

PROJECT Citizen

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ABCs OF PUBLIC POLICY – HELPING TEACHERS GET IT

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INTRODUCTION

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN SOLVING COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

A. Purpose

In the words of Abraham Lincoln, we have inherited a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.” The right to participate in governing ourselves—protecting our rights and promoting our common welfare—carries with it certain responsibilities. Among these responsibilities are acquiring the knowledge and skills for intelligent participation and the willingness to promote liberty and justice for all people.

Goals

Project Citizen introduces students to and educates them in the methods and procedures used in our governmental processes. The goal of the program is to develop students’ commitment to active citizenship and governance by

- providing the knowledge and teaching the skills required for effective participation

- providing practical experience designed to foster a sense of competence and efficacy
- developing an understanding of the importance of citizen participation

We believe this program will add to students’ knowledge, enhance their skills, and deepen their understanding of how “the people”—all of us—can work together to improve our communities.

B. Introducing students to the concept of public policy and the policymaking process

Helping students develop an understanding of the concept of public policy and the policymaking process is a prerequisite to successful attainment of the goals and purposes of the Project Citizen instructional program. Before starting the activities presented in the student book it is recommended that the teacher work with students to develop an understanding of the concept of public policy and the policymaking process as they are generally understood and used by political scientists.

1. Defining public policy

This program focuses on the development of a public policy to deal with a specific problem in the community and if the teacher and class decide to do so, the recommendation of that policy to the appropriate governing body or governmental agency. It is necessary, therefore, that students understand the term public policy.

As used in this program, a public policy is an agreed upon way that our government, at whatever level, fulfills its responsibilities, such as protecting the rights of individuals and promoting the welfare of all the people. Typically, public policies are written into laws by legislatures. Other policies, however, are contained in orders, rules, and regulations created by executive branches of government, and in some instances the decisions of courts at various levels.

Because one of the main goals of this program is to help people learn how to participate in their government, we want them to examine problems that are or should be dealt with, at least partially, by government. The solutions students develop to these problems, therefore, should include recommendations as to what policies government should be responsible for implementing. The policies suggested also may include recommendations regarding the shared responsibilities of the people in a community.

USING NEWSPAPERS TO INTRODUCE PUBLIC POLICY

Time required: Two standard class periods

Materials needed: Several copies of the local newspaper (8 to 12 copies per class or group) and a copy of Student Handout 1 and 2 for each student.

Procedures:

First Class Period

- 1) Distribute the worksheet "What Is Public Policy?" (Appendix H – Student Handout 1) and ask students to complete the first box with their own ideas about what they think public policy means.
- 2) Next, ask the whole class the question: "What is public policy?" Using a brainstorming strategy, record all responses on a chalkboard, overhead, or chart paper. Leave these posted for use in the next step.
- 3) Divide the class into smaller groups of three to four students each. Distribute one complete copy of the local newspaper (include all sections) to each small group. Each group should select four or five articles that reflect its understanding of what public policy is. Each article chosen must come from a different section of the newspaper, for example, national or state news, business section, sports, etc. Groups should be prepared to present and defend each selected article as an example of public policy.

4) Call on each group to present one of its choices and defend it as an example of public policy before the class. The group that follows should not use an article from a section of the newspaper used by any previous group.

5) Use the examples that students gave to conduct a discussion of what the essential elements of public policy are. Have students record this information in the second box on the "What Is Public Policy?" worksheet. Some typical answers might include, but are not limited to the following:

- government action
- authority
- common good
- community input
- protecting citizens
- solve a problem

6) Following the class discussion of essential elements of public policy allow time for the small groups to write a definition of public policy, copy it to chart paper, and then present the definition to the class.

7) After all groups have presented their definition, the teacher should highlight or record all the common terms or phrases that are present in each of the definitions.

8) From these common elements, the newspaper examples, and the original brainstorming work, the class should develop a consensus definition of public policy.

Optional activity: As a research assignment ask the students to collect several definitions of public policy from various sources. Have the class compare its definition to the others. Allow time to refine, revise, or rewrite the class definition, if desired.

Second Class Period

1) Distribute the worksheet "What Is and Is Not Public Policy?" (Appendix H – Students Handout 2). Review the directions with students and discuss the examples given for the first problem. Return to the definition they wrote as a class in the first part of the lesson and ask them to explain how it fits the example.

2) Ask students to generate their own solutions for one or more of the given community problems. Then have the students form small groups of three or four to share their individual solutions.

3) Next, assign one of the community problems to each group and have group members reach consensus on one solution that is and one solution that is not public policy. Have each group prepare to present its work to the whole class.

