

How-To Guide

Creating Your Personal Testimony to Influence Policy Change

In this guide, you will learn how to:



- Identify your audience
- Create your message
- Express your feelings effectively
- Ask for the change you want

Why personal testimony?

The purpose of including personal testimony in public hearings is to help decision makers understand how a proposed change will directly affect the lives of people living in the community. Personal testimony highlights the potential impact of policy change on individuals and creates a more complete decision-making process.

Providing personal testimony at public hearings is not easy. It's important to have good communication skills and to develop a plan for telling your story.

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Communication Skills for Providing Personal Testimony:



What is the rule, policy or law you want to address with your personal testimony?



Who is your audience?

The first thing to consider when planning your personal testimony is your audience. For example, if you want to provide input on a proposed change to a policy at your school, that audience will probably be made up of school administrators, educators and other students who also have a personal stake in the issue. If you want to provide personal testimony to a city committee such as a zoning or planning board, your audience will probably include elected officials as well as experts (such as transportation and community development experts).

Who is your audience?

- Elected officials?
- Volunteer board members?
- Paid staff of a local organization?
- Members of the community?

Many audiences will have a mix of different members. For example, if you are providing testimony at a City Council meeting, your audience will probably be made up of elected officials, members of your community, and perhaps paid city staff.





What does your audience need to know?

Think about the needs and interests of your audience. This will help you choose how to tell your story and what details are important to include. Your goal is to grab the attention of your audience by making your story relate to them so they can understand your personal perspective.

For a proposed change to a policy at your school, you may want to include details about your current experience as a student, and if you think the change will make your school experience, and the experiences of other students, better or worse. If you are providing personal testimony for a proposed zoning change in your neighborhood, you may want to include details about how the proposed change will affect current aspects of your community.

Sometimes, decision makers, including volunteer groups and elected officials, will ask for input on specific issues and tell you what they want to know. Other times you will have to use your best judgement to decide what information will be most useful for the decision-making process.

Generally, decision makers want to know how their policies will affect you and your ability to do the things you want and need to do as a member of the community.

Use this space to list a few things you think decision makers might need to know to help them make their decision.



What do you want to say about this rule, policy or law change, and why is it important to you?

Clear messages address the Who, What, Where, When, How and Why of an issue.

Below is an example of a clear message that addresses an audience made up of city officials. The issue is a proposal for a new downtown theater complex whose developers are applying for community development funds to support their project.

Sample testimony:

Hello. My name is Anyperson Jones. I want to speak about the proposal that will use community development funds to build a theater downtown this year. While I like the idea of having a centrally located theater, I am concerned about this project because the plans do not include a good description of how the theater will be universally accessible to all members of the community. Given that the developers are applying for community funding for this project, I think it's important that the theater be universally accessible.

I use a wheelchair and I enjoy going to the movies with my friends. In the past this hasn't been easy because the theaters we currently have in town only have one or two places in the auditoriums where a wheelchair can fit and their aisles are very narrow. There have been times when I have been unable to see films because all the accessible spaces in the theater were occupied and I was told that I was not allowed to use the aisle because my chair presented a fire hazard. As a result, I often don't go to films with friends which isolates me from my community.

This proposed theater offers our community an opportunity to increase accessibility to all community members but universal design is something that needs careful and thoughtful planning in advance. Modifying inaccessible structures after they are built is not cost effective and rarely results in universally accessible spaces. Universal accessibility won't just benefit wheelchair users, like me, but will also benefit families and groups who want to invite people who use mobility devices to see films.

I would like to suggest that an accessibility workgroup be established to review plans for the new theater and all future projects seeking public funding. This will help ensure public funds are used for the benefit of every community member rather than excluding some individuals because of oversights in design and planning.

Practice Testimony: Who, What, Where, When, How, Why

This example addresses the questions of Who, What, Where, When, How and Why, and it speaks to the interests of the audience as well as the broader community. Friends and family members of the individual providing the testimony will benefit from planning for universal design, as well as other people who use wheelchairs, or other assistive technology.

In the table below, identify the Who, What, Where, When, How and Why of the movie theater testimony and the action the speaker wants the decision makers to take.

