



When you testify before a board, council or committee, (we will say board for the remainder of this document) you engage in one of the few activities with elected office holders that are both personal and public. If done correctly, public testimony can be one of the most powerful tools a grass roots volunteer can use to move public policy toward limited government.

Public Testimony is NEVER Futile

When you testify before a board, you are trying to convince them to do something or not do something. You may sometimes think that the board members are hopeless and will never adopt your position or idea. Occasionally this is true, but you might be surprised to know how often it isn't. **No office holder wants to be seen supporting a position that regular people can show will cause harm to their lives.**

Even if the members of the board you are testifying in front of cannot be convinced, your words may cause a reporter to interview you after your testimony. You may find that you have given voice to people in the audience who agree with you (you may then find allies who can help you). If television, radio, or even public access television cover any of your testimony, you may find yourself reaching thousands of other people. Your words might sometimes cause a board or committee to table a proposal, buying time to build support around your position.

So in the best of circumstances, you can convince a board to adopt your position or postpone a decision which will buy you time. In the worst of circumstances, you can still find an audience and, potentially, allies that can help you in the future. Testifying also builds your stature as a public activist, and will help you build credibility when you are active on other issues. **So remember: Engaging in public testimony is NEVER a waste of time.**

Make the Most of Your 3 Minutes of Fame

When you testify before a board or committee, you will typically get three minutes at the microphone (sometimes they allow five). If you follow the following basic guidelines, you will be able to make your point effectively within that small period of time. Here goes...

Remember Testimony Etiquette

First, remember that you are always speaking to the chair or president of the board when you testify -

even if another board member asks you a question. Always address the Chair first.

Begin by thanking the board for the time. Always use their titles. For example, when you begin, say, "Mr./Madame Chair, members of the board, thank you for this time today." If, after your testimony, a member asks you a question, begin your answer with, "Mr./Madame Chair, Senator Jones (the member who asks the question), my answer is..."

Second, when you are finished, offer to answer any questions. Say thank you when you are finished.

Third, and this is VERY IMPORTANT: **Always be polite and professional, even if you are angry, and even if one or more board member disrespects you. NEVER go over time.** If you need more time, create a "Tag Team" by getting one or more supporters to testify on different aspects of your issue. Always be well dressed and groomed to enhance credibility.

Finally, know that there is almost always a sign-up process. At the capitol, sign-up sheets are provided in hearing rooms shortly before a hearing begins. In local or county governments, there is usually a colored sheet you fill out with your name and address which indicates your desire to testify. Come early and sign up early. Many board chairs determine order on a first come, first serve basis, but not always. Public office holders and people with specialized information are often given preference. So sign up early, but be patient. If you do not sign up, don't expect to speak.

① Tell Them Who You Are and Why You Are There

Tell them WHO you are. When you begin, after you have thanked the board, tell them your name. But who you are is not just your name. Also tell them where you live and what you do for a living. Tell them who you represent if you are representing a group. If it is relevant, tell them whether you are married or have children. You can say you are a member of Americans for Prosperity if you are testifying on a prosperity related issue like taxes or property rights. If board members know that you are one of their constituents or that you are plugged into a network of lots of people, this will add weight to your testimony.

Tell them WHY you are there. After you have told them who you are, tell them what has brought you to their meeting and what compelled you to offer testimony. For example, "I have come to testify against House Bill 9999 which I think will make it hard for parents to put their children through college," or, "I have come to support House Bill 9998 which will create thousands of family wage jobs in my

community." At this point, the board now knows your name, who you are, and why you are there.

② Tell Them Your Personal Story

Consultants and professionals are great at showing graphs, charts, and focus group results. **But you might be astonished to know that, in the world of politics, few things have the impact that a personal story does.** This is your chance to personalize your testimony and give the board members, or whoever might be listening or watching, a reason to take your side on an issue. For example: "My father grew up in my home town manufacturing widgets. So did his father. I am a third generation widget maker. The widget industry is key in my town and is important to our identity, drives our town's economy, and is part of our heritage. If this ordinance passes, you will shut down our industry. I will have to pull my kids out of school and move. This ordinance will kill my community and end a way of life that has endured for one hundred years. People like me will have to take unemployment and other forms of public assistance. It is humiliating, and I know my neighbors agree."

The point here is to attach a human face and a human story to bring emotional and intellectual impact to your position. Namely, YOUR human face. You can bet that you will have an impact.

③ Tell Them Your Central Principle

As you prepare your personal story, think about the central principle involved and articulate this principle clearly when you testify. Such principles could be "freedom", "choice", "security", "prosperity"; this will vary depending on your issue. Always be clear about the principle at the heart of your story with those you are speaking to and with yourself. If you clearly name and discuss your central principle after you've given your personal story, you will put your personal story within a context that matters to everyone and adds weight to your testimony.

④ Tell Them What You Want

Finally, and perhaps most important, TELL THEM WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO DO. As you conclude, always say something like, "So for these reasons, I strongly urge you to vote FOR Ordinance 32-3 and help preserve jobs in my community," or "So for these reasons, I strongly urge you to vote AGAINST Senate Bill 8888 and protect charter schools throughout Oregon". Bottom line, tell them what you want them to do.

You are a salesperson when you testify. Your product is your position on an issue, and you are trying to convince the board to adopt your position

instead of someone else's. So remember, always ask for the sale.

EXERCISE

As an exercise, pair up in threes. Each person will take five minutes and think of an issue that is important to them. Imagine a bill is under consideration supporting your side of an issue. On a piece of paper, write down a name for this bill, what the bill does, and construct your testimony based on the material in this lesson.

The three of you will take turns in the following roles: 1) One will be a board chair, 2) One will be another member of the board and 3) One will be a citizen testifying to the board about the bill idea they came up with. The "citizen" who is testifying will offer his or her testimony. The "board members" will listen. The "board member" who is not the chair will keep time, and the "citizen" will be limited to three minutes. The citizen will use testimony etiquette as he or she testifies and the "board members" will respectfully assist if there are any mistakes (real board members usually, but not always, offer assistance too).

After the testimony, one of the "board members" will ask a question (any question - we are practicing etiquette here). After the question is answered, switch roles until each person has had a chance to play every role. When you are done, go out and be heard! Thanks, and good luck! ☑