

# To Testify at the Washington State Legislature



*Every citizen has the right to testify, orally or in writing, on bills or constitutional amendments being heard by the Washington State Legislature.*

*“All political power is inherent in the people, and governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, and are established to protect and maintain individual rights.”*

— Article 1, Section 1  
Washington State Constitution

*“Every person may freely speak, write and publish on all subjects, being responsible for the abuse of that right.”*

— Article 1, Section 1  
Washington State Constitution

## “Open” Legislature

Washington state has one of the most “open” legislatures in the country. A bill has a public hearing before Senate and House committees before being considered by the houses of the Legislature. Your opportunity to testify comes at the committee hearings. If you cannot appear before a committee, you may write a letter making your position on a bill known.

Committees usually meet in hearing rooms in the John A. Cherberg Building (formerly called the Public Lands Building) and the John L. O’Brien Building (formerly called the House Office Building). Both buildings are adjacent to the Legislative Building in Olympia.

## Committee Hearings

Legislative hearings are conducted informally. They are not judicial proceedings and there are no prescribed rules to follow. Anyone can testify; you do not need formal training.

Schedules of committee hearings are published weekly and daily during the legislative session. These are available in the north entry of the Legislative Building or in the Bill Room in the Legislative Building. You can also find out which committee will be hearing the bill you’re interested in by calling the toll-free Legislative hotline number (1-800-562-6000) or by inquiring in person at the north entry of the Legislative Building or in the Bill Room.

The Bill Room has copies of bills for distribution. Be sure to ask for any pending amendments or substitutes to particular bills. Notices of interim committee hearings are sent out by committees between legislative sessions.

Most committees have mailing lists. You can ask to be placed on a particular committee’s mailing list or, for a small fee, receive notices of every public hearing. Phone numbers for the committees are listed in the Bill Room and at the State Capitol Information Center on Capitol Boulevard.



If you are a person with a disability and need special accommodations, please contact the

House at (360) 786-7101, and the Senate at (360) 786-7400.  
TTY 1-800-635-9993.

## Before the Hearing

Generally, if you are testifying on a bill or issue and represent only yourself, you will not be required to register as a lobbyist.

A Public Disclosure Commission brochure outlines guidelines on this subject: *"You do not have to register and report if you:*

1. appear only before public meetings of legislative committees or state agencies, or
2. do not receive pay, expenses or other consideration for lobbying and make no expenditure for or on behalf of a legislator, elected official or state employee in connection with lobbying, or
3. restrict your lobbying to four days during any three month period and spend no more than \$15 for or on behalf of a legislator, elected official or state employee."

A copy of this brochure is available through the State Capitol Information Center, or you may check with the Public Disclosure Commission if you're uncertain.

Be punctual, since usually only one public hearing for testimony is held on a particular bill.

When you enter the hearing room, locate the sign-up sheet near the entrance and write your name, address, and whether you favor or oppose the bill. Also check to see if copies of proposed amendments or substitute bills are available.

*"The several committees shall fully consider measures referred to them. The committees shall acquaint themselves with the interest of the state specially represented by the committee, and from time to time present such bills and reports as in their judgment will advance the interests and promote the welfare of the people of the state."*

**Rule 44, Permanent Rules of the Senate, 1985**

## Organize Your Comments

Time is usually limited, so be brief and direct. Written testimony should not be read at committee hearings. Committee staff will distribute copies of written testimony to members of the committee if you bring a sufficient number – one for each member. Writing down your comments in outline form will be helpful when you speak, and you should summarize your written testimony.

## Avoid Duplication

If other persons will be offering similar testimony at the hearing, try to coordinate your testimony and avoid duplication.

Well-organized testimony is the most effective.

## At the Meeting

### Committee Procedures

Be present at the beginning of the hearing. The committee chair will open the hearing on a particular bill. Frequently, opening comments will be made by the bill's sponsor or by committee staff. Sometimes, however, the chair will ask for testimony from proponents and opponents immediately.

The chair will organize the hearing to ensure:

1. that the committee members hear relevant information,
2. that interested persons are given the opportunity to express their positions, and
3. that the hearing does not exceed the time available.

Most committee hearings are limited to no more than two hours, and may have several subject matters pending. The chair will attempt to be fair and provide each person an opportunity to testify. However, it may be necessary to restrict testimony so that everyone is given an opportunity to express his or her opinions.

Follow the custom of beginning your remarks by addressing the

chair and committee members, introducing yourself and your purpose. For example, "Mr. or Madam Chair and members of the committee, I am John Doe from Spokane. I am here representing myself. I support this bill because . . ."

Make clear in opening remarks if you are representing other citizens, or a separate group.

Be brief, and be sure your remarks are clear. Avoid being too technical, and do not repeat previously made remarks. There is no need to be nervous or worried about how you present your testimony.

Be prepared for questions and comments from committee members. These are designed to gain additional information, but don't answer if you are not sure of the answer. Tell the members you will get a written answer back to the committee and then follow through.

Restrict yourself to your testimony. Abstain from other overt demonstrations such as clapping, cheering, booing, etc.

*"Standing committees shall act upon all referred bills, memorials and resolutions. Only such bills as are included on the written notice of a committee meeting may be considered at that meeting except upon the vote of a majority of the entire membership of the committee to consider another bill."*

**Rule 25, House Rules, 1985**

## Parking

During the legislative session, parking is limited, particularly during the day. We suggest following exit #105-A from Interstate 5, which will direct the public to parking. You may then take the Legislative Shuttle directly to the Capitol. Disabled parking is available on the Capitol Campus.

