

Committee Chairman

Tools for Encouraging Debate and FAQ's

One of the primary tasks of the committee chairman is to make sure that the proper procedures are followed as each bill is presented to the committee for consideration. An additional task of the committee chairman is to make sure that committee members are engaged in the discussion of bills being considered, in order to give each bill a fair hearing. **The following is a list of strategies that the chairman can employ when the committee seems hesitant to engage in debate.**

1. **Be patient.** If after opening the floor for debate no one makes a request for floor time just wait. Don't be afraid to just sit there for thirty or forty seconds. This extended pause will provide some students with the time to organize their thoughts. You can let them know that they should take some time to look at their packet and at the bill to come up with some ideas to discuss.
2. **Invite participation.** Use gentle reminders that discussion is expected. "Is there a representative who would like to speak in support of the bill." "Please raise your placards if you would like to speak for or against this bill."
3. **Refer to the previous speaker.** Use comments made by the last person who controlled the floor as a springboard for others to participate. After a Rep. Jenkins has finished speaking the chairman might say, "The representative just stated that a person convicted of a felony should never be granted the right to vote. Do any other committee members support that view?"
4. **Refer to outside comments.** Refer to prior conversations, "Rep. Waterhouse, I recall that you were initially in opposition to this bill when we discussed it yesterday....Would you like the floor explain your position?"
5. **Make a general request for an opposing view.** "Our first speaker spoke out in support of this bill. Is there anyone in opposition to this bill?"
6. **Refer to the bill and position paper content.** Refer to a specific statement in the bill or the bill's position paper and then request a reaction. "The bill states that.....Does anyone have a reaction to that provision?"
7. **Appeal to a specific student.** Don't pick on students, but gently encourage them to speak. Remember that when you yield time to them they can refuse by yielding back to you. "Rep. Smart, would you like to comment on the point made that ?" Or "Rep. Smart, would you kindly explain how you plan to vote on this bill? I yield three minutes."
8. **Refer to the question and answer period.** Utilize statements made during the question and answer period. "Rep. Opitz remarked during the question and answer period that..... would any committee members like to comment on that statement?"
9. **Using floor time to ask questions.** Remind students that they don't have to use floor time to make statements in support or opposition to the bill. They can instead request floor time for the purpose of asking another student a question. After being yielded floor time a student might say, "I have a question for Rep. Sun. {ask question} ? I yield Mr. Sun my remaining time in order to answer my question."
10. **Entertain a motion to recess for a caucus or to plan an amendment.** If you're really having a hard time getting folks to speak take a short recess to caucus in order to allow informal discussion or to plan an amendment. CHAIR: "The chair will entertain a motion for a two minute caucus for the purpose of discussing the current bill outside of formal rules."
11. **Suggest an amendment:** If the group seems stuck on an aspect of the bill that could be changed to address their concerns, suggest an amendment. Amendments need to be offered in writing, it can be useful to take a short recess to prepare the amendment.

Frequently Asked Questions (or things that may come up that you weren't prepared for):

1. What happens if 30 seconds into debate someone moves to end debate or call the question?

As the chair you will rule that “out of order”. You would say, “I’m sorry, but I’m going to rule that out of order, because there has not been enough debate on the bill. I’ll be happy to reconsider your motion after the bill has had a proper hearing.”

2. What happens if someone is being a jerk, sleeping, or fooling around during committee?

As the chair you are responsible for maintaining “decorum” in your committee. Gently bang the gavel and say, “representatives, decorum please,” or “Representative Jones, I’m going to have to ask you to kindly refrain from hitting the person next to you with your placard.”

3. What happens if someone continues to be a jerk after repeated requests to stop?

First use your judgment. Is this kid really trying to be a problem, or is it possible there’s something else going on that you may not be aware of. If you’re in doubt, you may always send a note to a teacher or ask the clerk to go and get a teacher. You do have the right to take a vote on removing a student from the committee, but this power should be used very carefully and only when other options have been exhausted. CHAIR: “Unfortunately, I’m going to have to make a recommendation that Rep. Kind be removed from the committee due to ongoing disruptions after repeated requests to stop. Under the House Rules, this requires a 2/3 vote of the committee members. All those in favor of removing Rep. Kind from the committee for a period of 30 minutes, please raise your placards...By a vote of 19-1 Rep. Kind is ordered removed from the committee for 30 minutes. Clerk, will you please go and find Mr./Ms. _____ to escort Rep. Kind out.”

4. Can committee chairs participate in debate?

Yes. As chair you have the floor, unless it has been yielded to someone else. You can just speak your mind, you don’t have to recognize yourself. Don’t overuse this privilege, or others will be less inclined to speak. Also consider the need to maintain the trust and respect of your committee, and not to be seen as overly partisan. The clerk, and secretary may (and should) also participate, but they DO need to be recognized by the chair just like any other representative.

5. What if I don’t know what to do next?

Turn to the secretary/parliamentarian and confer with them. If you’re really stumped, just turn to the committee and say, “I’m not sure about this situation; does anyone know what the proper procedure is?”

6. How do amendments work?

Remember, only ONE amendment may be discussed per bill. As debate is progressing, you may ask, “Are any representatives considering proposing an amendment to the bill? (Get a show of hands).

“The chair would look favorably on a motion for a five minute caucus to discuss ideas for amendments, since we can only formally discuss one amendment.” Hopefully someone will say, “so moved.” Vote. When you are back in session the chair asks if there are any motions to amend. The amendment sponsor will read his/her amendment and the chair will ask, “is there a second”. There must be one-third members offering a second to discuss the amendment. If there are not enough, only then may the chair ask for another amendment. Once one amendment is debated and voted on, no further amendments may be made to that bill, unless there is extra time remaining.

- 7. As the chair can I ignore students who I disagree with or don't like, or just yield them less time during debate?** NO. As chair you should provide all students equal time regardless of their position. All students are given 3 minutes to speak, time permitting. Make every effort to call on representatives who have not spoken as much. Your secretary may be keeping a running tally of everyone who has spoken, which you may look at. Priority should be given to representatives who have not yet spoken on the bill under consideration, rather than recognizing people who have already spoken.

- 8. What happens if one representative calls another representative out by name?**

Use your judgment. If it's not offensive, rude, or negative, don't make a big deal about it, but if it's borderline, say, “The chair would just like to remind everyone to please refrain from referring to other speakers by name during debate. It's more appropriate to use the phrase, ‘my colleague’, ‘my fellow representative’, or ‘the previous speaker’. Comments should be addressed to the chair, not directly to other members.

- 9. What happens if our committee finishes early?**

Try NOT to finish early. Your teacher may have provided you with a committee hearing debrief template with questions for discussion, use these for group reflection. You may also entertain a motion for a caucus to discuss how the day went, what your committee did well and what you could have improved etc, then come back together to discuss? Do not leave early, or go to another committee.

- 10. What happens if someone leaves a committee and doesn't return or doesn't come back from lunch?**

Send a note to a teacher through the secretary or clerk to report the unexcused absence.