

Preparing Testimony for Public Hearings

Public hearings are a core part of the democratic process. They serve as an opportunity for the public to voice opinions, sway public opinion, and to present information that policymakers may not otherwise be aware of. In brief, public hearings are held to receive testimony from the public on a local issue, or on a proposed government action. Testimony is usually recorded for public record regardless of side or opinion, most times, whoever is hosting the hearing will release a summary of key points. All levels of government hold public hearings, from local communities to national organizations. Formal public hearings may be required by law in certain situations, such as on the environmental impact of a proposed mining project. In other cases, government officials may use them to gather information to help with decision-making or drafting legislation. Some public hearings may be less formal if they are not held or sponsored by a government organization, and may not require multiple sources or sides to speak.

How should you present testimony at a public hearing?

To present testimony or information at a public hearing, preparation is the key to success.

- 1. Get on the agenda.** When there's a hearing on an issue you or your organization care about, no matter how inconveniently it's scheduled or how peripheral your group may be politically, you should make sure your stance is represented in the testimony or, if possible, you/your organization are on the agenda. When you appear at every one of these things, the people in power learn to recognize you: if you have good things to say and are knowledgeable, they may even come to depend on you. Showing up is very important.
 - a.** Call whatever organization or institution is sponsoring the hearing - for example, if it's a municipal hearing, call City Hall - and then find out who you should talk to about being included in the testimony.
 - b. Getting on the agenda may not be easy.** If the hearing is time-limited, the folks conducting it have probably already chosen their presenters, and to get yourself included may be virtually impossible, or at least very political. You may have to know the right legislator or power-broker, or simply be known as someone who's a royal pain in the neck when you're left out. You have options in this situation: a) see if your political friends can get you included; (b) see if the chosen spokesperson for your issue will include you or your point of view in his or her presentation; (c) talk to the media and anyone else who'll listen about your exclusion (keep in mind, though, that this one's a tough call, because it makes enemies).
- 2. Establish goals for the hearing.** First and foremost, you should know what you want to accomplish with this event. Knowing your goals will also help you choose the best possible people to testify.

3. Of course, **if it's a public hearing your main goal is probably to get your message across about whatever issue or problem is being discussed.** This might mean convincing the city commission to vote in your favor on a public issue, or convincing the general public to vote a particular way in a referendum. You may decide that you have other goals, as well—for example, to attract new volunteers or increase local media coverage of your cause. You might also have the goal of increasing understanding between your side and the opposition.

Example: Forming goals for a hearing

Jose is the head of the coalition we mentioned earlier that is working to establish a one cent sales tax increase to raise funds for youth programs. The city commission has called for a public hearing on the matter, and a referendum will send the issue to the voters next month. Jose and the other leaders of his coalition take this into consideration when forming their goals for the hearing. Here's what they come up with:

Goal 1: To show that there is a need for the proposed youth programs.

Goal 2: To show that the sales tax is needed in order to fund them.

Goal 3: To show that the sales tax won't be a burden on citizens.

4. If you represent part of an organization or movement, choose speakers to represent your views. Pick the people who can best gear their testimony to your message, whether they're highly articulate experts in the field, or people with compelling real-world experience of the issue. You'll want to find folks with whom you feel comfortable as representatives of your cause, because they're likely to be seen that way, even if they're not involved in your organization. Based on your goals, it's often best to seek different kinds of testimony, like a mixture of expert opinion (such as a scientist who specializes in your issue or topic) and personal narratives (stories from people who are directly impacted by the issue) works better than having only one type of information to present. If at all possible, it's best to have people that represent a cross-section of the community, like different ages, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic status.
5. **Prepare yourself well to present testimony.**
 - a. **Research the issue.** How did this issue come before the committee and why is this issue relevant? How is this issue currently addressed by law? What stage is the issue in the legislative process and what is the next step in the process? Who are the committee members that will decide the issue? What is opposition's point of view? Could you compromise on some parts with them?
 - b. **Develop 2-3 key points that you want to convey to the committee.** Use layperson's terms. Avoid jargon and too many statistics. • Personalize your testimony. What does it mean to you? Use anecdotes from your community.

- c. When preparing written testimony, it should be no longer than one page and limited to one bill or issue. Always be polite and positive and do not attack or threaten a government official.
- d. When preparing spoken testimony, preparation and practice is essential! Oral testimonies generally have a time limit of 2-3 minutes at the legislative hearing, so prepare your testimony with that time limit in mind.
- e. Visit the legislative chamber beforehand (ideally when it's in action) to understand the environment. This will help you be more comfortable when presenting, and will help you to understand the process—for instance, does the legislative body have a red, yellow, and green light system to indicate how much time public speakers have left? Or do they simply cut you off at three minutes? How large is the room, and how big is your audience?
- f. Include some of the basic information at the beginning of your testimony:
 - i. Greet the committee.
 - ii. State your name, where you live, and your affiliation.
 - iii. State whether you do/do not support an action.
 - iv. In clear, simple terms, explain why you do/do not support an action.
 - v. End with a simple, direct ask, and a thank you.
- g. **Keep your testimony simple, in layperson terms—avoid jargon!** Including facts and figures is always good, but personalized testimony is usually the most effective. If you're comfortable with it, make sure you include your personal story.
- h. **Practice, practice, practice!** Time yourself delivering your testimony to a friend or spouse. Aim to make your testimony shorter than the time allowed.
- i. Think about potential questions the committee might ask you and prepare concise answers.
- j. **Remember, your testimony may be available to those who want to find it, so prioritize your comfort, safety, and security.** If these are a concern, there may be ways around it. Many government bodies provide methods to protect your privacy while testifying, like using a pseudonym instead of your name, stopping the recording of the meeting when you testify, etc. However, you need to make sure these are options in advance, and make sure you and the people running the public hearing are prepared to do this. If needed, seek out an experienced or connected person who can advocate for you to have this protection and/or can help set it up.

6. Example of testimony structure:

- a. Look directly at the chairperson/questioner. Thank the chair/group for the opportunity to speak. "Mr. Chair" or "Madam Chair, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today."

- b. Identify yourself, your credentials, and where you live—establish your relationship with the issue. State your name for the record, then "I am a manager/resident/attorney/scientist in ... If no one has described the organization you work for or if your specific expertise/relationship to the problem is unknown, establish it briefly. "DMNR is a 10,000-member local organization dedicated to building better communities through education and advocacy."
- c. Deliver your key points using personal experiences. Make sure to include how this decision impacts you, your association, or your business.
- d. Offer positive suggestions or alternative strategies to resolve the issue.
- e. Thank the board, committee, or legislator for hearing your support or concerns. Ask them to support your position, for example, "Therefore, I urge the committee to support HB 707."
- f. Since you have done your homework and practiced, you can use a relaxed conversational style. Show you have listened to the other speakers, and don't repeat what others before you have said. Ideally, do not read or memorize your testimony but rather use notes for guidance. You may be asked questions after you are done speaking—wait briefly after you finish for committee members to ask questions. Be polite but assertive. Respond directly to the question posed and answer concisely and honestly. Do not be afraid to say, "I don't know." You can submit the answer after the hearing in writing.

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