

Presentation on Giving Oral Testimony

1. **Tell people where you are coming from.** One of the great lessons from David Pittle was that he always started every speech and congressional testimony by telling people, “I stand before you today as a former regulator, an engineer, a professor, an advocate, a caregiver and a consumer.” This immediately tells your audience what perspective you bring to the table.
2. **Keep it personal.** It really helps to connect with the audience to tell your story. This is also a lot easier than memorizing or reading from a piece of paper, which sounds less authentic and makes it harder for people to stay engaged.
3. **Pick the three most important points you want to make and keep coming back to them.** Usually, you only get about 3-5 minutes of time, so you don’t want to overstuff your remarks and then be rushed and not be able to leave your audience with any clear takeaway messages. In this case, repetition works.
4. **Talk to Grandma.** One of the best pieces of advice that I ever got was when I graduated from college and my commencement speaker was Hazel O’Leary, then Secretary of Energy. She said when you are talking to people, pretend like you are “Talking to Grandma” because when you keep it simple, you’ll always be understood. There is a temptation with testimony to want to cram in as much detail, facts, and figures as possible, but the truth is that when you are on the receiving end, it sometimes can sound like a lot of noise, and your key points get lost. Also, don’t try and impress with fancy language because that could lead to failing to get your point across.
5. **Know your “money” line.** It’s important that you pick what you believe is your most compelling soundbyte ahead of time. This means that if all else fails and the committee only gives you 30 seconds to talk that you are prepared for that scenario. It also means that if there are reporters there covering the event, they will have an easy way of capturing and reporting on your comments. For example, in testimony I helped prepare for David Pittle on vehicle and SUV safety, he made this statement that was quoted in nearly all the major papers and prompted attention from the Senate Commerce Committee.
“Consumers Union technical director R. David Pittle said that industry plans to focus first on making small cars better able to withstand a collision with an SUV or pickup is a little like "telling children terrorized by the playground bully to wear padding to school.”

<http://consumerist.com/2010/06/how-to-testify-before-congress.html>