



Arbitrable Issues

Appendix I to Part Ten of the National Association of REALTORS® Code of Ethics and Arbitration Manual

Article 17 of the Code of Ethics provides:

In the event of contractual disputes or specific non-contractual disputes as defined in Standard of Practice 17-4 between Realtors® (principals) associated with different firms, arising out of their relationship as Realtors®, the Realtors® shall mediate the dispute if the Board requires its members to mediate. If the dispute is not resolved through mediation, or if mediation is not required, Realtors® shall submit the dispute to arbitration in accordance with the policies of the Board rather than litigate the matter.

In the event clients of Realtors® wish to mediate or arbitrate contractual disputes arising out of real estate transactions, Realtors® shall mediate or arbitrate those disputes in accordance with the policies of the Board, provided the clients agree to be bound by any resulting agreement or award.

The obligation to participate in mediation and arbitration contemplated by this Article includes the obligation of Realtors® (principals) to cause their firms to mediate and arbitrate and be bound by any resulting agreement or award. (Amended 1/12)

Part Ten, Section 43, Arbitrable Issues, in this Manual provides in part:

*As used in Article 17 of the Code of Ethics and in **Part Ten** of this Manual, the terms “dispute” and “arbitrable matter” refer to contractual issues and questions, and certain specific non-contractual issues and questions outlined in Standard of Practice 17-4, including entitlement to commissions and compensation in cooperative transactions, that arise out of the business relationships between Realtors®, and between Realtors® and their clients and customers, as specified in **Part Ten**, Section 44, Duty and Privilege to Arbitrate. (Revised 11/96)*

Part Nine, Section 42, Grievance Committee’s Review and Analysis of a Request for Arbitration, provides, in part, in subsection (b):

If the facts alleged in the request for arbitration were taken as true on their face, is the matter at issue related to a real estate transaction and is it properly arbitrable—i.e., is there some basis on which an award could be based?

Despite the guidance provided in the above-referenced sections of the *Code of Ethics and Arbitration Manual*, questions continue to arise as to what constitutes an arbitrable issue, who are the appropriate parties to arbitration requests, etc. To provide guidance to Association Grievance Committees in their review of arbitration requests, the Professional Standards Committee of the National Association provides the following information.

Arbitration by Associations of Realtors® is a process authorized by law in virtually every state. Arbitration is an economical, efficient, and expeditious alternative to civil litigation. Jurists, including the former U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, have endorsed arbitration as a method of reducing the litigation backlog in the civil courts.

To conduct arbitration hearings, Associations of Realtors®, acting through their Grievance Committees and Professional Standards Committees, must have a clear understanding of what constitutes an arbitrable issue. An arbitrable issue includes a contractual question arising out of a transaction between parties to a contract in addition to certain specified non-contractual issues set forth in Standard of Practice 17-4. Some arbitrations conducted by Associations of Realtors® involve entitlement to compensation offered by listing brokers. At closing, the listing broker will typically be paid out of the proceeds of the sale and may direct that a disbursement be made to the cooperating broker who the listing broker believes was the procuring cause of the sale or was otherwise entitled to the compensation. Subsequently, another broker who may have been previously involved in the transaction will file an arbitration request claiming to have been the procuring cause of sale or otherwise entitled to the compensation, and the question arises as to who is the proper respondent. ***(Revised 11/96, Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

In our example, assume that the listing broker is Broker A, the cooperating broker, who was paid is Broker B, and the cooperating broker who was not paid, but who claims to be the procuring cause of the sale or otherwise entitled to the compensation, is Broker C. It is not unusual for arbitration requests filed by one cooperating broker to name another cooperating broker as the respondent. This is based on the assumption that the monies the listing broker paid to Broker B are unique and that the listing broker's obligation to compensate any other broker is extinguished by the payment to Broker B, irrespective of whether Broker B was the procuring cause of sale or otherwise entitled to the compensation. However, the mere fact that the listing broker paid Broker B in error does not diminish or extinguish the listing broker's obligation to compensate Broker C if a Hearing Panel determines that Broker C was, in fact, the procuring cause of sale or otherwise entitled to the compensation. ***(Revised 11/96, Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

Does this mean that a listing broker who offers compensation to multiple cooperating brokers is always potentially obligated to pay multiple brokers if a property was shown by more than one cooperating broker? Not necessarily. When faced with Broker C's arbitration request, the listing broker could have initiated arbitration against Broker B, requesting that the Hearing Panel consider and resolve all of the competing claims arising from the transaction at the same time. Professional Standards Policy Statement 27, Consolidation of arbitration claims arising out of the same transaction, provides: ***(Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

