

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Lawrence Christopher Smith v. Secretary, et al.

Smith v. Secretary · No. No. 1:23-cv-00526-KES-SAB (PC) · Decided August 27, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California struck Plaintiff Lawrence Christopher Smith’s third amended complaint because it was 48 pages, largely incoherent and illegible, and failed to comply with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8 and the court’s 25-page limit. The court granted one final opportunity to file a compliant third amended complaint within 30 days or submit a notice of voluntary dismissal. The order warned that failure to comply would result in a recommendation that the action be dismissed.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Stanley A. Boone
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	August 27, 2025
DOCKET	No. 1:23-cv-00526-KES-SAB (PC)
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	The court screened a pro se prisoner's third amended complaint in a civil-rights action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The court struck the complaint for exceeding the court's page limit and failing to comply with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8, while granting one final opportunity to file a compliant third amended complaint.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Screening under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A and 1915(e)(2), including whether the complaint states a facially plausible claim and complies with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8. The court also applied its inherent authority to manage its docket and enforce pleading page limits.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished district-court order; nonprecedential
PARTIES	Lawrence Christopher Smith v. Secretary, et al.

TOPICS

pleadings

civil procedure

section 1983

prisoners rights

joinder

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

civil rights

prisoner civil rights

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the court should strike Plaintiff's third amended complaint for exceeding the court's 25-page limit.
2. Whether the third amended complaint complied with Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8's requirement that allegations be short, plain, simple, concise, and direct.
3. Whether the court should allow Plaintiff one final opportunity to file a compliant third amended complaint rather than dismissing the action.
4. What pleading requirements govern the joinder of claims and defendants in Plaintiff's amended complaint.

HOLDINGS

1. The court may enforce a 25-page limit for the complaint and its exhibits, and Plaintiff's 48-page third amended complaint was properly stricken for violating that limit.
2. The third amended complaint violated Rule 8 because it was excessively long, largely incoherent and illegible, failed to present short and plain statements of claims, and did not provide Defendants adequate notice of the claims.
3. Plaintiff may not join unrelated claims against unrelated defendants in one action; multiple defendants may be joined only when the claims arise from the same transaction or occurrence and share common questions of law or fact, after which multiple claims against a properly joined defendant may be considered under Rule 18.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Rather than spend an inordinate amount of time trying to evaluate what, if any claims are stated in Plaintiff's voluminous filing, the Court will permit Plaintiff one final opportunity to file another third amended complaint.” (at 5)

“The largely illegible complaint does not set forth a basis for federal jurisdiction and fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” (at 6)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff, a prisoner proceeding pro se and in forma pauperis, filed a § 1983 action against governmental defendants. His third amended complaint was 48 pages long, exceeded the court's generally applicable 25-page limit, and was described as largely incoherent and illegible. The complaint did not establish a basis for federal jurisdiction, did not state a claim upon which relief could be granted, and did not provide Defendants adequate notice of the claims.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The District Judge denied Plaintiff's motion to stay on November 4, 2024, and allowed thirty days to file a third amended complaint complying with the screening order. Plaintiff filed amended complaints, including a 48-page third amended complaint on May 8, 2025. The court previously struck an amended complaint for exceeding the 25-page limit and again struck the 48-page complaint, allowing Plaintiff thirty days to file a compliant complaint or voluntarily dismiss the action.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009)
- Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007)
- Jones v. Williams, 297 F.3d 930, 934 (9th Cir.)
- Wilhelm v. Rotman, 680 F.3d 1113, 1121 (9th Cir.)
- Moss v. U.S. Secret Service, 572 F.3d 962, 969 (9th Cir.)
- Lal v. United States, 2022 WL 37019, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Jan. 3, 2022)
- Williams v. Corcoran State Prison, 2022 WL 1093976, at *1 (E.D. Cal. Apr. 12, 2022)
- Rivas v. Padilla, 2022 WL 675704, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Mar. 7, 2022)
- Skinner v. Lee, 2021 WL 6617390, at *2-*3 (C.D. Cal. May 20, 2021)
- Cafasso v. Gen. Dynamics C4 Sys., Inc., 637 F.3d 1047, 1059 (9th Cir.)
- McHenry v. Renne, 84 F.3d 1172, 1179 (9th Cir.)
- Nevijel v. North Coast Life Ins. Co., 651 F.2d 671, 673-74 (9th Cir.)
- Sparling v. Hoffman Constr. Co., 864 F.2d 635, 640 (9th Cir.)
- Knapp v. Hogan, 738 F.3d 1106, 1109 (9th Cir.)
- Doe I v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., 572 F.3d 677, 681 (9th Cir.)
- Ramirez v. Perez, 2022 WL 21827691 (E.D. Cal. 2022)
- Case v. Waddington, 2007 WL 1140282 (W.D. Wash. 2007)
- Ready Transp., Inc. v. AAR Mfg., Inc., 627 F.3d 402, 404-05 (9th Cir.)
- Wolf v. Idaho State Bd. of Correction, 2021 WL 3721434, at *2 (9th Cir. Aug. 23, 2021)
- Watts v. Thompson, 116 F.3d 220, 224 (7th Cir.)
- Lewis v. Florida Dep't of Corr., 739 F. App'x 585 (11th Cir. Sept. 28, 2018)
- Owens v. Hinsley, 635 F.3d 950, 952 (7th Cir.)
- George v. Smith, 507 F.3d 605, 607 (7th Cir.)
- Coughlin v. Rogers, 130 F.3d 1348, 1351 (9th Cir.)
- Desert Empire Bank v. Insurance Co. of North America, 623 F.3d 1371, 1375 (9th Cir.)