4) To check for understanding, have students generate at least two more problems from their own community to complete the empty boxes on the worksheet. Then either individually or as homework, have the students give possible solutions for each problem.

Debrief Questions

1. What did you learn about the meaning of public policy?
2. Did your understanding of public policy change as a result of this activity?
3. Who has responsibility for making public policy?
4. How might existing public policy get changed?

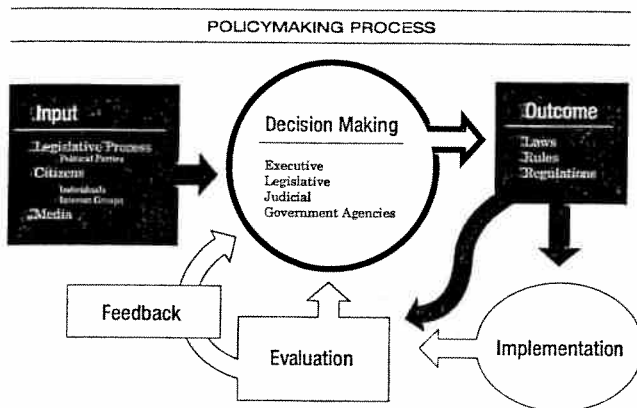
2. Policymaking process

It is important that students understand the central role of government (local, state, national) in formulating public policy. They also should understand, however, that government's role is only one part of the process; all citizens in a community should be encouraged to participate as well. Democratic decision-making requires both the consent of citizens to be governed and their participation in that government.

Policymaking might begin when people in a community perceive that a problem exists. Perceptions about a problem may emerge from the media, politicians, citizen groups, or the institutions of government. Next, people might formulate ideas for how best to resolve the problem. People with ideas try to persuade government to adopt their ideas and put their solutions into practice. In this process, there are likely to be differences of opinion over what should be done about a particular problem and who should do it. Frequently, alternative proposals emerge. The entire process includes collecting and analyzing data, assessing consequences of alternative actions, and gathering support for one proposal or another. Once people agree on an appropriate course of action, they must persuade the appropriate government or governmental agency to adopt the policy. Once the policy is adopted, it then has to be carried out.

3. Activities for Introducing the Policymaking Process

The flowchart below shows how the policymaking process occurs in most circumstances. Spending time reviewing the flowchart with the class can help students gain a clearer understanding of this complex process. A reproducible copy is provided in Appendix H – Student Handout 3.



After you have explained the policy flow depicted on the chart, divide the class into small working groups of four students each. Have students discuss the chart and then do some research to develop a better understanding of the process, as it applies to their local or state government bodies. Next, divide the chart into four discrete sectors: 1) Input, 2) Decision Making, 3) Outcomes, and 4) Implementation (including Evaluation and Feedback). Assign, or allow each member of the group to select, one of the four sectors and have them develop two or three paragraphs that

explain that part of the chart. After each person has finished his or her writing task, have the group members edit the four sections into a whole essay that describes the policymaking process.

C. Who Are the Policymakers?

One of the important ideas that students will need to learn about public policy is that there are a number of different policymakers who may have the authority and some responsibility for dealing with a problem.

1. Activities for Introducing the Policymakers

Refer to Student Handout 4A in Appendix H to show students how different policymakers might have responsibility for dealing with the common problem of school truancy. After discussing the example, give students a copy of the chart, “Who Are the Responsible Policymakers?” (Appendix H – Handout 4B). Have students work in small groups of three or four. Ask each group to identify a problem in their school or community that is likely to require a public policy solution, develop a chart for the problem they select, and then present their work to the class.

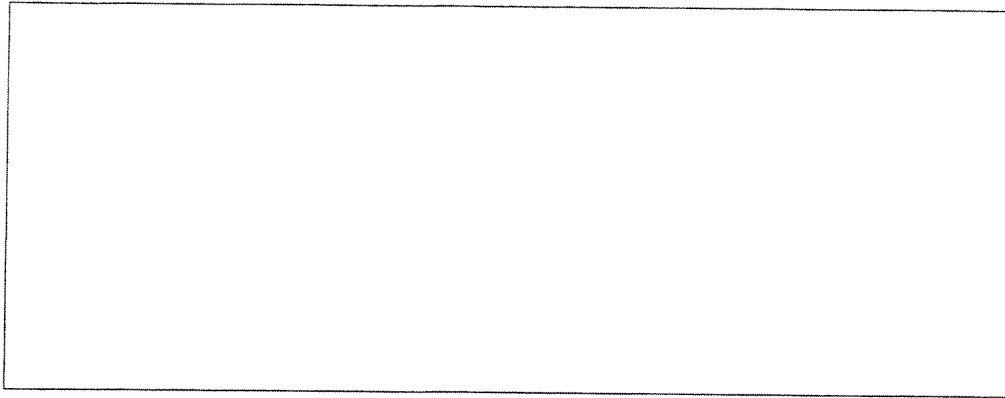
2. Citizens and the policymaking process

