

Tips for Speaking from the Floor

Prepared by Wayne Davis, Town Moderator

The following tips combine the basic rules governing floor debate at Carlisle Town Meeting, along with my observations from years of attending and moderating Town Meeting.

1. Before You Rise

- a. **Know Your Purpose.** It may seem obvious, but first you need to be clear in your own mind why you want to rise to speak. Typical purposes are:
 - To ask an informational question of a Town official or the proponent of the motion;
 - To share some relevant information with the Meeting;
 - To persuade others to vote for or against the motion on the floor;
 - Some combination of the above
- b. **Listen.** Pay attention to what other speakers are saying, so that you can respond and elaborate on their points while avoiding needless repetition.
- c. **Prepare.** Your fellow citizens will appreciate, and you will be more persuasive, if you take a few moments to outline your main points. Some people prepare the full text of their remarks in advance of the meeting.
- d. **Be Selective.** **The time limit is three minutes.** While you *can* take all that time and try to make 10 different points, experience suggests that the most persuasive speakers are those who focus on two or three key points and limit themselves to about two minutes. The longer you take and the more points you try to make, the greater the risk you will lose your place and then your audience.

True, some issues are big and complicated, and you may genuinely feel like you have more content to share. If you know that in advance of the meeting, you might find a fellow citizen who shares your views; then you can plan that each of you will address the relevant points. Otherwise, make your most important points when you first rise to speak, and hope that you get a second chance after others have spoken.
- e. **Relax and Take a Deep Breath.** Yes, it *can* be stressful. Some seeming “old pros” will tell you their hearts beat a bit faster, their palms sweat, and their voices quaver, no matter how many times they’ve done it before. That’s OK—it happens for many of us. Carlisle’s Town Meeting has a long tradition of civility and respectful listening. Your neighbors and fellow citizens are there to hear what you have to say, not to judge your performance. So relax and take that deep breath, whether you’ve a total newcomer or old hand.

2. **Get Recognized.** When you are ready to speak, try to move to the closest available floor microphone, even if another speaker is already there. If you haven’t had time or can’t get to the microphone, raise your hand when the Moderator asks if anyone wishes to speak. If the Moderator seems to have missed seeing you, it is permissible to call out loudly, “Mr. Moderator!” to get the Moderator’s attention.

3. Ready, set, go! Once you’ve been recognized:

- a. **Adjust the height of the microphone.** Yes, you may and should do this so you can speak comfortably and directly into the microphone.

- b. **State your name and street address.** Please identify yourself, even if you have spoken previously.
- c. **Address your comments to the Moderator.** By convention, all comments and questions are directed through the Moderator, not to other speakers or individuals.
- d. **State your purpose.** While not an absolute necessity, it helps the audience and the Moderator to know what you're doing. For example:
 - "I'd like to ask the Finance Committee a question ..."
 - "I'm speaking to urge everyone to vote against this Article ..."
 - "I have a question for the Chairman of the School Committee, after which I'd like to make a few comments"
- e. **Make your points, succinctly.** Avoid repeating yourself or prior speakers. While it's OK to express support of what others have said, *e.g.*, "I agree with Mr. X's comments about the importance of this measure..." it's best to avoid repeating the detailed comments. Audiences hate repetitive arguments.
- f. **Wrap up cleanly and concisely.** A two-sentence wrap often works well. *E.g.*, "In conclusion, this Article will set the Town on the right path for the next 10 years. Please vote yes." If you have been warned by the moderator that your time is up, then finish whatever point you were making in one sentence, and then give your two-sentence wrap.