

# How to Prepare and Present Testimony to a Legislature

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Testifying during a state or congressional legislative hearing is a powerful way to share your expertise with policymakers and the public. Preparing for a legislative hearing is no small task, but it is an incredible opportunity to directly address the people making decisions, and raise your visibility in a way that may increase your opportunities down the road.

Hearings are organized by state or congressional committees, and are meant to provide background information that can inform future legislation. Committees usually choose “witnesses” to give testimony who are subject matter experts or directly impacted by the topic being discussed. Being invited to testify is a rare opportunity, so you’ll want to feel fully prepared.

## What to Expect at a Legislative Hearing

The committee chair sets the hearing topic, and the majority party controls the schedule. Hearings must be planned at least seven days in advance; this means that you may have less than a week to prepare both written and oral testimony, especially if you are invited by the minority party, who may not have been given advance notice of the hearing.

Both parties can call witnesses to testify (though the minority party is allowed fewer), meaning that witnesses in the hearing may be approaching the issue from very different angles depending on who has invited them to testify. Common witnesses include industry/business representatives, subject matter experts, and professional lobbyists. Before you draft your testimony, talk to the committee staff who invited you to learn the goal of the hearing, other witnesses, and the deadline for submitting written testimony in advance.

The committee chair will begin the hearing with introductory remarks; the ranking member will also give remarks. Attendees will include legislators and their staffs, and may also include lobbyists, members of relevant organizations, and others interested in the topic, since hearings are usually open to the public. Committee members might only attend during their opportunity to ask questions, so don’t be concerned if people are coming and going during the hearing. Witnesses will each have a maximum of five minutes for sharing their oral testimony before committee

members ask them questions. Committee members can then respond to witness testimony.

Committee members from the majority and minority parties alternate asking questions to the witnesses. Depending on the topic, there may be multiple rounds of questioning. Generally, each committee member gets five minutes per round to question whichever witness(es) they choose, though the committee member may spend some or all of that time sharing their own statements on the topic. If committee members have additional questions for witnesses that exceed their five minutes, they can submit them to the chair to pass along to the witnesses after the hearing; these questions and answers can still be added to the public record after the fact. Hearings usually last 90 minutes to two hours, though some can last much longer depending on the topic and the number of witnesses called. The committee chair and ranking member will then give short closing remarks to end the hearing.

## Best Practices for Preparing and Presenting

State and federal legislative committees may vary in the rules or protocols for their hearings, so talk to the committee member who invited you to learn what to expect and what is required.

Confirm with them whether it will be in-person or virtual. If it’s in person, make sure you know exactly where it is located and plan to get there early. If it’s virtual, ask which platform they use (e.g., Zoom) and whether you need to have it installed on your computer in advance. Whether it’s virtual or in person, remember you will be on camera the entire time.

**Written testimony** is submitted and distributed in advance to the members of the committee, and allows you to go into more detail and provide more nuance on the issues you’ll discuss in your oral testimony. Ask the committee member or staff person who invited you about deadlines and requirements such as length and formatting. You may want to look at other examples of testimony for guidance (available at [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov)). Keep in mind that your main audience for the testimony is policymakers and their staffs, so make sure to avoid scientific jargon and use accessible language.

**Oral testimony** can be no longer than five minutes; you will be cut off at the time limit. Here are some tips to maximize your impact.

- Remember this formula: one minute = about 150 words. Plan your comments to be no more than 650 words (between four and four-and-a-half minutes).
- Keep your oral testimony simpler than the written testimony. Focus on two or three main points you want your audience to remember, and use your time to repeat and strengthen these points.
- Practice, practice, practice! You don't have to memorize your oral testimony, but you don't want to be staring down at your notes the entire time.
- Speak slowly and clearly; your hearing might have simultaneous language translation or captions, which will require you to speak slowly. (Another good reason to practice!)

## A Basic Outline for Written and Oral Testimony

**Introduction:** Begin by thanking the committee chair and ranking member for the opportunity to testify. (For oral testimony, look up and rehearse pronouncing their names correctly.) Introduce yourself and why you are testifying—how does your research or area of expertise relate to this issue?

**State the problem:** Provide information about the scale and urgency of the issue at hand. Name who is most impacted by this issue. You can include key facts or statistics to back up your position, but remember to avoid jargon and not get bogged down in the data. A personal story or anecdote can help illustrate your connection to the issue and bring your testimony to life.

**Offer solutions and considerations:** Lay out your case for how science can help address the problem equitably. Include considerations for some of the nuances that the issue presents, but don't lose sight of your main points. At the end, summarize your top two or three takeaways that you hope the audience will remember.

Both written and oral testimony will be added to the official public record, so it is important to be confident about the facts and claims you are making in both testimonies.

## Preparing for Questions

Committee staff may also ask for your input on questions to ask witnesses during the hearing—this is a great opportunity to propose questions that will allow you to dive deeper into one of your main points. Ask the committee member who invited you if they have a list of questions you can use to prepare, and if there are other committee staff or members you should reach out to so you can learn what other members are hoping to gain from the hearing. You are allowed to bring talking points with you, so come prepared with a sheet of key statistics, facts, or bullet points you want to integrate into your answers. You should also read the other witnesses' written testimony in advance (published online) so you know where they're coming from, and look for opportunities to rebut their points through an answer to a related question if possible.

There is always a chance you will be asked challenging or even hostile questions from members of the committee, so prepare for these types of questions in advance by asking someone to practice with you so you feel comfortable navigating this situation. Think about the framing of your responses, and try to redirect off-base questions to areas related to your expertise, so it's harder for your responses to be taken out of context. If you don't know the answer to a question, it is better to say you don't know and will follow up with more information than to say something you might later regret (remember, this is part of the official record). Committee members in both the majority and minority may use hearings as an opportunity for showmanship or to get sound bites they can use to engage their base. Always be polite in your responses, and respond calmly. You're not on trial, even if things feel heated—you're there to provide scientific expertise.

For an example of written and oral testimony, check out UCS Senior Analyst Anita Desikan's [testimony on scientific integrity and public health](#).

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*This guide is based on recommendations and input from Anita Desikan and Dave Cooke at the Union of Concerned Scientists.*

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