

WRITING TESTIMONY AND LETTERS

TESTIMONY

The primary focus of oral and written testimony is clearly and concisely communicating the essence of the issue. The same guiding principles apply in oral and written testimony that apply in every other communications forum.

I. BASIC STEPS

1. Introduce yourself. Say who you are, where you are from, and give a brief description of the history of your organization.
2. Thank whoever is listening to the testimony for the opportunity to express your view.
3. Always be respectful.
4. Provide listeners with a brief summary of what you are going to testify about. You can go more in-depth later, but it is important to get to the gist of your testimony at the start.
5. Don't get muddled down in trying to elaborate too much on each of your points. People will follow along and read most of your testimony as you present the information orally.
6. Be clear, direct, and concise.
7. Make printed copies of your full testimony. Take care to ensure that the printed copy is structured so that people can follow along easily.
8. It is helpful to have your written testimony in front of you so that you can be certain to highlight the main points. This is different than giving public comment, which is more informal. Testimony is very formal and it is important that you are precise, on-point, professional, accurate, and direct.
9. Do not hand out printed copies of your testimony to legislative committees BEFORE you testify. Our experience is that if legislators receive printed copies of what you intend to say well in advance, they won't always listen to your oral testimony.
10. Ensure that written testimony meets the same standards of fairness, accuracy, precision, urgency, and simplicity as articles, news releases, and op-eds. Make sure words are spelled correctly and always use correct grammar.
11. Make sure that there is space for you on the docket. Call in advance to reserve a place — the earlier the better. The Natural Resources Commission, legislative committees, and hearings held by the Department of Environmental Quality sometimes require weeks of advance notice to reserve a space to testify.
12. Relax.

II. APPROACH

It is essential to have a strong, fact-based case that is logical, reasoned, and rational. When you attack an issue from an emotional perspective, or rely on loaded language to convey urgency, you often lose credibility. Let the facts and the content of your testimony carry the message. To gain the respect and ear of people whose opinions may differ from ours, it is important to be professional, levelheaded, rational, business-like, and articulate.

LETTERS

The same guiding principles apply to letters that apply to everything we write, say, and publish: Be brief, clear, punctuate correctly, use good grammar, be reasoned, and friendly.

The most important aspect to consider when you are writing a letter is your AUDIENCE.

If you are writing:

Lawmakers — The sensitivity and respect factor is heightened when you are writing letters to lawmakers. These people are extremely influential folks that merit your esteem. When addressing a letter to a lawmaker, there is a formal salutation: The Honorable. Correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar is also extremely important. In the body of your letter, try to make lawmakers your friends: Be friendly, respectful, interested, and aware of what these people are doing, have done, or where they stand on an issue.

In letters to lawmakers it is also extremely important to get directly to the point. Be clear, concise, and succinct. These public officials read dozens of letters every day and don't have a lot of time to muddle through heavy text. To convince them of a point, we need to be direct and clear about exactly what we want from them right from the start.

In summary, a letter to a lawmaker:

1. Gets right to the point.
2. Is congenial, interesting, and brief.
3. Thanks them for their time.
4. Is rarely longer than one page.

Email Alerts — Whether we are posting letters on our Web sites, Enviro-Mich, or sending 'simple' emails, we still need to stick to the highest quality standards.

ALWAYS be reasoned, logical, rational, respectful etc. Be formal, brief, clear, accurate, and do not get nasty. The same punctuation and grammar issues also apply.

Board Letters — Letters to your Board of Directors are vital to any organization and the same high standards apply. That means no spelling errors, typos, punctuation, or grammar faux pas'. That also means board letters need to be well written and insightful.

Friend or Funder — Be friendly, respectful, direct, and talk to them about the issues that interest them. Again, GET TO THE POINT! Be amicable and straightforward. Thank them for their support. Give them an update on recent activities. Be newsy and write clearly, concisely, accurately, and grammatically correct.

Writing Testimony and Letters

Thank You Notes — Thank you notes are especially nice if you hand write them. It is important that we show people appreciation for whatever they have helped us do. That is courteous and good practice. Also, always send a note with any information or publication that you send off to someone. It is nice to include a business card with a note as well sometimes. ALWAYS RESPOND if someone has written you a note as well. This is extremely important.

III. DON'T DO THIS

NEVER send negative, nasty letters or emails TO ANYONE. Nastiness doesn't get us anywhere. The environmental community doesn't sink to that level because it doesn't have to. So DO NOT send personally critical, negative, inflammatory letters or emails EVER. It is bad energy, unproductive, and doesn't get us what we want, which are better solutions to complicated problems.