

How to do public speaking and writing about environmental illnesses (MCS or EHS)



Whether you need to speak at a public hearing, or are writing a letter or article, this document provides insight on what to do and what not to do. We also cover strategies for speaking at a toxic/radiant place.

Keywords: multiple chemical sensitivity, MCS, electrical sensitivity, activism, public speaking

The need to communicate

Whether your home is threatened by a developer's plans, your kid's school refuses to accommodate environmental disabilities, or you want to improve civil rights, effective communication is needed. We show you how.

Show up in person

If you talk to someone, whether it is one person or a large audience, it is by far best to do so in person. People pay serious money to attend a concert or a sports

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event, rather than watching it on TV at home. Lobbyists do their work in person, and it is not just because they don't want to leave any record of their work.

Showing up in person demonstrates more of a commitment to what you say than if you send a letter or speak through a telephone. You spent the time and effort to get there, what you have to say is that important to you. It is much more powerful than a letter or a phone. (Petitions are even less valuable, as the officials know very well how little effort it takes to sign one.)

There is also the effect that they can see you. You are not something abstract, you truly exist. You look like a normal person, and act like a normal person. It is harder to ignore a person right there in the room.

No extra credit

If you can't go there because of your disability, they will not take that into account. If you do go and have to stay in bed for three days afterwards, they will not give you credit for that either. They truly do not understand. And if you try to tell them, they'll likely think you are a whiner, as they still do not understand. Asking for sympathy will rarely work and can easily backfire, as they may discount all you say even more.

Public speaking

You may need to speak in public, such as at a zoning hearing or some forum. That can be scary if you haven't done it before, but it gets easier each time you do it.

Find out in advance how long you'll be allowed to speak. If it is a public hearing, you'll probably just get 3 or 5 minutes, and only once.

Rehearse what you want to say at home. Do it in front of another person, or a pet, or a houseplant. It is important you rehearse it aloud, as that works differently than just reading it. That way you can also time it.

Start by introducing yourself. Say your name. Maybe also say what you used to do before you became sick with EI (or still do). If it is relevant, also say which neighborhood you live in. This shows you are a normal person.

When you speak, try to connect with your audience by briefly looking into their eyes. If it's a tough audience, focus on just one person who seems less scary, and ignore everyone else.

Be yourself. Speak from your own experiences, but don't wander off topic. That can be more effective than an attempt at abstract talk or making grand claims.

Unless you are the leader of an organization, you only speak for yourself.

Speak to your audience in a language they understand. Do not use legal words or technical terms. You won't impress anyone, and if the listeners do not understand what you say, they will assume it is unimportant.

They will *not* think that since they do not understand, you must be so much smarter than them and they must believe you. It doesn't work that way.

Be respectful

Always be respectful of your audience. They show you respect by allowing you to speak uninterrupted.

Do not talk down to them, no matter how stupid they seem. Do not accuse them of taking bribes, even if you know it to be true.

No matter how narrow-minded they are, show them respect anyway. They hold the power, making them hate you doesn't help your cause. You can't shame officials to change their minds.

Be credible

You want to appear credible, whether you stand at a podium or write an article or book. Otherwise, people will write you off and ignore everything you say. Even worse, they may stereotype you and everyone with the illness as not credible people.

You can damage your credibility in ways big and small. It happens far too often.

Know what you talk about. If you tell people things they know to be false, you've lost them. A small example was at a hearing in Phoenix, Arizona, where a person referred to the state's largest utility, APS, as "American Power Supply." It actually stands for Arizona Public Service.

The audience was commissioners who dealt with APS daily. There was no need at all to spell out the name, as everyone always used the abbreviation.

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People throw technical terms around all the time, and they are often not used fully correctly. Avoid complicated technical terms that are not commonly used, such as RFID, blood-brain barrier, endocrine disrupters and pulsed microwaves, unless you absolutely have to.

That goes doubly if your source is social media, where incorrect usage of technical terms is rampant.

Instead, use more generic terms we all better understand, such as “Wi-Fi,” “electromagnetic radiation,” “chemicals,” and “heavy metals.”

If exposure to these things give you headaches and brain fog, you can say so, but abstain from spelling out how. There are many theories how they affect people, none of them have been proven. We don’t truly know.

Again, don’t try do dazzle the audience with how smart you are. If you really are that smart, the smart people will be able to tell. If you are acting, they will know too. It works much better if you are just yourself, just as it works best for a job interview or a first date.

No matter how much you are hurting from being in the room, don’t tell them. To them, you look just fine, they cannot relate, so they’ll not take you seriously.

You are already straining your credibility by talking about chemical or electrical sensitivities. If you add more controversies, chances are it’ll be too much and you’ll lose credibility.

Do not bring in controversies or political opinions that are not essential to your message. They are polarizing and a fast way to lose your audience. You will only be listened to by those who already subscribe to your particular set of opinions.

An example of what *not* to do is the foreword to the 2022 book *WiFi Refugee*. Within a few pages it promotes no less than five conspiracy theories, most of which are completely irrelevant to the topic of the book. The two that are mildly related are well out of the mainstream (“Covid caused by 5G,” “Spanish flu caused by radio waves”).

Mentioning these five theories added nothing to the book’s theme, which was to tell the stories of people who were forced to move away from wireless radiation sources.

How many people dropped the book after reading that foreword?

I've seen this problem in other books about either MCS or electrosensitivity. It is very poor tactics.

The other side enjoys to point out anything that can paint all of us as kooks. This was done by a psychiatrist who wrote an article promoting his idea that everyone who has electrical hypersensitivity believes in government conspiracy theories. He did admit his assertion was only based on "more than one" patient seen in his psychiatric clinic. That means two or three people, which is not enough to make any conclusion. There is also the problem that people who seek psychiatric help are just a small part of the larger MCS/EHS population, and hardly representative.