It is important that students understand the role of citizens in formulating public

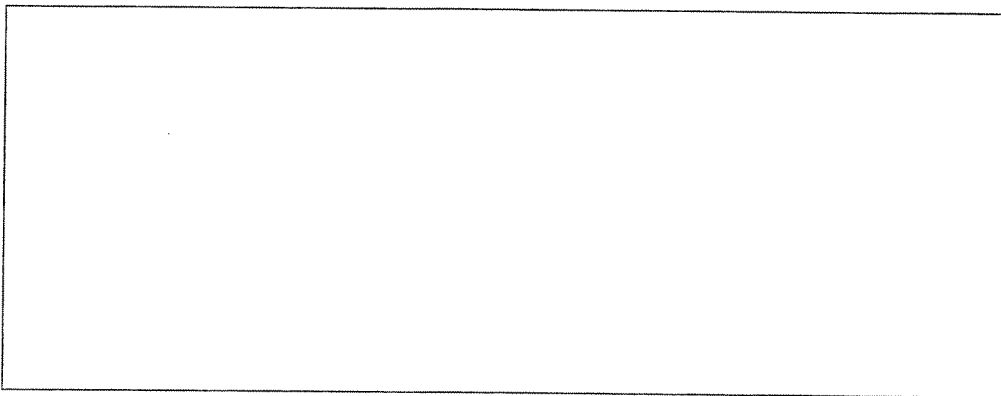
policies. Citizens can be involved at all levels of the process by attending public meetings, writing letters to their representative and to newspapers, making phone calls and sending email messages, monitoring proposals and counterproposals, participating in demonstrations, persuading other citizens to support a particular alternative, conducting research, submitting proposals of their own, and giving testimony at public hearings. This is only a partial list, but it illustrates that there are numerous opportunities for citizens to participate in the decision-making process.

STUDENT HANDOUT 1 – WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

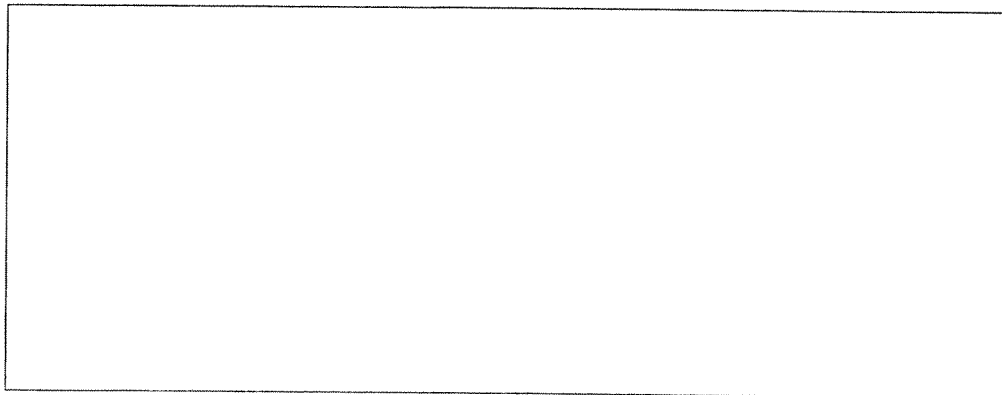
My definition of public policy



Essential elements of public policy



My revised definition of public policy



STUDENT HANDOUT 2 – WHAT IS AND IS NOT PUBLIC POLICY?

Directions: Read the first example of a community problem shown in the middle column below and what is and what is not a public policy solution to it. Next think about possible solutions for each of the other community problems and write your examples for each of those. Use the last two spaces to identify a problem in your community and give examples for it. After you have come up with your own responses, share them with your group members or the class.