OPINION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 9 EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA 10 11 LAWRENCE CHRISTOPHER SMITH, No. 1:23-cv-00526-KES-SAB (PC)
12 Plaintiff, SECOND ORDER STRIKING PLAINTIFF’S THIRD AMENDED COMPLAINT,
13 v. GRANTING ONE FINAL OPPORTUNITY TO FILE A THIRD AMENDED COMPLAINT
14 SECRETARY, et al., (ECF No. 49) 15 Defendants. 16 17 Plaintiff is proceeding pro se and in
forma pauperis in this action filed pursuant to 42 18 U.S.C. § 1983.

19 On November 4, 2024, Plaintiff’s motion to stay the proceeding was denied by the District 20
Judge, and Plaintiff was granted thirty days to file a third amended complaint in compliance with
21 the Court’s screening order. (ECF No. 41) 22 On December 6, 2024, Plaintiff filed a third
amended complaint. (ECF No. 42.)

On April 23 23, 2025, the Court issued an order striking Plaintiff’s third amended complaint
because it 24 exceeded the 25-page limitation. (ECF No. 49.) On May 8, 2025, Plaintiff filed a
third amended 25 complaint that is 48 pages in length and does not comply with Federal Rule of
Civil Procedure 8. 26 (ECF No. 49.) 27 /// 28 /// 1 I. 2 SCREENING REQUIREMENT 3 The
Court is required to screen complaints brought by prisoners seeking relief against a 4
governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity.

28 U.S.C. § 1915A(a). The 5 Court must dismiss a complaint or portion thereof if the prisoner has
raised claims that are legally 6 “frivolous or malicious,” that “fail[] to state a claim on which relief
may be granted,” or that 7 “seek[] monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such
relief.” 28 U.S.C. § 8 1915(e)(2)(B); see also 28 U.S.C. § 1915A(b).

9 A complaint must contain “a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader 10
is entitled to relief....” Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2). Detailed factual allegations are not required, but 11
“[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory 12
statements, do not suffice.” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (citing *Bell Atlantic Corp.*
13 v. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)).

Moreover, Plaintiff must demonstrate that each defendant 14 personally participated in the
deprivation of Plaintiff’s rights. *Jones v. Williams*, 297 F.3d 930, 15 934 (9th Cir. 2002). 16
Prisoners proceeding pro se in civil rights actions are entitled to have their pleadings 17 liberally
construed and to have any doubt resolved in their favor. *Wilhelm v. Rotman*, 680 F.3d 18 1113,
1121 (9th Cir.

2012) (citations omitted). To survive screening, Plaintiff’s claims must be 19 facially plausible,
which requires sufficient factual detail to allow the Court to reasonably infer 20 that each named
defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678-79; *Moss 21 v. U.S. Secret*
Service, 572 F.3d 962, 969 (9th Cir. 2009).

