

So you want to make a public comment!

by Liz Denys

<https://lizdenys.com/public-comment>

Step 1: Find out how to submit a public comment!

Typically, you can submit a public comment by either speaking at a public meeting, which is likely in person but may have a virtual option, or by sending in a written comment. Make sure to sign up to speak if you need to and note any deadlines for sending in written comment! Sometimes, you can only do these things close to the meeting - set a reminder while you're thinking about it. Most governmental agencies are required to weigh written testimony the same as spoken testimony. However, media coverage often only reviews spoken testimony, so if you are able to speak at a public meeting, that will have more weight in the court of public opinion.

Step 2: Prepare your comment!

At the end of the day, politicians tend to follow, not lead, and how stories are framed in the media really matters for how politicians end up voting. This is why I always try to speak at public meetings when I'm able.

You might not think you can make a difference, but even being the lone voice on a side of an issue provides political cover for someone to do the right thing - your comment makes it impossible to say no one wanted it!

Some people are more confident at public speaking than others (this gets easier with time, I promise!), but you don't have to have a speech memorized or go off the cuff to provide testimony. Also, when issues are contentious - as they

Public comment is not always designed to accurately reflect affected communities, and barriers to participation often burden the most vulnerable affected the hardest. Consider equity both in your thinking on the issue at hand and in how you support it with your comment.

A lot of people engage in bad faith at public meetings. Often the people who show up to defend the status quo will rely on misinformation or lose their cool, but you don't need to engage with their arguments or meet them at their level. Sticking to how the facts, your experiences, and the experiences of others support why you want something is more effective, even if it's frustrating.

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often are when changes are proposed - opponents might be hostile towards you, and this can rattle even the most confident and experienced public speakers!

Write down whatever notes will help you focus on delivering your testimony. You can even draft your testimony ahead of time and read it at the hearing. In my experiences, many people read out their testimony, including people who work professionally for advocacy groups - it's completely normal and ensures you get to say everything you want to say!

The most important thing to do is clearly state your position on the issue at hand in your testimony. Even if all you say is "I support this" or "I oppose this," you've successfully expressed your opinion on the record, and it will help shape

Plus, if a lot of people are saying ghoulish things that make your blood boil, it can be helpful to commiserate in a friendly group chat.

Step 4: Show up and give your testimony!

You got this!

Some final thoughts:

You usually don't have to be at for the entire meeting to give a public comment. If you can only show up for part of a meeting and someone else you know is going, ask them to fill you in on when public comments start and stop so you know if you can make it to speak. You can generally leave once you've given testimony and been dismissed from follow-up questions, if applicable.

It's common to start with a brief introduction with your name and your connection to the issue and area it affects. If you can, include some personal anecdotes about why the issue matters to you. Local grassroots organizations may also have talking points and statistics you can reference. If you have time at the end, say thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Look into how the hearing will be run ahead of time. Find out if you need to be there at a specific time to testify and determine if someone might ask you follow-up questions after you speak. If you can't find this information, watching clips from previous meetings held by the convening body to get an idea of how things go. In my experiences in NYC, questions are rarely asked of members of the public testifying on their own behalf, and it's also common to offer to follow up later if you don't know the answer.

Step 3: Tell interested friends, family, and neighbors to come comment, too!

There is strength in numbers always. More voices for your position makes it more likely to be adopted!

Look up information about the public meeting ahead of time! Find out if there are any requirements or time limits for public testimony. In NYC, you often have only 2 or 3 minutes, so when I can, I practice my testimony to time it. Often, you can submit additional comments that don't fit as written testimony.