

# Educational Resources

## 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?