The “sheer possibility that a defendant 22 has acted unlawfully” is not sufficient, and “facts that are ‘merely consistent with’ a defendant’s 23 liability” falls short of satisfying the plausibility standard. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678; *Moss*, 572 F.3d 24 at 969. 25 II. 26 DISCUSSION 27 The Federal Rules of Civil Procedure require only that the complaint contain “a short and 28 plain statement of the claim showing the pleader is entitled to relief....” Fed.

R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2). 1 Rule 8 states that “[e]ach allegation must be simple, concise, and direct.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(d)(1). 2 To ensure compliance with Rule 8, courts in the Eastern District of California generally limit 3 complaints to twenty-five pages. See *Lal v. United States*, 2022 WL 37019, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Jan. 4 3, 2022); *Williams v. Corcoran State Prison*, 2022 WL 1093976, at *1 (E.D.

Cal. Apr. 12, 2022). 5 The page limit includes the complaint itself and any exhibits, for a total of twenty-five pages. See 6 *Rivas v. Padilla*, 2022 WL 675704, at *2 (E.D. Cal. Mar. 7, 2022). “[A] lengthy complaint can 7 violate Rule 8 if a defendant would have difficulty responding to the complaint.” *Skinner v. Lee*, 8 2021 WL 6617390, *2-*3 (C. D. Cal. May 20, 2021) (citing *Cafasso v. Gen.*

Dynamics C4 Sys., 9 Inc., 637 F.3d 1047, 1059 (9th Cir. 2011). A district court has the power to dismiss a complaint 10 when a plaintiff fails to comply with Rules 8’s pleading directives. *McHenry v. Renne*, 84 F.3d 11 1172, 1179 (9th Cir. 1996); *Nevijel v. North Coast Life Ins. Co.*, 651 F.2d 671, 673 (9th Cir. 12 1981). When the factual elements of a cause of action are not organized into a short and plain 13 statement for each particular claim, a dismissal for failure to satisfy Rule 8(a) is appropriate.

14 *Sparling v. Hoffman Constr. Co.*, 864 F.2d 635, 640 (9th Cir. 1988); see also *Nevijel*, 651 F.2d at 15 674. Under Rule 8, allegations of facts that are extraneous and not part of the factual basis for the 16 particular constitutional claim are not permitted. See *Knapp v. Hogan*, 738 F.3d 1106, 1109 (9th 17 Cir. 2013) (recognizing that Rule 8 can be violated when the plaintiff provide too much 18 information).

19 Nonetheless, a claim must be facially plausible to survive screening, which requires 20 sufficient factual detail to allow the court to reasonably infer that each named defendant is liable 21 for the misconduct alleged. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678; *Moss*, 572 F.3d at 969.

The sheer possibility 22 that a defendant acted unlawfully is not sufficient, and mere consistency with liability falls short 23 of satisfying the plausibility standard. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678. Although detailed factual 24 allegations are not required, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported 25 by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice,” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (citations omitted), and 26 courts “are not required to indulge unwarranted inferences,” *Doe I v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.*, 572 27 F.3d 677, 681 (9th Cir.

2009) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted). 28 /// 1 Plaintiff's third amended complaint fails to comply with Rule 8 due to its failure to state 2 short and plain statements. As noted above, the third amended complaint is 48 pages in length and 3 is largely incoherent and illegible. A court cannot perform its screening function under 28 U.S.C. 4 § 1915 if the complaint is illegible.

See *Ramirez v. Perez*, 2022 WL 21827691 (E.D. Cal. 2022). 5 Local Rule 130(b) also requires that documents submitted for filing be legible. The largely 6 illegible complaint does not set forth a basis for federal jurisdiction and fails to state a claim upon 7 which relief can be granted.

The complaint also does not comply with Federal Rule of Civil 8 Procedure 8 and does not put Defendants on notice of the claims against them. See *Case v. 9 Waddington*, 2007 WL 1140282 (W.D. Wash. 2007) (dismissing action as it "cannot proceed 10 without a legible complaint" and noting it would prejudice Ds who "would not receive sufficient 11 notice as to the allegations brought against them").