When reviewing requests for arbitration, Grievance Committees should try to ensure that all appropriate parties are named as complainants or respondents. If it appears that there may be related claims involving other parties arising out of the same facts, the Grievance Committee may suggest to either the complainant or respondent (or both) that they may wish to request arbitration with additional respondents or third-party respondents so that all related claims may be resolved through a single arbitration hearing. Upon motion by either the complainant or the respondent, an arbitration request may be amended to include any additional appropriate parties, or separate arbitration requests may be filed naming additional parties, so that all related claims arising out of the same transaction can be resolved at the same time. (Revised 11/92)

A listing broker who offers compensation to multiple brokers may realize, prior to the closing of a transaction, that there may be more than one cooperating broker claiming they are the procuring cause of sale or are otherwise entitled to the compensation. In such instances, to avoid potential liability for multiple compensation claims, the listing broker, after the transaction has closed, can initiate an arbitration request naming all of the potential claimants (cooperating brokers) as respondents. In this way, all of the potential competing claims that might arise can be resolved through a single arbitration hearing. ***(Revised 11/96, Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

There is also an alternative avenue of arbitration available to Realtors® involved in disputes arising out of cooperative real estate transactions. Standard of Practice 17-4 recognizes that in some situations where a cooperating broker claims entitlement to compensation arising out of a cooperative transaction, a listing broker will already have compensated another cooperating broker or may have reduced the compensation payable under a listing contract because a cooperating broker has expressly sought and/or chosen to accept compensation from another source, e.g., the seller, the purchaser, etc. Under the circumstances specified in Standard of Practice 17-4, the cooperating brokers may arbitrate between themselves without naming the listing broker as a party. If this is done, all claims between the parties, and claims they might otherwise have against the listing broker, are extinguished by the award of arbitrators. Similarly, Standard of Practice 17-4 also provides for arbitration between brokers in cases where two (or more) brokers each have open listings and each claims to be entitled to the compensation. Since the determiner of entitlement to compensation under an open listing is generally production of the purchaser, arbitration between the two (or more) “open” listing brokers resolves their claims against the seller. This open listing scenario is to be distinguished from the situation in which two (or more) listing brokers each have exclusive listings and each claim entitlement to compensation pursuant to their respective listing agreements. Because exclusive listing agreements generally provide for payment of compensation if the listed property is sold – whether through the listing broker’s efforts or not – each listing broker could have a legitimate, enforceable right to compensation from their client. Thus, Standard of Practice 17-4 does not obligate listing brokers to arbitrate between themselves when both (or all) have independent claims to compensation based on their respective exclusive listing agreements. ***(Amended 5/02, Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

Entitlement to cooperative compensation offered but not paid by the listing broker would be a question to be determined by an arbitration Hearing Panel based on all relevant facts and circumstances including, but not limited to, why it was impossible or financially unfeasible for the listing broker to collect some or all of the commission established in the listing agreement; at what point in the transaction did the listing broker know (or should have known) that some or all of the compensation established in the listing agreement might not be paid; and how promptly had the listing broker communicated to cooperating brokers that the compensation established in the listing agreement might not be paid. ***(Amended 11/98, Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

Another question is whether a REALTOR® (often a cooperating broker with an arguably-arbitrable claim) can thwart the process by remaining silent for one hundred eighty (180) days and then bringing a lawsuit against another REALTOR® (often the listing broker). As noted previously, arbitration requests must be filed within one hundred eighty (180) days after the closing of the transaction, if any, or within one hundred eighty (180) days after the facts constituting the arbitrable matter could have been known by the complainant in the exercise of reasonable diligence, whichever is later. REALTORS® cannot reasonably be expected to request arbitration in circumstances where they have no reason to know that a dispute with another broker or firm even exists. Under these circumstances, a listing broker with no prior knowledge of a dispute would have one hundred eighty (180) days from receipt of notice of a lawsuit to invoke arbitration with the other broker. ***(Amended 5/23, Revised and effective June 5, 2025)***

The foregoing are by no means all-inclusive of the consideration that must be taken into account by a Grievance Committee in determining whether a matter will be arbitrated. However, these are some of the common questions raised with respect to arbitrable issues, and this discussion is provided to assist Grievance Committees in their important role in evaluating arbitration requests. ***(Adopted 4/91)***