



## Engaging with Select Committees

As researchers who engage with law, most of us will find over the course of our careers that our interests intersect with governmental priorities or concerns every once and again. When this happens, it is an opportunity for engagement that can lead to other work, including funding applications, knowledge exchanges and potential for impact. But, just because the government is looking at an issue that you know a lot about does not mean that they will know about *you* and your work. Inquiries held by Select Committees are a key opportunity to introduce your work and yourself as an academic to relevant parliamentary actors.

This guide assumes that a Select Committee has put out a call for evidence on an issue that you would like to respond to – but are wondering *how* to, given that they are clearly not interested in an academic article/blog. It sets out steps on what has made evidence submission successful for CTRL members in the past – as demonstrated by the evidence being cited in Select Committee Reports, and by being invited to give oral testimony on the same inquiry in light of the submitted written evidence.

### 1. Use the inquiry's terms to structure your work

This is one of the main ways in which submitting evidence to a Select Committee is distinct from writing an academic paper: you will not be writing an 'introduction, body and conclusion', because that is simply not what the inquiry is looking for. Instead, most inquiries come with a list of set questions that the Select Committee is looking for answers to. This should form the skeleton of your response.

In your introductory paragraph, set out who you are and why you are an expert on this area, as this will be the first thing the clerk reading your submission will be faced with. The more 'relevant' your expertise looks, the more likely they are to consider your submission in detail.

Following this, use subheadings to flag which question on the inquiry or which issue you are specifically responding to. What you end up producing will allow for targeted scanning, which may be all the clerk has time to do.

### 2. Choose what you want to address

One of the main reasons we know academics do not respond to Select Committee inquiries is because the scope of the inquiry is too broad, and goes beyond their own expertise. We're here to reassure you: that does not matter! You address the parts that fall within your area, and simply do not include subheadings addressing topics that go beyond it. We frequently find that inquiries we respond to straddle fields like economics, political science and law – and we focus on the law queries and submit evidence on those only. It is far preferable to put in a smaller submission that is focused on your area of expertise than to try to answer every question there.

### 3. Format for your audience

If you have ever read a Select Committee report, you will see that it is written almost like a Hansard outtake: there are chapters, headings, and then every paragraph is numbered. In our experience, it is well-received if you adopt that same approach – not least of all because it makes



your work *much* easier to specifically reference in the Select Committee Report on the inquiry you have responded to with evidence.

Keeping those paragraphs succinct is another key to success. The longer a paragraph gets, the less likely that the people primarily reading over the evidence – the clerks for a Select Committee, the MPs themselves – will actually have the time to absorb the full points you are making. A hallmark of academic writing is to not produce paragraphs that only have two or three sentences in them – but that instinct is best abandoned when responding to Parliamentary inquiries.

#### 4. Recognise your audience is not academic

This in some ways goes without saying, but also is probably the most important point: you need to recognise that your audience is *not* that of other academics, but rather of people with more or less awareness of the policy field you are writing about – and they all need to be able to absorb what you are saying. The less you rely on jargon, and the more you set out your key findings in accessible, simple language, the more likely it is that a clerk will appreciate your submission – and the more likely it is that they conclude that you will be well-suited to giving evidence to the MPs, who are virtually never actual subject specialists in a given policy area to the extent that academics are. This is particularly the case with law, which comes with its own language and rituals that only legally trained MPs will be able to follow with ease – and you are more likely than not aiming to communicate with the majority of MPs who are *not* legally trained.

But it is a good benchmark to adopt regardless: you are writing to people who are smart, but who are not from your environment. Bring them on board.

#### 5. Do back yourself up with authority

Especially in legal academic writing, we are trained from our early days of studying for the LLB that a sentence without a footnote is unlikely to pass a ‘sniff’ test in terms of rigour. It is natural for most of us, therefore, to back up most of our assertions in anything we write with a slew of footnotes or other references.

The good news is that Select Committees appreciate this – even if not as a ‘disciplinary habit’, they appear to perceive it as confirming the expertise of those submitting. Parliamentarians don’t have access to research databases; flagging key research and sources genuinely helps them. The trick to using authority well, however, is to ensure that the flow of the writing generally is not impacted by the fact that you are adding these formal academic notes in it: you are still aiming to produce generally accessible paragraphs, but backing them up with academic rigour throughout, to demonstrate to those wanting *more* information than what is in the main text that you are able to supply it.

Given that the primary audience for Select Committee evidence is the committee clerks, who will pore over it and use it to determine what oral evidence should focus on going forward, these clues towards further research are very helpful in sharpening the scrutiny that a Select Committee is able to engage in. We therefore encourage this one academic habit to stay.

*To see this approach in practice, have a look at the evidence that Sylvia de Mars and Colin Murray submitted to the House of Lords Sub-Committee on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in a 2021 inquiry that focused on the then Northern Ireland Protocol Bill:*  
<https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/113115/pdf/>