12 Further, it is well-established that district courts have an inherent power to control their 13 dockets. *Ready Transp., Inc. v. AAR Mfg., Inc.*, 627 F.3d 402, 404-05 (9th Cir. 2010) (citation 14 omitted). The Ninth Circuit has determined the imposition of a 20-page limit is not a 15 constitutional violation. See *Wolf v. Idaho State Bd. of Correction*, 2021 WL 3721434, at *2 (9th 16 Cir.

Aug. 23, 2021) (finding the district court did not abuse its discretion in striking a complaint 17 that did not comply with the 20-page limit, and finding the plaintiff's "contentions that the page 18 limit violates his rights to access he courts and to due process lack merit"). Likewise, other 19 circuit courts have found the imposition of page limitations on pleadings is not unconstitutional.

20 See, e.g., *Watts v. Thompson*, 116 F.3d 220, 224 (7th Cir. 1997) ("Enforcing page limits and 21 other restrictions on litigants is rather ordinary practice. This court has a page limit which is 22 rather strictly, and cheerfully, enforced."); *Lewis v. Florida Dep't of Corr.*, 739 Fed. Appx. 585 23 (11th Cir. Sept. 28, 2018) (affirming the dismissal of an action for failure to comply with a court 24 order to file an amended complaint that complied with the page limitation, and rejecting the 25 argument that a page limitation was "unconstitutional... because it effectively denied him access 26 to the courts").

27 As noted above, a district court has discretion to dismiss a complaint due to its failure to 28 comply with Rule 8. Because Plaintiff's third amended complaint is far in excess of the 25-page 1 limit generally imposed on complaints in the Eastern District of California and contains excessive 2 and extraneous incoherent facts, it violates Rule 8. Rather than spend an inordinate amount of 3 time trying to evaluate what, if any claims are stated in Plaintiff's voluminous filing, the Court 4 will permit Plaintiff one final opportunity to file another third amended complaint.

If Plaintiff 5 fails to comply with the 25-page limitation, the Court will dismiss the action. 6 Plaintiff is advised that he may not bring unrelated claims against unrelated parties in a 7 single action. Fed. R. Civ. P. 18(a), 20(a)(2); Owens v. Hinsley, 635 F.3d 950, 952 (7th Cir. 8 2011); George v. Smith, 507 F.3d 605, 607 (7th Cir. 2007). Plaintiff may bring a claim against 9 multiple defendants so long as (1) the claim arises out of the same transaction or occurrence, or 10 series of transactions and occurrences, and (2) there are common questions of law or fact.

Fed. 11 R. Civ. P. 20(a)(2); Coughlin v. Rogers, 130 F.3d 1348, 1351 (9th Cir. 1997); Desert Empire 12 Bank v. Insurance Co. of North America, 623 F.3d 1371, 1375 (9th Cir. 1980). Only if the 13 defendants are properly joined under Rule 20(a) will the Court review the other claims to 14 determine if they may be joined under Rule 18(a), which permits the joinder of multiple claims 15 against the same party.

16 In this instance, because the third amended complaint does not comply with the Court's 17 order not to exceed twenty-five pages in length, the Court must strike it from the record. Plaintiff 18 will be permitted to file a third amended complaint that complies with Federal Rules of Civil 19 Procedure, the Local Rules, and this Court's prior screening order, and given the fact that Plaintiff 20 cannot join unrelated claims and defendants in a single complaint, the Court finds that twenty-five 21 (25) pages is sufficient to present his allegations.

22 Based on the foregoing, it is HEREBY ORDERED that: 23 1. The Clerk's Office shall send Plaintiff a civil rights complaint form; 24 2. Plaintiff's third amended complaint (ECF No. 49) is STRICKEN from the record; 25 3. Within thirty (30) days from the date of service of this order, Plaintiff may file a 26 third amended complaint, not to exceed twenty-five (25) pages in length or a 27 notice of voluntary dismissal; and 28 /// 1 4.

The failure to comply with this order will result in a recommendation that the 2 action be dismissed. 3 4 5 IT IS SO ORDERED. FA. ee 6 | Dated: _August 26, 2025 STANLEY A. BOONE
7 United States Magistrate Judge 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28