Dr. Joseph Pierre's article "Tin foil hats: tired trope or sign of times" was published in the online edition of *Psychology Today* in 2022. It is well worth reading as an example of clever propaganda.

Focus on one issue

People are resistant to changing their minds. If you present them with more than one thing that challenge their perceptions, it becomes even more difficult to convince them. The risk of "losing" them grows exponentially.

This is another reason to avoid talking about other issues or controversies than your main message.

Check the venue ahead of time

Consider visiting the meeting hall in advance to see if you can actually be there. The radiation and chemical levels may simply be too high. The furniture may be new, the airspace too cramped, there may be a cell tower on the roof or Wi-Fi transmitters in the room.

It may be possible for you to just walk in and take a look. If access is blocked, try to talk to someone there and explain your need. They will very likely be happy to give you a tour and even tell you how they conduct their meetings.

It can be helpful to be a spectator to an earlier meeting there, before the one you intend to participate in. That will show you how they conduct their business.

Making it work

If it is tough to be in the meeting room, you can try to set it up so you only need to be inside while you speak.

It may work to prop the door open and stay out in the hallway. That way you can still hear what is going on and quickly step inside when it is your turn.

Another option is to wait further away and have a helper get you when it is your turn. If you discuss this in advance with the secretary, they may arrange so you are the first speaker in that segment of the meeting, so there is more time to get you inside.

I have used all of the above methods successfully.

The podium will probably have a microphone. It will always be wireless. They are very unlikely to have a corded microphone available.

The microphone will likely be mounted in a holder, which is much better than holding it in your hand. Remember, it is just for a few minutes.

Virtual appearance

In recent years it has become possible to speak virtually using a computer and software such as Teams or Zoom. Some activists asked for this accommodation, which was first denied, but then granted once an attorney got involved.

Be aware that the viewers can see both you and what is behind you in the room. Your background is an important part of shaping people's impression of you. Some of the software systems allow you to insert a picture as your background, or blank it out entirely.

Dress as you would if you went there in person, at least from your waist and up.

Showing up in person is still best for making an impression on your audience.

Debates

You may participate in a debate of some sort, where there is a back-and-forth between two sides.

Always remember that you are really speaking to the audience. You will never change the mind of your opponent. How you come across to the audience is

paramount. Make sure they understand what you are saying, avoid jargon and acronyms that they may not know.

Unless you are a very skilled debater, stick to the safer approaches. Do not do any personal attacks on your opponent. That can easily backfire, where the audience gets outraged and becomes sympathetic to the other side's message. So, always show your opponent some respect.

Your opponent may try to get you to say things that are very controversial, or to use strong language about something. This is an attempt at discrediting you before the audience. Don't take the bait.

Doing a debate is more challenging than a presentation. There is no script, you don't know what your opponent will say and what you have to respond to. You have to respond quickly and succinctly. If you have brain fog and your short-term memory is not working so great anymore, you are at a great disadvantage. And those are common effects of environmental illnesses. The audience will not give you any credit for these limitations.

Writing effectively

Writing about MCS or EHS is in many ways similar to public speaking.

Here too it is important to appear credible, to abstain from talking about controversies that are not relevant to your main message. They can never make you more credible, unless you write to a narrow audience of like-minded people.

Don't try to dazzle your audience with your understanding of things. It is likely to backfire. If you use words people do not understand, they will assume what you say is unimportant. If you use technical words, make sure you really understand what they mean – far too many people don't, and that hurts your credibility with those who do.

Keep it short and to the point. If possible, make just one point. Don't overload the reader with a lot of material that may be new. People can only absorb so much.

Many people can only read one page before they become fatigued.

Regular people are intimidated by scholarly references. Highly educated people often want to know your sources. Write to your audience.

Social media

If you post online, you are likely to encounter snide remarks, perhaps even hateful ones. Again, treat them with respect, do not respond in kind. Your audience here is *not* the hateful poster, but other people, and they will respect you *much* more if you don't lose your cool.

If a posting upsets you, either don't respond or take a break before responding. Then be calm and firm, not shrill. If you can pull it off, sarcasm may work well. Remember who your real audience is, you will never be able to convince the hateful poster, but some quiet reader may actually stop and think if you provide a good answer.

The people who respond to you (usually) don't actually know you. They are just acting on whatever stereotype they have in their minds. It is not about you, really.

Writing to a politician

If you write to a politician, make it very short and to the point. It will be read by a staff person and nobody else. The staff is focused on finding out which issue you are writing about and whether you are for or against it. They then report to the politician how many letters/e-mails were for and against each issue. Your carefully crafted prose won't get passed on.

A tough sell

People with multiple chemical sensitivities and electrical hypersensitivity have for decades had to step forward and essentially say "we exist, we should be allowed to be here."

And for decades the message has largely fallen on deaf ears. The politicians and other decision-makers want to ignore the sick people, as it is inconvenient and unpopular to make the necessary changes.

But there have been several victories too. Most states allow people to opt-out of wireless smart meters, some developers saw their plans squashed, smokers are banned from many buildings, and more. EI activists had a hand in all of those.

About the picture

The picture shows professor Martin Blank of Columbia University speaking at a smart meter hearing before the Arizona Corporation Commission in 2014.

About the author

I have attended a course in public speaking and spoken publicly about fifty times, both on MCS/EHS and other topics. I have been involved in MCS/EHS-related advocacy for more than twenty years.

More information

More articles about how to be an MCS or EHS activist on www.eiwellspring.org/activist.html.

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