

# How to Give Persuasive Public Testimony

By Susan Freas Rogers

**Persuasion:** any attempt to modify (i.e., **change**) the *attitudes, beliefs, and/or actions* of another toward a predetermined goal. In the public/social/political arena, this is called **advocacy:** [*Oxford Dictionary*] “public support for or recommendation of a particular cause.” [*Wikipedia*] “an activity by an individual or group which aims to influence decisions within political, economic, and social systems and institutions.”

## Who is your audience?

Know who you are talking to. *Why should they change?* They will have a variety of psychological and social needs that you might be able to appeal to. Will some decision-makers and/or audience members have a different opinion on your issue? If so, you may need to acknowledge this in your remarks – see below.

## Types of content needed for maximum persuasive effect:

The Greek philosopher Aristotle outlined his theory on the three modes of persuasion more than 2,400 years ago in his work, *On Rhetoric*. These principles have stood the test of time and still form the foundation of modern persuasive speaking and writing.

Aristotle knew that trying to persuade people to change was different than just giving them information. Here are the principles to follow. ***Your content should include material that:***

### 1. Adds to the *image and credibility of the speaker* (Greek: *ethos*)

- “I’ve had 20 years professional experience in this field...”
- “My children and I live in the area that will be directly affected by your decision.”
- “I was there, and I saw...”

Don’t forget nonverbal messages. **Look** and **act** like someone whose input is worth paying attention to. Whether you like it or not, you **are** being evaluated on your appearance, your tone of voice, etc. No matter how nervous you are, don’t laugh. No matter how angry you are, do not display “attitude.” For credibility, it is crucial that you appear calm, confident, competent and in control of your message. (Tip: wearing a jacket or cloak of any kind will make you look more authoritative -- that’s why you will almost never see a woman legislator without one.)

### 2. Appeals to the *emotions of the listeners* (Greek: *pathos*)

Draw upon the audience’s emotions, sympathies, deep interests and/or imagination. Arousing any emotion will work: fear, happiness, sadness, sympathy, horror, joy, envy, pride, prejudice. (Anger also works very well – remember Trump’s election – but typically will not be applicable, nor effective, in a public testimony situation when your audience is decision-makers). Human-interest stories work well, but have to be BRIEF.

- “Put yourself in my place: I have to watch my son have seizures when he doesn’t get the right kind of medicine...”

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- “I brought this American flag because I’m proud to be an American, but I’m NOT proud of...[X,Y,Z] and YOU should not be proud of that, either.”

You can see many appeals to emotion in your everyday life: pay attention to the advertising you see on TV and in magazines and newspapers. Which of *your* emotions are the ads trying to arouse?

### 3. Provides *logic, reasoning, specific facts and figures* (Greek: *logos*)

- “The huge attendance here and at previous hearings clearly demonstrates that...”
- “I have cancer. My medical expenses would have been \$156,000, so I would have been bankrupt and homeless *right now*, if not for the Affordable Care Act...”

## Language

Say “You” and “I,” *not* “Everyone” or “We.” [Example: “You’ve seen the pictures in the newspaper,” not “Everyone has seen the pictures in the newspaper.”] Provide real-life examples, but if none are available, create visualizations in the listener’s mind (“Imagine when you will be able to...” or “Think about what it would be like if...”). Never apologize, make excuses or put yourself down (see #1 above).

Make sure your words reflect YOUR worldview, not that of “the other side.” For example, conservatives use the word “regulations” for what progressives consider “protections.” Conservatives will talk about “tax burdens,” progressives consider them “our fair share.” **Words matter.** Don’t buy into their language: use YOUR word choices to re-frame the issue.

## How to Organize Your Material

When you have only three to five minutes, organization is key. You must be very clear and easy to follow. For longer persuasive appeals, there are two common formats:

### Motivational Sequence Format

- Get **Attention** (with *short* anecdote, startling fact, or a reference to the listeners)
- Show **Need/Problem** (*see detailed steps at right*)
- Propose the **Solution**: (*see detailed steps at right*)
- Show the **Future**: what it will be like **after** they make the change you are asking for, and what it will be like if they reject your proposal.
- Call for **Action**: Summarize your main points, ask listeners to take a specific course of action.

OR

### Problem/Solution Format

- **Identify** and **Describe** the **Problem**
  - How bad it is, how it may grow
  - Illustrate the problem with examples. How does it affect the listener?
  - Why it’s not solved yet
  - What will happen if not solved
- **Propose the Solution**: What will solve the problem? Explain clearly; demonstrate how your plan will be successful and practical, and what your listeners need to do to make it happen.

For short “public testimony” situations, a modified Problem/Solution format will probably be easier to apply to your material.

