

Questions and Answers on Conducting Oversight

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- 1. I'm in a personal office. How do I do oversight?** Personal offices can do oversight in many effective ways. First, if you have a good investigation topic that needs more data your office can write a detailed request letter to the GAO or make a request to a particular agency or governmental organization asking for answers to specific questions such as the nature of contract, effectiveness of a program or conditions at a facility etc. The letter can be released with a press release or, if you want an element of surprise, you can release the letter at an appropriate hearing. This same kind of request letter is also a typical tool for committee staff starting data-heavy hearings. Once you get a response you can release it separately or use it as the basis for hearing questions. Good places for using oversight materials produced in this way are appropriations hearings and Senate confirmation hearings but all kinds of authorization hearings can work well. In the alternative, you can dig up your own preliminary information and then ask for more at a hearing. Or you can ask an Administration witness to comment on what you have discovered. A sample question could be something like "I have learned from... that....Could you please comment on this finding." Or, "Isn't it true that ...How do you answer these charges (or deal with is inconsistency.)" **NOTE: If you use the GAO it can take months to get answers to complicated questions.** If you have a narrower request you may be able to get a faster answer from the CRS. However, the CRS is better suited for summarizing research that has already been done.
- 2. How can I use information from academic institutions effectively?** Sometimes there are already existing academic studies on, or related to, the topic you want to investigate. If you ask CRS to find all the relevant studies on a subject you can contact the authors directly for ideas on further studies or data collection methods. You can also start an investigation by asking an agency to comment on a study you have found. For example, in a hearing, "According to a study by..... This contradicts your testimony....Could you furnish for the record how you arrived at your position that...." This may provide a jumping off point for further investigation or give you hints for points to pursue.
- 3. What is a fairly easy way to find subjects to investigate?** Another good place to start looking for investigation topics is by scouring testimony from the same agency or witness over a period of time, for example by comparing different years of agency budget hearings (the data is fairly uniform.) Charts are particularly good places to look for inconsistencies since more effort will be made to make textual passages agree and charts may even contradict text.
- 4. Are there other good ways to find topics or launch investigations?** Most offices will get tips from constituents, disgruntled employees or even anonymous sources. While you must be careful to check any data obtained, many effective hearings and investigations start this way. And remember, once you have developed a reputation for investigations, sources will come to you. And don't forget new angles on stories already in the news.
- 5. I have a good idea for a hearing. What is the most important thing I should do to insure that my hearing is effective?** The best way to insure that you have an effective hearing is to

remember that you are telling a story. You should be able to summarize your hearing vividly in a brief sentence so that press, other members and the public see its importance. This is not just a ploy to grab attention but a way to focus your mind. If you concentrate on telling the story then you will notice what parts need to be proved or improved in order to make your case.

6. **How do I insure press coverage?** Good press follows from a good topic (see .5 above) but it doesn't hurt for television coverage to have one that is telegenic as well. If a topic lends itself to pictures then the press must be alerted in advance to give them time they need and the story may need to be embargoed. There may be time that you can supply film or contacts to help them do their job. You could also give an exclusive if you were sure that you could guarantee coverage. Be sure that you have one or more local angles and have alerted local press to the story.
7. **What should I avoid in writing hearing questions?** When writing hearing questions or opening statements, remember that you are writing for the ear. Most people take in more information from their eyes than from their ears. Complicated questions with lots of clauses don't work in this setting since they take too much attention to follow. If your questions are too complicated then witnesses won't know what to answer. Even worse, it gives them an opening to be non-responsive or give you canned answers. So keep your sentences simple and direct and use the active voice. Try to make your sentences more memorable with lots of examples.
8. **What kinds of questions should I use?** There are several different kinds of questions commonly used at hearings. You may want to mix them up to avoid boring your audience. Your questions can be: based on documents or data, especially inconsistencies; questions asked mainly to help narrative flow (lead a witness through a set of facts); restrictive questions (designed to produce a yes/no response); statements in the form of a question followed by a "would you agree?;" and, follow-up questions, among others.
9. **Are there any forms of questions that you would avoid?** I would avoid open ended questions that allow witnesses to say anything that they want. These destroy the narrative and can completely derail your hearing. You should always know (and indicate) the answer to every question so that the member asking can bring the hearing back to the points you want to make or contradict a witness. Every question should have a point that relates to your message. Don't neglect follow-up questions, especially when you get an answer you don't want. Your questions should indicate, "If the witness says x ask..., If the witness says y..." and so forth.
10. **What is the best way to organize my thoughts about a hearing in advance and insure that I have not left something out?** The best way I insured that I had a good hearing was to write a thorough hearing memo in advance to share with other staff members. It included: a complete summary of the issue under investigation; need for the hearing; summary of all likely witness testimony; description of all studies, data or other evidence; and, attachments, including the original document request letters.