

Plain English Guide to Civic Engagement

No fancy words, just facts

Government uses complicated words to talk about simple things. This guide translates the jargon so you can understand what's happening and make your voice heard.



Estimated read time: 10 minutes

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Why This Matters

Have you ever tried to understand a city council agenda and felt like you needed a law degree? Or wanted to speak at a public meeting but didn't know what "public comment period" meant? You're not alone.

Government and activist groups often use special words that make simple things sound complicated. Sometimes it's habit. Sometimes it's to sound important. But whatever the reason, it keeps regular people from participating.

This guide gives you the tools to break through the word barrier. Because democracy should be for everyone, not just people who know the secret language.

Essential Terms Decoded

Here are the most common confusing terms you'll encounter, translated into plain English:

Government Terms

Ordinance

A local law passed by your city or county. Like a rule that only applies

in your area.

Example: "The city passed an ordinance banning plastic bags" = The city made a new rule against plastic bags.

Resolution

An official opinion or decision that doesn't create a law. It's like saying "we think this is important" without making a rule.

Example: "The council passed a resolution supporting clean energy" = The council officially said they like clean energy, but didn't make any actual rules about it.

Quorum

The minimum number of people who need to be present to make official decisions. Usually half plus one.

Example: "We don't have a quorum" = Not enough people showed up to vote on things.

Public Comment Period

The time during a meeting when regular people (not officials) can speak. Usually limited to 2-3 minutes per person.

Example: "Sign up for public comment" = Put your name on the list if you want to speak during the meeting.

Activist Terms

Direct Action

Doing something yourself to create change instead of asking politicians to do it. Can range from community gardens to protests.

Example: "We're planning direct action" = We're going to do something ourselves instead of waiting for permission.

Solidarity

Standing together with others who face similar problems. Supporting each other's struggles.

Example: "Acting in solidarity" = We're helping each other because we're stronger together.

Grassroots

Started by regular people in the community, not by big organizations or politicians. From the bottom up.

Example: "A grassroots campaign" = Regular people organized this themselves.

Translation Practice

Let's practice translating some real examples you might see:

Government Speak:

"The municipality is soliciting input from stakeholders regarding the proposed amendments to the zoning ordinance."

Plain English:

"The city wants to hear what people think about changing the rules for what can be built where."

Activist Speak:

"We need to build capacity for sustained direct action through base-building and popular education."

Plain English:

"We need to get more people involved and teach them how to take action that lasts."

Meeting Speak:

"I move to table the motion pending further deliberation by the subcommittee."

Plain English:

"I suggest we wait to vote on this until the small group has more time to think about it."

Translation Tip: When you hear complicated language, ask yourself: "What simple action or idea is really being discussed here?" Usually it's something basic like voting, waiting, talking, or deciding.

How to Ask for Clarification

Never be embarrassed to ask what something means. Here are polite ways to get clarity:

In Meetings

- "Could you explain what [term] means in this context?"
- "I want to make sure I understand. Are you saying that...?"
- "For those of us new to this, could you break that down?"
- "What would that look like in practice?"

When Reading Documents

- Call the office that created it and ask for help understanding
- Look for a "definitions" section (usually at the beginning or end)

- Search online for "[your city] + [confusing term]"
- Ask community organizations for help translating

Remember: Officials work for you. They should be able to explain their work in words you understand. If they can't or won't, that's their failure, not yours.

Common Processes Explained

Here's how some common civic processes actually work:

How to Speak at a City Council Meeting

1 Find the meeting schedule

Check your city's website or call city hall. Meetings are usually monthly or twice a month, often Tuesday evenings.

2 Get the agenda

This lists what they'll discuss. It's usually posted online 3-7 days before the meeting.

3 **Arrive early to sign up**

There's usually a sign-up sheet near the door. Put your name and what you want to talk about.

4 **Wait for public comment**

This usually happens near the beginning or end. They'll call your name.

5 **Speak for 2-3 minutes**

State your name, where you live, and your point. Be respectful but clear about what you want.



Also covered in: Speaking tips and overcoming anxiety are discussed in our "Introvert's Guide to Organizing Meetings" from a different angle.

Your Next Steps

Now that you have these translation tools, here's how to use them:

1. **Pick one issue you care about.** Maybe it's housing, schools, or the environment.
2. **Find out who makes decisions about it.** Is it city council? School board? County commissioners?
3. **Go to one meeting just to watch.** Bring this guide. Notice what words confuse you.

4. **Ask one question.** Either during public comment or by calling an office.
5. **Bring a friend next time.** Teaching someone else helps you learn too.

Final thought: Every expert was once confused by these terms too. The difference is they kept showing up until the words became familiar. You can do the same.