

How to Testify Before a Committee

Committees are small groups of legislators who meet together to discuss issues regarding a certain topic (e.g. natural resources, education, taxes). These committees are open to the public, and usually allow you to speak. For more information about committees, visit:

<http://www.le.state.ut.us/documents/aboutthelegislature/committees.htm>

Testifying before a committee might sound intimidating, but remember—these are people just like you. If you are prepared, it's easy. This is your opportunity to educate legislators, opponents, and the public.

The following guidelines will help you feel confident and prepared when testifying:

Before the Meeting

- Prepare with a goal of convincing legislators that your position is **legitimate** and **reasonable**.
- Most times, the committee chair will open up the meeting for public comment by passing around a sign-up sheet. This is where you would testify. You can also contact the appropriate committee chair in advance of the meeting by calling Legislative Research and General Counsel (538-1032) and request permission to testify and be placed on the committee chair's list of speakers.
- Find out what the time limit for your comments will be.
- If possible, attend a committee meeting before you testify to become familiar with the process, the room, and the legislators.
- Make sure you have the Committee's latest schedule. Committee meetings can be delayed or postponed. Agendas are posted 24 hours in advance of the meeting at the Capitol, or on the legislative internet home page (www.le.utah.gov). From the website you can sign up to have agendas e-mailed to you automatically.
- Verify all your information. Then check it again. Know the "other side of the story" as well. If a legislator or an opponent finds an error in your information, it can cast doubt on the information you submit and may discredit your position.
- If you have handouts, prepare enough for every legislator to get a copy. Make them short, usually not more than two pages. You can also ask the committee secretary to distribute handouts before the meeting.
- Prepare and practice your testimony ahead of time so that you feel confident and comfortable when the time comes to actually testify. If you do not prepare beforehand, you run the risk of forgetting to address important aspects of your argument in front of the committee.
- Be on time. Even better, arrive a few minutes early to collect your thoughts.
- Plan to stay a while, even through the dinner hour. While comment times are limited, there is no way to predict how long the question period will last on each agenda item.

During the Meeting

- Be polite and considerate of everyone involved.

- Pay attention to the legislators’ comments and the testimony of your opponents. You can learn about their key concerns and interests by being attentive.
- Check your ego at the door. Legislators are unimpressed by someone telling them how to do their job. Don’t accuse the legislators of causing your problem.
- When you are called on, go to your assigned position, address the chair by title and last name, then acknowledge the remaining legislators. (e.g. “Chairman Smith and members of the Senate Natural Resources Committee”)
- For the record, state your name, address, and any group or organization you represent.
- Deliver the facts and arguments of your testimony in priority order of their importance. If you refer to the bill, do it in the same order of the paragraphs contained in the bill.
- Follow a logical path to a clear conclusion: “Do Pass” or “Kill” this bill.
- Watch the body language of those you’re addressing. Are they confused? Bored? Angry? Take your cues from them.
- At the conclusion of your testimony, thank the legislators, and offer to answer questions. In responding to their questions, first acknowledge the committee chair, then acknowledge the legislator who asked you the question—e.g. “Chairman Smith,” (he acknowledges you), “Senator (Representative) Jones,” (she acknowledges you).

Question Period

- Some questions or comments may be insulting or openly hostile. Stay cool. Your ability to stay calm only enhances your stature. Express your understanding of his/her position, but make it clear that yours is different. If you can, without sacrificing your position, empathize with a part of the comment or question.
- If you are asked and you don’t know the answer, never guess. You are held accountable for what you say. Rather, 1) ask one of your colleagues to answer if you think they know or 2) say that you don’t know, but that you will find out the answer and get back with them. Saying “I don’t know” is okay, but remember to follow up with the answer when you’ve found it.
- At the end of the questions, thank them for the opportunity to present your position.

After the Meeting

- Remember, your job doesn’t end when the meeting is over.
- Debrief with colleagues in the hall. Talk about assignments to follow up on any questions that were asked.
- Try to talk with supportive and undecided legislators. Ask for suggestions, offer to provide more information, and urge support for your position.
- Follow up immediately on any commitments you made.
- Stay in contact with the committee and your fellow supporters, as well as opponents. This lets them know that there is a continuing interest in the issue and their position.