



Educational Resources

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE SIMULATION

GENERAL RESOURCES -

EXTENDED RESOURCES

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PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE SIMULATION

Developing Effective Questions and Counter-arguments

Questions

Think about how many questions you ask in the course of a day. We ask questions for a number of different reasons, with different goals in mind. The way we form our questions and the wording we use changes based on what our goal is and the type of relationship we have with the person we are asking. Consider the difference between these questions:

- What's for dinner?
- In your opinion, which of these headphones is going to have better sound?
- Did you borrow my jacket last night again without asking me first?
- Could I please have an extension on my project?
- I'm sorry — did you say that the store is in the next block or the block after that?

The first question listed above seems to be requesting information. The second requests information and an opinion from someone with some expertise. You might think of the third question as a type of cross examination of one sibling by another. The fourth is a request for a favour from a teacher. The fifth is seeking clarification from a stranger. As the purpose and relationship change, the way the question is phrased also changes.

Purpose of the question

What is your goal in asking the question? Are you looking for an opinion? Do you want to clarify a point you didn't understand? Do you want more detail? Do you want to question the argument of a witness who doesn't see the bill the same way you do? In this case you would try to point out weak points or possible concerns.

Ideas for phrasing different types of questions

Type	Pointers	Examples of phrases
Asking for information	Be clear about the type of information you are looking for.	What did that program cost last year? When did your group conduct this study? Why did you decide to introduce this bill?
Asking for their position or opinion	Be precise in what information you are seeking. Rather than asking an open-ended question, be specific.	In your opinion ... Based on your work in this field ... Which option would be more efficient ...
Asking for clarification	Be specific in what information needs to be clarified, rather than just saying "could you repeat that?"	Did your statistic about support for this bill apply to all of Canada, or just to Nova Scotia?
Asking a question to challenge or cross-examine.	Do not ask open-ended questions that will allow the respondents to choose what they want to say. Try to ask questions that lead to a simple yes or no. Make statements that show the weakness of their argument, and get them to agree with you. Expose weakness or contradictions.	You stated that this bill is needed to combat crime in our cities. The number of murders in our cities was actually 20% lower last year than in the previous year. Isn't that true? You stated that ... but then later said that.... Which of those statements is true?

Preparing Counter-arguments

A debate is not simply a pair or group of people taking turns expressing their own opinions. In order to be a real debate, participants need to engage with and question the ideas expressed by others, and to reformulate their arguments in response to the criticisms of others. Other committee members may make arguments that you disagree with or that will hurt your position. If you allow them to make their arguments without replying with counter-arguments, you may be perceived as agreeing or validating what they said.

- Predict what arguments are going to be made by people on the other side of the issue. Take the time to write them down ahead of time, and decide how you will respond if you are right. If you do this, you will not have to think as quickly during the simulation.
- Listen very carefully to other speakers. Write down a quick summary of their main arguments and key facts.
- Imagine that the speaker is building a house in their speech. The house is built from his/her arguments and the evidence he/she uses to support the arguments.
- In forming a counter-argument, imagine you are taking apart this house. Go through the list that you made of the arguments, and try to find a way to challenge each one.
- Hints for developing counter-arguments:
 - Is what he/she is proposing fair to everyone?
 - Is he/she basing the argument on poor research or faulty logic?
 - Is the proposal feasible with the time, money and resources that are available?
 - Will there be undesirable side effects to their plan?
 - Are there less damaging solutions that can be used instead?

Practice

Think of three questions you might ask of the minister or witnesses. While it's helpful to pre-write questions, remember that you will also think of others while listening to the presentations.

Who is the question for?	Proposed question	What is your purpose or reason for asking the question?



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Simulation Procedures and Order of Business – extended version

Note: The written procedure below is for a meeting with seven sections. Your teacher may direct you to complete some or all of the sections.

The chair

The chair is a member of the committee who has been elected to run the meetings in an orderly way and to play a moderating role during debate. The chair is granted authority by the committee to be responsible for the following:

1. Limit time for the discussion or debate for any section.
2. Decide who is allowed to speak at any given time.
3. Keep the debate civil and on topic.

Rules for conduct in the meeting

1. Only speak when the chair grants you permission.
2. Be polite and respectful.
3. Do not disrupt the meeting by talking or whispering during the meeting.
4. Witnesses and the minister sit in the gallery until invited by the chair to sit at the committee table.
5. Only committee members are permitted to participate in the debate or to vote.
6. In House of Commons committees, the chair votes only in the event of a tie.
7. Refer to others by Mr. or Ms. and their last name (see name cards on desks).

