

# Strategies for Parliamentary Appearances

## Description

This job aid provides information and best practices to help federal officials prepare for an appearance before a House of Commons or Senate committee.

## Introduction

Understanding the rules and dynamics of parliamentary committee appearances enhances the effectiveness of your engagement with these committees. By familiarizing yourself with these strategies, you can approach your appearance with confidence and contribute meaningfully to democratic parliamentary processes.

## Quick facts



- Parliamentary committees are an integral part of the House of Commons and the Senate. In a minority Parliament, the work conducted by committees takes on even greater importance.
- Parliamentarians examine proposals for new laws in detail, study issues, consult with experts, and listen to witnesses to inform their decisions and recommendations.
- Committees are designed to be smaller-scale versions of the Senate and the House of Commons. Most committees maintain political party representation ratios similar to those seen in the chambers.
- Appearing before parliamentary committees is an essential part of the accountability role of the executive branch of government.
- When a committee decides that a certain person should appear, it may direct the clerk of the committee to invite the person to appear or if necessary the committee may adopt a motion ordering that person to testify before the committee.
- Unlike a court of law, committees are forums for information exchange, policy scrutiny, and collaboration between government officials and members of Parliament.
- Public meetings are open to visitors and transcripts of the discussions are published. In-camera meetings are not open to the public.



There are five main types of committees in Parliament. Each one has a different purpose, mandate and membership.

1. **Standing committees** are permanent committees that examine the work of government departments, review federal policies, investigate issues and study bills assigned to them by the Senate or the House of Commons. Areas of study can include agriculture, foreign affairs, finance, Indigenous affairs, health, and transport.
2. **Special committees** are established to investigate specific issues. The size of special committees is not fixed. Unlike a standing committee, a special committee's job is complete once it has submitted its final report. The Special Senate Committee on the Arctic is an example of a special committee.
3. **Legislative committees** study specific bills. These are more common in the House of Commons than the Senate.
4. **Joint committees** are made up of both senators and members of Parliament. Joint committees have a Senate chair and a House of Commons chair, who alternate or share leadership during meetings.
5. A **committee of the whole** comprises all members of the House of Commons or all members of the Senate, allowing for quick decisions and discussions. Its composition is identical to that of the chamber, with rules of procedure similar to other committees.



**Informative nature:** Parliamentary committees are not legal tribunals. Their primary function is to gather information, examine policies, and seek clarification on government actions. Understanding this distinction helps frame your approach and demeanour during appearances.

**Calling witnesses to appear:** Committees have virtually unlimited powers to compel the attendance of witnesses and to order the production of documents. At the same time, officials have an obligation not to disclose classified information or other confidences of the government to those not authorized to receive them.

**Role of departmental officials:** Departmental officials serve as representatives of their respective departments. You are not appearing as yourself. It is expected that you come to a committee meeting prepared to respond to questions that fall within the accountabilities of your position.

**Role of ministers:** When present, ministers respond to questions directly and may turn to officials for detailed answers. Ministers are politically accountable to Parliament for government actions and policies, and they are the primary witness when discussing matters of a political nature.

**Role of parliamentary relations offices:** Departmental officials will work closely with the director of parliamentary affairs in your minister's office to monitor committee activity, provide strategic and procedural advice, and help departmental officials prepare for appearances.

**Role of the committee chair:** This person is responsible for enforcing the rules during meetings. As a parliamentarian who is elected by fellow committee members, the committee chair becomes the spokesperson for the committee.

**Expectations of committee members:** Members will ask questions related to the study topic, seek clarification and additional information. They have limited time allotted and therefore will interrupt witnesses if they feel responses are taking too long or not addressing their questions.

**Collaborative engagement:** Parliamentary appearances can be opportunities for collaboration between government officials and committee members. Officials should strive to foster a constructive dialogue and contribute to the committee's understanding of the issues at hand.



Your goal is to be a credible source of information while maintaining factual and non-partisan communication. To achieve this goal, consider the following practices.

## The dos:

### Effective preparation

- Work with your departmental parliamentary affairs team to establish a proper witness strategy and to identify lead witnesses.
- Ensure every line in your opening remarks can be expanded upon and backed up with data or factual information.
- Familiarize yourself with the material. Pay attention to the issues raised previously by the committee, and research members and alternates.
- Be aware of statements made by the minister related to the study topic.
- Anticipate questions you may receive. Practice questions and answers.

### Conduct

- Address the committee through the chair (i.e., when asked a question by a member, begin with, "Madam Chair..." or "Mr. Chair...").
- Yield to the chair if interrupted. You may continue your response if interrupted, but only the chair can instruct you to move on to the next question.
- Commit to follow up with information when you do not know the answer.

### Communication

- Provide factual, impartial information and explanations.
- Employ a professional tone and calm demeanour. Make eye contact.
- Listen actively to the questions being asked.
- Answer only the "what" not the "why" as it concerns a policy or government decision.

### Ethical behaviour

- Understand and respect the confidentiality of information, including Cabinet confidences.
- Convey information truthfully on behalf of your minister, to maintain appropriate accountability to Parliament.

### Continuous improvement

- Assess what went well and what requires improvement next time.

# The don'ts:

## Authority limits

- Avoid defending policy or debating policy alternatives. Answers should be limited to factual information and explanations.
- Don't speak to matters that are before the courts.
- Don't share advice provided to ministers and Cabinet confidences.

## Clarity and accuracy

- Don't guess or speculate at an answer if you are unsure.
- Don't be evasive.
- Avoid providing financial details or citing budget amounts if not referenced in your briefing materials.

## Accountability

- Refrain from offering personal opinions, even if asked directly.
- Don't answer a question if it is beyond your accountability. Defer questions to the appropriate department or agency or to another panel member best placed to respond.

## Sample responses to parliamentary questions



- Mr. Chair, I am not in a position to answer that question because the issue is before the courts.
- Mr. Chair, I don't believe the issue is my personal opinion. The issue is...
- Madam Chair, the answer is yes and allow me to explain why that is...
- Madam Chair, I think the member and I would have to disagree on that point.
- Mr. Chair, you would have to ask the Minister that question.
- Mr. Chair, I would not characterize the Minister's comments that way. She identified a number of points...
- Madam Chair, I wouldn't want to speculate...
- Mr. Chair, the member would have to ask my colleague that question as the issue does not fall under my purview.
- Madam Chair, unfortunately, I do not have that information readily available. However, I would be happy to follow up and provide that information in writing to the committee.
- Mr. Chair, the characterization by the member is not accurate.

## Reference material



- How to Train Senior Officials for Parliamentary Committee Appearances (TRN139): [https://catalogue.csps-efpc.gc.ca/product?catalog=TRN139&cm\\_locale=en](https://catalogue.csps-efpc.gc.ca/product?catalog=TRN139&cm_locale=en)
- Learn About Parliament: [Parliamentary Committees](#)
- Streaming of the House of Commons proceedings and public committees: [ParlVu](#)
- The Powers of Parliamentary Committees: [Canadian Parliamentary Review – Article \(revparl.ca\)](#)