Who is presenting the testimony? Is it an individual who is providing testimony or a group?	
What is the issue the speaker is addressing?	
Where will this decision have its effect? Is it a city-wide decision, a neighborhood decision, etc.?	
When will the decision take effect?	
How will this issue affect the speaker?	
Why is it important? What details are included in the testimony that communicate why this issue matters?	
What action does the speaker want the decision makers to take?	

Planning Your Own Testimony: Who, What, Where, When, How, Why

When planning your personal testimony, make sure to practice with a friend. Ask them if they can identify the Who, What, Where, When, How and Why as well as your intended audience. Not only is this feedback valuable in helping you develop a clear message, but it helps you practice before the meeting. Now, develop your own message.

In the table below, identify the Who, What, Where, When, How and Why of your message as well as the action you want the decision makers to take.

Who are you and are you speaking as in individual or part of a group?	
What is the issue you want to testify about?	
Where is your community affected by this decision? Is the decision city-wide, neighborhood-based, organization-based, etc.?	
When will the decision take effect?	
How does this issue affect you and/or your community?	
Why is it important to you and/or your community?	
What action do you want the decision makers to take?	



How do you feel about the issue?

Once you have a clear message developed, it is important to consider the tone you will use during your testimony. **Tone** is the way you communicate your feelings on an issue. Tone isn't just the way your voice sounds when you speak but can also be communicated by word choice, body language and facial expressions.

Many people feel nervous or even angry when providing personal testimony and this can affect whether or not your audience hears what you have to say. If you seem nervous, you may be less clear when you speak and sound unsure of yourself.

Anger is often a motivating reason why people want to provide personal testimony, but anger and hostility in your voice or in your word choices can make it hard for your audience to listen to your perspective and take you seriously.

One good way to establish an effective tone for personal testimony is to identify how you are feeling and why you feel that way **before** you create your testimony. If an issue makes you feel angry because the needs of people with disabilities are not being taken into account, consider the best way to communicate that anger in your testimony and practice with a friend.

Below is an example from the movie theater testimony with added words that clearly and calmly express strong emotions and the reason why the speaker feels that way.

*Hello. My name is Anyperson Jones. I want to speak about the proposal that will use community development funds to build a theater downtown this year. While I like the idea of having a centrally located theater, **I feel angry and frustrated because** this project does not include a good description of how the theater will be universally accessible to all members of the community, particularly to those of us who use wheelchairs.*

Use this space to describe how you feel about the issue and why you feel that way.

Personal Testimony Tips



- **Build confidence with practice.** If you don't have experience with public speaking, practicing with a friend or even in front of a mirror can help you develop confidence.
- **Go to the meeting with a friend.** It's easier to feel more confident when someone is with you to provide support.
- **Provide testimony with a group.** This is called group advocacy and can be very empowering. The movie theater example could easily be a group advocacy effort in which friends and family of the individual providing testimony could also describe how important it is to them that their family member/ friend be able to attend movies with them.
- **Keep it short and clear.** There is usually a time restriction of 2-3 minutes. Practice with a timer so you can see how long it takes for you to share your story.
- **Practice your pace.** Slow down so that your audience can understand you.
- **Stay calm.** Take a deep breath before you begin speaking and slowly exhale. Pause for a breath between sentences to help you maintain your calm pace.
- **Speak naturally.** Try to memorize your testimony. If you can't memorize your comments, simply let your audience know that you will be reading your thoughts.
- **Make eye contact.** Eye contact is good way to connect with your audience. Try to make eye contact with at least a few people in your audience when you pause for a breath. You may also make eye contact when you introduce yourself or at the end of your comments.
 - **A note about eye contact:** In some cultures, eye contact is a sign of disrespect, especially with an elder. Eye contact can also be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for people who have an autism spectrum disorder. Focus on other aspects of your body language, such as not fidgeting with your cell phone or rustling your notes, and speaking clearly and calmly.
- **Reflect.** Think about what went well and what could be improved after you've given your testimony. This is something you can do on your own or ask a friend to help you with. Thinking about your successes and challenges will help you prepare for the next time!

Learning to provide personal testimony can feel intimidating and even frightening, but decision makers really do need your input to make the best decisions. With practice, you will feel more confident and may even see the impact of your participation when policies are changed or developed that improve the quality of life in your community.