

Testifying Before a Government Body

Arrive early, prepare to stay late, and use your time wisely. Presenting testimony before a legislative body can be time consuming. Use this time wisely, practice your speech, listen to testimony given by others, and pay attention to recurring questions asked by legislators – you may be asked the same question, or you may have the answer to a question someone else was unable to answer. If possible, arrive early and familiarize yourself with the setting and protocol.

Etiquette. As you begin your testimony thank the Chair and members of the committee for the opportunity to speak, introduce yourself, state where you are from, and indicate whether you are supporting or speaking in opposition to the item in question. If after you have spoken a member of the committee other than the chair asks you a question, address them by their title (Senator if a senatorial committee, Representative if a house committee). Remember to give straightforward answers.

Your Testimony. The committee must sit through hours and hours of testimony, try to be refreshing but direct and to the point. Good testimony is usually less than five minutes long and uses both facts and a personal story to communicate a point. Make sure to bring a copy of your testimony for each member of the committee.

Story of Self. The best testimony normally includes a personal story. When writing your personal story think of three main points: challenge, choice, and outcome. A challenge can either be an opportunity you had to accomplish something, or a time in your life when you faced trial. The choice is the decision you made or might have made under another circumstance. The outcome explains how your action influenced your current situation and why you are speaking before the committee.

When preparing your testimony don't stray from who you are and be confident in your speech. You are speaking with an experience and background most legislators don't have. You are the expert, and you are there to help the committee make the right decision.

Questions and conversation. If you do not have the answer to a question, be honest. If you do not have the answer to a question but can provide the information following the meeting tell the member of the committee you will follow up with their office after the hearing, and do so.

Some committee members may have an agenda and may try to provoke a response from you, remember to stay calm and don't let their foolery get to you. Never retaliate against this kind of behavior, it's exactly the type of response they are hoping for. It is okay to disagree with the committee member's views, but do so respectfully.

Following your testimony. After you have testified at a hearing make sure to visit your representative and senator's office and provide them with a copy of your testimony. Chances are you will only be able to speak with a staff member, as most lawmakers are on the floor or in committee during business hours.