroneous legal conclusions, see Boag, 454 U.S., at 365, n.,  
23 102 S.Ct., at 701, n.; whether the court has provided a statement explaining the dismissal that facilitates  
24 "intelligent appellate review," ibid.; and whether the dismissal was with or without prejudice.

25 With respect to this last factor: Because a § 1915(d) dismissal is not a dismissal on the merits, but rather an  
26 exercise of the court's discretion under the in forma pauperis statute, the dismissal does not prejudice the filing  
27 of a paid complaint making the same allegations. It could, however, have a res judicata effect on frivolousness  
28 determinations for future in forma pauperis petitions. See, e.g., Bryant v. Civiletti, 214 U.S.App.D.C. 109, 110-  
29 111, 663 F.2d 286, 287-288, n. 1 (1981) (§ 1915(d) dismissal for frivolousness is res judicata); Warren v.  
30 McCall, 709 F.2d 1183, 1186, and n. 7 (CA7 1983) (same); cf. Rogers v. Bruntrager, 841 F.2d 853, 855 (CA8  
31 1988) (noting that application of res judicata principles after § 1915(d) dismissal can be "somewhat  
32 problematical"). Therefore, if it appears that frivolous factual allegations could be remedied through more  
33 specific pleading, a court of appeals reviewing a § 1915(d) disposition should consider whether the district  
34 court abused its discretion by dismissing the complaint with prejudice or without leave to amend. Because it is  
35 not properly before us, we express no opinion on the Ninth Circuit rule, applied below, that a pro se litigant  
36 bringing suit in forma pauperis is entitled to notice and an opportunity to amend the complaint to overcome any  
37 deficiency unless it is clear that no amendment can cure the defect. E.g., Potter v. McCall, 433 F.2d 1087, 1088  
38 (CA9 1970); Noll v. Carlson, 809 F.2d 1446 (CA9 1987).  
39 [*Denton v. Hernandez, 504 U.S. 25, 112 S.Ct. 1728* (U.S.Cal.,1992)]

## 40 **2.2 Connecticut Supreme Court**

41 "[t]he action is frivolous if the client desires to have the action taken primarily for the purpose of harassing or  
42 maliciously injuring a person or if the lawyer is unable either to make a good faith argument on the merits of  
43 the action taken or to support the action taken by a good faith argument for an extension, modification or  
44 reversal of existing law."  
45 [*Texaco, Inc. v. Golart, 206 Conn. 454, 463-464, 538 A.2d 1017* (1988)]

## 46 **2.3 Legal Dictionary**

47 Black's Law Dictionary defines the word "frivolous" as follows:

48 **"Frivolous."**<sup>1</sup>

49 [1] Of little weight or importance.

50 [2] A pleading is 'frivolous' when it is clearly insufficient on its face, and does not controvert the material  
51 points of the opposite pleading, and is presumably interposed for mere purpose of delay or

52 [3]to embarrass the opponent.

53 [4] A claim or defense is frivolous if a proponent can present no rational argument based upon the evidence or  
54 law in support of that claim or defense. Liebowitz v. Aimexco, Inc., Colo.App. 701 P.2d 140, 142. [5] Frivolous

<sup>1</sup> The definition of "frivolous" has been broken up into clauses for the purpose of a more complete analysis and breakdown its meaning.