

Communicating with Policymakers: Congressional and District Visits



Why are visits important?

Visits help you, as a scientist, to build a relationship with legislative offices so that they think of you when they need expertise in your field and rely on you as a resource for the office. You also want them to appreciate the value of your research in their district and to understand why they should make federal funding for basic research a consistent priority.

Organizing a visit

You have two options for visiting your member of Congress, meeting in Washington or in your district when Congress is on recess. **Visits in your district** tend to be more relaxed and lack the distractions of floor votes or other procedural matters. They may also be more memorable since the Member has returned to keep in touch with the concerns of the people who elected them. **Washington visits** have the advantage of meeting with staff members, who are usually easier to gain an appointment with and whose opinions are highly regarded by their senator or representative.

Scheduling a visit is as simple as asking for a date and time to talk about the subject of your choice. The Senate (202-224-3121) and House (202-225-3121) switchboards will connect you with your member, or you can use the web to get contact information for the office scheduler (or sometimes fill out a request form). Choose a date when your Member is present in that particular office and try to meet when policy is being developed; don't wait for a vote.

Before you go: Preparing for a visit

Visits are all about adapting your discussion to your audience. You may be speaking to people who have little science background, but who respect your expertise and are interested in listening to you. Make the conversation a two-way street by making your science relevant to them, not just simplifying it.

You'll make the most impact with a clear, concise message. You should have an "ask" for the visits, which may have to do with legislation or budget items you hope the member will support, or may be offering yourself as a resource. Practice your 'elevator speech' and avoid the urge to lecture!

Being informed about the issues from the legislative side will help. If you're aware of what legislation the member sponsors, the issues they're concerned with, and what committees they're on, it will help keep the discussion relevant and productive. Meetings are often short, and if you show the member and staff that you're taking the visit seriously, they'll remember you and your message.

A professional appearance matters. On a visit, you want to present a professional face. Suits and business attire are the norm on Capitol Hill, but you should also wear comfortable shoes and avoid carrying too much baggage, as you will be doing a lot of walking. Business cards are a must, and a leave-behind (a one or two page summary of the information you're trying to convey) can also be helpful.

Preparation begins at your home institution. Many universities and organizations have policy/relations officers whose job is to help prepare employees for this kind of activity. Talk with yours in advance! And if anyone you know has been on a visit before, use them as a resource. **If you are a federal employee**, you are still allowed to meet with your Representative and Senators on vacation or unpaid leave, but you should check with your government affairs office to determine how you can conduct visits as a private citizen, not an agency representative.

Important talking points

Science and technology are key drivers of economic growth, improved human health, and increased quality of life. The geosciences support a better understanding of our world, its resources and its challenges.

Federal investments are crucial for the scientific R&D that we rely on to protect public safety in the face of natural and man-made disasters like hurricanes, drought, earthquakes, and severe weather events.

Geoscience R&D is an investment. Research takes time, and only the Federal government can maintain the levels and stability of funding necessary for basic R&D efforts that lead to long-term national benefits.



Use GSA's Position Statements to help build your talking points.

Steady federal investments in geoscience R&D keep the US competitive with other countries, allow us to develop stable energy, water and critical mineral resources, sustain and maintain the environment, and supply a skilled geosciences workforce.

Scientists and engineers make up a small portion of the workforce but they disproportionately create jobs for the rest of the nation. In 2008 alone, university research was responsible for the creation of nearly 600 new companies.

Tips for your visit

Do:

- Be on time, be prepared to wait, and be flexible. Changes in the legislative calendar and office activity often mean Members and staff may have limited control over their schedules.
- Expect your visit to last 15-30 minutes and plan accordingly – it may help to have a script worked out beforehand. Know your message and what you want from the meeting.
- Decide on a spokesperson if you are in a group (ideally someone from the member's district or state)
- Be polite, politically neutral, and use conversational language (avoid jargon).
- Do your homework – know what committees the member serves on, how they vote, what issues they care about, and how the issues affect other constituents (not just yourself).
- Allow time to ask and answer questions. You are there to have a conversation!
- Thank the Member or staffer for their time, and follow up with an email.

Don't:

- Be disappointed if you have to meet with a Member's staff instead of the Member. Treat the staff the same way as you would the Member – they hold a lot of power!
- Be negative or whine about politics.
- Lecture, debate, go off topic, or be condescending to a staffer or Member.
- Talk to your companions and not the person you meet with.

Don't forget to follow up!

An effective relationship with a congressional office takes persistence and communication! It's important to follow up via email or phone with the person you're meeting with to remind them who you are and what you're willing to do to help them.

For more information

To have GSA help you organize a district or congressional visit, contact Kasey White (kwhite@geosociety.org).

Find your Representative using your zip code: <http://www.house.gov/representatives/>

Find your Senator: http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm

Keep up with legislation on GSA's Public Policy webpage and RSS:

<http://geosociety.org/geopolicy/>