Schedule

The chair begins the meeting by welcoming everyone and then leads the committee through seven steps.

1. Introduction and discussion of witness list

- Committee members will look at the list of witnesses who will be addressing the committee today. Discussion: Do these witnesses represent the diversity of Canadian viewpoints on this issue?

2. Lead Minister presentation

- The cabinet minister whose department is responsible for this bill will speak first and introduce and explain the bill.
- Question and Answer: Committee members may ask the Minister questions and make general comments about the bill.

3. Witness presentations

- There will be four presentations by individual Canadians who represent groups interested in this bill.
- When it is their turn, the chair will call witnesses to the table to speak. A question and answer period will follow each presentation. Committee members are free to make general comments about the bill.

4. Meeting recess

- Members of Parliament review what they have heard from witnesses and consider whether they should make any further changes to their positions. Members may meet with other members of their caucus.

5. Clause-by-clause examination of the bill

- The chair leads the committee through each clause in the main part of the bill, setting aside clause 2 (definitions). The examination begins with the substantive clauses of the bill, and concludes with the bill title and definitions.
- For each clause, the chair will ask if there are any proposed amendments. At that point you may speak in favour of or against the wording of that clause or may make general comments about the bill.
- At the end of any discussion on a clause, the chair asks for a vote on that clause. The clerk records if the clause was approved or defeated.

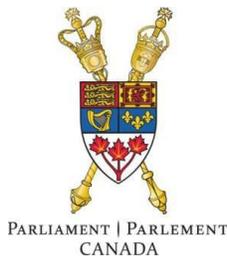
6. Proposed amendments:

- Only a member of the committee can propose an amendment, although an amendment can be drafted by an external group (such as the witnesses) and brought forward by a member of the committee.
- You are invited to write your own amendment for one of the other clauses. A clause can be amended by adding, changing or deleting certain words. Use the amendment form to explain and record your proposed modification.
- Your amendment cannot significantly expand the scope of the bill because the bill has already been passed in principle during second reading. For example, if a bill proposes to lower the age of voting to 16, you could not add a clause lowering the age of driving to 14. That change would have to be the subject of its own separate bill.
- To propose an amendment, put up your hand, and when the chair calls on you, say “Mr. / Madam Chair. I would propose an amendment to this clause.”
- Read out your new wording and pass the amendment paper to the clerk. The chair will then ask you to speak in favour of the amendment.

- The chair will then ask for speakers in favour of or against the amendment. At this time, members may also propose changes to the amendment being discussed.
- The chair then calls for a vote on whether or not to approve the amendment to the clause.
- If the amendment passes the vote, the clerk changes the wording of the clause and the chair reads out the new wording.
- After the vote on the amendment, the chair calls for a vote on the clause. If there are other amendments to the clause to be proposed, they should be moved at this time. *Note: Only one amendment may be discussed at a time.
- Once a clause — with or without amendment — has been approved, the committee may begin its discussion of the next clause.

7. Vote to report the bill

- The final step for the committee is to vote on whether or not to adopt the bill and to report the bill to the Senate or House of Commons as it is now written. If you approve of the bill as it is now written, after any amendments have been made, vote “Yes.” If you oppose it as written, vote “No.” If you approve that the bill should be reported to the Senate or House of Commons, vote “Yes.” If you oppose that it should be reported, vote “No.”



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PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE SIMULATION

Preparing to Address the Committee

Organization: _____ **Witness names:** _____

In your statement to the committee, your goal will be to convince committee members to view the bill the way that you do. To be convincing, you must think carefully about how you are going to express and support your opinion.

Introduction

1. Introduce yourself and your partner, and describe the organization that you are representing.
2. Thank the committee for inviting you to speak.
3. Clearly state your view on the bill.

Introduction

Who we are:

Our position:

General arguments: Make three or more arguments to support your position. Target your reasons to the other members in the committee who might not share your opinion. Explain each argument clearly and support your position with evidence such as statistics, if possible.

Argument	Why we feel this way	Reasons and evidence

Clauses: Discuss two clauses that are either the greatest strengths of the bill or the greatest concerns.

Clause	Our views on this clause: Is it important and should it stay as is? Should it be changed? How?	Why we feel this way

Conclusion: Thank the members of the committee for listening to your presentation. Repeat your view on the bill.

Question and Answer: Predict three questions that committee members might ask you, and plan how you will answer these questions.

Possible question we may be asked	Answer