### **With either organizational format, be sure to:**

- Begin with a clear statement of your main point.
  - “I’m here to ask you to vote YES on [insert your issue here].”
  - “Today, with your vote, you will become personally responsible for either destroying [insert your issue here] or protecting it for generations to come.” [Notice how this one gets attention AND evokes an emotional response (pathos) in listeners.]
- Include the **three types of content described above** (ethos, pathos, logos). For example, your description of the problem (and/or your description of what the future will be like after the problem is solved or NOT solved), will be most effective if it includes material that *arouses emotion* in the listener (pathos) AND *facts/figure/reasoning* (logos).
- Include any key counter-arguments that your audience (both decision-makers and others in attendance) are likely to be aware of or believe in. Show why your solution is better. This may be hard to fit into a very short presentation – you will have to decide how important it is to acknowledge those differing beliefs and counter them with your appeals. The more time you have, the more important it is to include these opposing arguments, then counter them with the advantages of choosing your solution instead.
- If you have a large amount of data to convey, you may need to make a document available to the decision-makers. Be very sure that any submitted material is VERY easy to look over and digest. Remember that anybody who sits on a governing body is buried in information – why should they spend time on yours if it’s not immediately clear and compelling? Have a friend look over anything you want to submit, and ask them to be brutal in their feedback.
- End your testimony by **reiterating your main point** – what you want the decision-makers to do. “Please, vote against [X] so that....”
- Do not introduce a new idea right at the end – this creates a huge distraction.
- End on a **positive** note, not negative. (And usually, it’s appropriate to say “Thank you.”)

### **Your Delivery: Tips for Looking Credible and Feeling Comfortable**

- Re-think the way you feel about being nervous. The goal is to **channel** your nerves into positive energy, not eliminate them altogether. You don’t want to get rid of the butterflies; you just want to get them all flying in the same direction! And remember: you will always look *better* than you feel. Never tell your audience you are nervous, even if your voice shakes.
- **Eye contact** with those you are addressing is very important – it conveys credibility (ethos). Good eye contact can even help overcome any effects of less desirable speaking habits you may display.
- **Practice** ahead of time, OUT LOUD. **Time yourself** if there will be a time limit imposed. It is vital that you do not get cut off before being able to make all your points – this can even reduce your credibility.

- **Do NOT talk fast just because you have lots to say**; this will annoy listeners and hurt your effectiveness. Distill your message into the most important points if, during practice, you find you can't fit them all in during the time you'll be given.
- **It's OK to use notes** to help you remember to make all your points in the right order, but **DO NOT JUST READ** your notes when giving your remarks. As you practice, edit your notes, taking out small words ("of, the, when," etc.) that your brain can (and will) fill in for you when speaking. Doing this will probably make you stumble at first while practicing, but don't worry – just give it a few more tries and you'll see how your brain will fill in the words. (But, if you repeatedly miss filling in an important word or phrase, add it back into your notes.)
- Before printing notes, change them to a 16-to-18 point font and 1½-line spacing, to make them much easier to read when you have to glance down. **Add extra spaces** where you left out words, so your brain will see where to fill them in as you speak. Use **bold face** and/or ALL CAPS (like I do in this document) to tell your brain when you want to **emphasize important words and ideas as you say them out loud**.
- Print your notes on **ONE SIDE ONLY** so you're not flipping sheets over, which is distracting to your listeners. The podium will usually have enough room so that you can just push each page to the side as you get done with it (i.e., you don't have to put it underneath the stack as you continue speaking). **Number your pages** in case you drop them and have to put them all back in order.
- If you know you tend to talk too fast or too softly, hand-write **SLOW DOWN** or **LOUDER** big in the margins. Don't worry, you won't say these things out loud, but your brain will notice and adjust.
- It's OK if you sound a little nervous, but don't be too soft, which comes across as weak. **Not using the microphone properly will very quickly damage your effectiveness**. You are *supposed* to hear yourself coming through the speakers – it does not mean you are too loud. Watch others who speak before you do and see how close they are to the mic. In many cases, you need to **get the microphone right up to your lips**. A strong voice adds to your credibility (ethos).
- "The visual" matters. Symbols work on the unconscious mind. If speaking to a national issue, consider wearing red, white and blue, or wearing an American flag pin on your lapel. These symbols have been used by the conservative right to connote patriotism and love of country – it's part of their communications strategy, and it's worked very well for them. Progressives are just as patriotic and we love our country just as much – **we need to take these symbols back, as part of OUR communications strategy**. Your listeners will struggle with the cognitive dissonance of *how you look* versus *what you say*, and will subconsciously begin to reconcile to the idea that progressives are patriotic, too.

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