

Speaking at public meetings

One side for residents who want to be heard. One side for the officials who run the meeting. Same rules for everyone.

FOR RESIDENTS

How to be heard

1. Sign up before the meeting starts.
2. Know the time limit and practice to fit it.
3. Name the agenda item or the issue in your first sentence.
4. Bring documents and hand the clerk a written copy for the record.
5. Ask for something specific: a vote, a records release, an agenda item.

YOUR RIGHTS

What the law protects

- Criticism of officials is protected speech. Harsh words are not disruption.
- You may record the meeting. [25 O.S. § 312\(C\)](#)
- Rules must apply the same way to supporters and critics.

KNOW THE LIMITS

What the board can and cannot do

- A board does not have to offer public comment. [2002 OK AG 26](#)
- It cannot vote on your issue that night unless it is on the agenda. Ask for it to be placed on the next one. [25 O.S. § 311\(B\)\(1\)](#)
- It can set fair rules: sign-up, equal time limits, topics within its authority, one speaker at a time.

STAY EFFECTIVE

Conduct that gets you removed

- Refusing to yield the podium when time is up
- Shouting over other speakers
- Approaching the dais or threatening anyone

Calm, specific and documented beats loud every time. The officials who ignore a calm speaker are the ones who look bad on video.

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FOR OFFICIALS

Once you open the floor

A board that opens its meeting to public comment cannot choose speakers by who they are or what side they take. [City of Madison Joint Sch. Dist. v. WERC, 429 U.S. 167 \(1976\)](#)

RULES THAT HOLD UP

Content neutral

- ☐ Written rules, posted and read aloud
- ☐ A sign-up sheet
- ☐ The same time limit for every speaker
- ☐ Topics within the body's authority
- ☐ One speaker at a time, from the podium

RULES THAT FAIL

Viewpoint based

- Bans on criticizing officials or staff
- Allowing praise but not complaints
- Cutting off a speaker because the topic is embarrassing
- Ending comment because residents disagreed with you

SPEECH OR CONDUCT?

The chair's script

1. General reminder of the rules to everyone.
2. Specific, polite warning naming the conduct: "Please let her finish. You will get your turn."
3. A short recess.
4. Only for continued disruption that actually stops the meeting: ask the person to leave.

Disturbing a meeting is a crime only when someone "willfully disturbs or breaks up" it. [21 O.S. § 1361](#) Never ask officers to remove someone for what they said. A man arrested at a city council meeting was allowed to sue for retaliation. [Lozman v. City of Riviera Beach, 585 U.S. 87 \(2018\)](#)

ONLINE

Social media

When an official uses an account to speak for the government, blocking critics can violate the First Amendment. [Lindke v. Freed \(U.S. 2024\)](#) Keep personal and official accounts separate.

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