How to Successfully Communicate with Congressional Offices

In order to have a successful meeting with a Congressional office, it is important to keep in mind your purpose and to whom you are talking. A well-crafted message is essential to having your argument heard and understood.

Construct your message

Know your audience.
You need to tailor your message to the people in the meeting. Who are they? What is their background? Do they have knowledge of science, research, or higher education? Are you meeting with the Member of Congress or a staffer? An excellent source of information is your Member of Congress’s website where they typically post their bio, media stories, and perspective on key issues. You can route to websites through congress.gov. In addition, the APS Office of Government Affairs strives to provide detailed information on Representative and Senators to all APS congressional visitors.

Present your main reason for being there in the beginning of the meeting.
You should not approach this meeting like you are giving a scientific talk or a classroom lecture. That usual approach first provides lots of background information leading up to a final result or main lesson. Instead, you should state your main point, purpose, or request up front and then provide supporting information, which hopefully generates a fruitful conversation. This allows you to make efficient use of the limited time these officials have for their meetings and have the conversation be meaningful.

Instead of:

Do this:

Stay away from jargon, acronyms, and complex scientific phenomena, unless you know the person has the relevant expertise.

Make it relevant and relatable.
Make your argument relevant to those with whom you are meeting. Why should this person care about what you are meeting with them about? How does it relate to the people with whom they are concerned? How does this impact their state or district?

Tell your story.
There is a reason you are having this meeting, and not someone else. How and why are you personally invested in what you are asking? How does this affect you and others with whom you associate or are in a similar situation? These personal aspects help make your argument more relatable and less abstract, and provide deeper context.
Generic Structure for Congressional Meeting

• Introductions
  o State who you are, your affiliation, and (if you are) that you are a constituent.
  o Thank the official for meeting and show appreciation for something they’ve done, if relevant. (check their website for recent actions)
  o If you’re meeting with a congressional office, be aware that you may be meeting with a staffer, and not the Member, but the staffer is the conduit to the Member and has his/her ear.

• Present your main point, purpose, or request.
  o You can lead with something like: “I’m here to talk about an issue that is critical to our state (or district): federal support of scientific research.”
  o Be aware of your audience and political leanings in order to avoid unnecessary political landmines.

• Make supporting arguments.
  o OGA one-page briefs provide ordered talking points to guide conversation.
  o Add a personal story: how many students you’ve taught or trained, where they’ve gone, an innovation in your lab, patents you’ve filed, number of people you’ve employed in your company or lab, etc. Don’t include how many papers you’ve published or the details of your research – this is all about the broader benefits of your federal funding.
  o Be succinct. (Most congressional meetings run 10-15 minutes.)
  o OGA’s approach for 1-page briefs: identify a problem and offer a solution.

• Assess the situation to decide where to take the meeting. (“Is this something that you’re interested in?” “Is this something the Congressperson can support?”)
• Ask if there are any questions.
• If appropriate (such as for a congressional office) offer to be a resource.
• Wrap-up (repeat your main point, gauge support, thank again).
• Leave your business card for future contact.
• After the meeting, within a week, send a thank you note.

Other Helpful Tips for Congressional Meetings

• Dress in business attire (ties, jackets, dresses, pantsuits, etc.)
• Always use a respectful tone, even when meeting with an office whose positions you may not share.
• Don’t arrive too early (more than 5 minutes), since there may not be room for you to wait. If you’re going to be more than 10 minutes late, contact the office.
• When you arrive at the office, greet the staffer nearest the door and tell him/her who you are and that you have a meeting with ________ at ________. If the main door to the office is closed, open it and go in. You don’t need to knock.
• Meeting spaces can be small, so you may need to hold your coat or other items.
• Some offices may not be fully staffed yet, so be prepared to meet with novices.
• Don’t be disappointed if a meeting seems rushed or chaotic.
• You will need to go through security every time you enter a congressional building. To save time, you can use the tunnels connecting the Senate buildings to each other, and other tunnels connecting the House buildings to each other.
• Be prepared with personal stories; they make your case more compelling.