Public Policy

EXAMPLE: City officials fund a program for needy individuals to “buy” food and clothing from participating merchants using vouchers

Community Problems

Some families in the community need food and warm clothing

School aged children are out on the streets late on school nights

Parents are not using child protective car seats properly

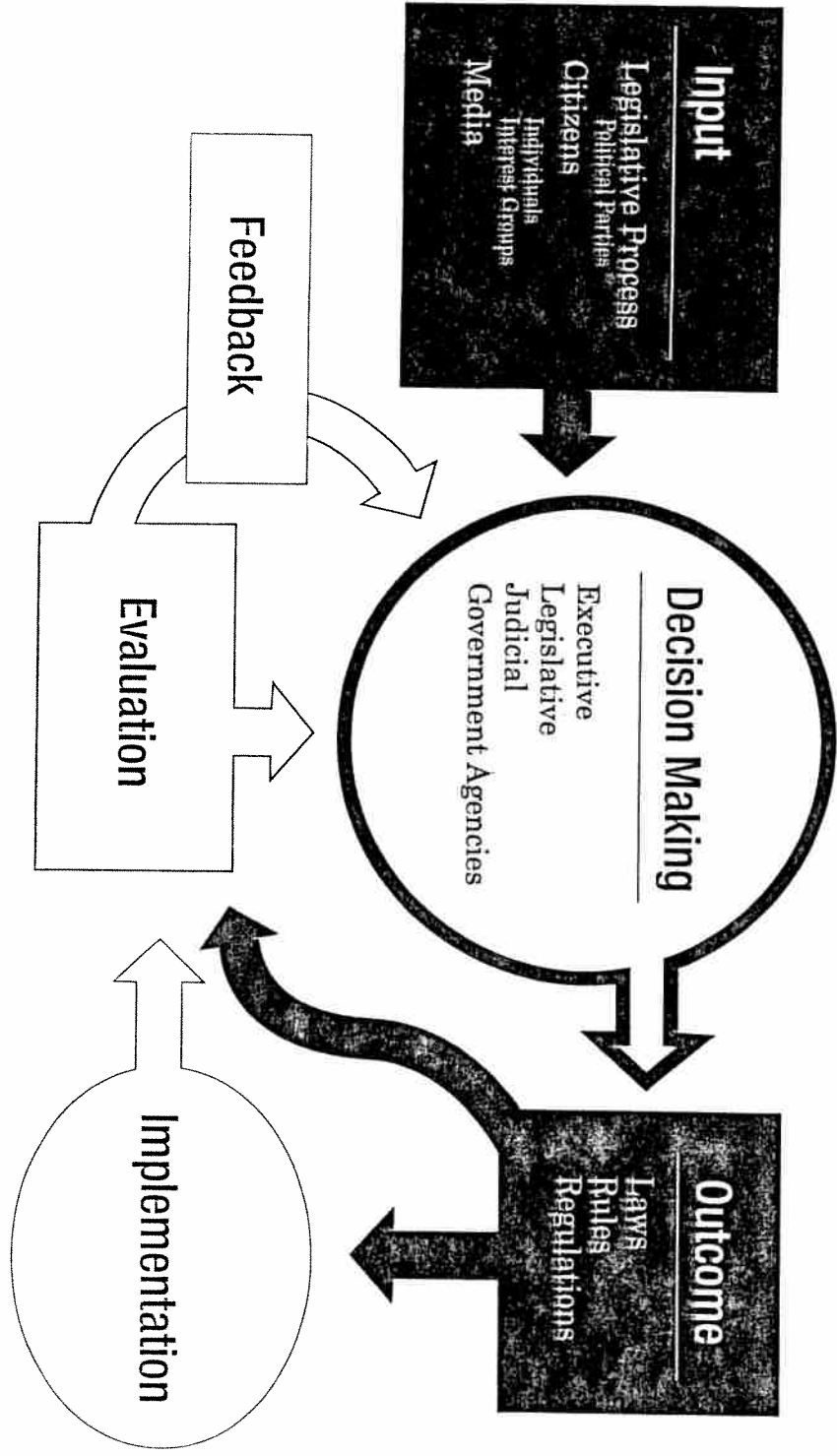
The lake in the community park is polluted and filled with litter

Many students in the local high school have been cheating on homework and tests

Community Service

EXAMPLE: Churches in the local community organize a drive to collect food and clothing and then distribute it

POLICYMAKING PROCESS



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WHO ARE THE RESPONSIBLE POLICYMAKERS?

Issue/Problem
Lots of kids are skipping school

Policymakers

Principal

Possible action to be taken:

Start a counseling program for kids who skip

School Board

Possible action to be taken:

Adopt a policy of minimum requirements for school attendance in order to pass

City Council

Possible action to be taken:

Direct police to work with school officials to bring students caught skipping back to school

State Education Department

Possible action to be taken:

Require every school to have a procedure for dealing with kids who skip

State Legislature

Possible action to be taken:

Pass a law that fines parents whose kids skip school

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WHO ARE THE RESPONSIBLE POLICYMAKERS?

Issue/Problem

Policymakers

Possible action to be taken:

Possible action to be taken:

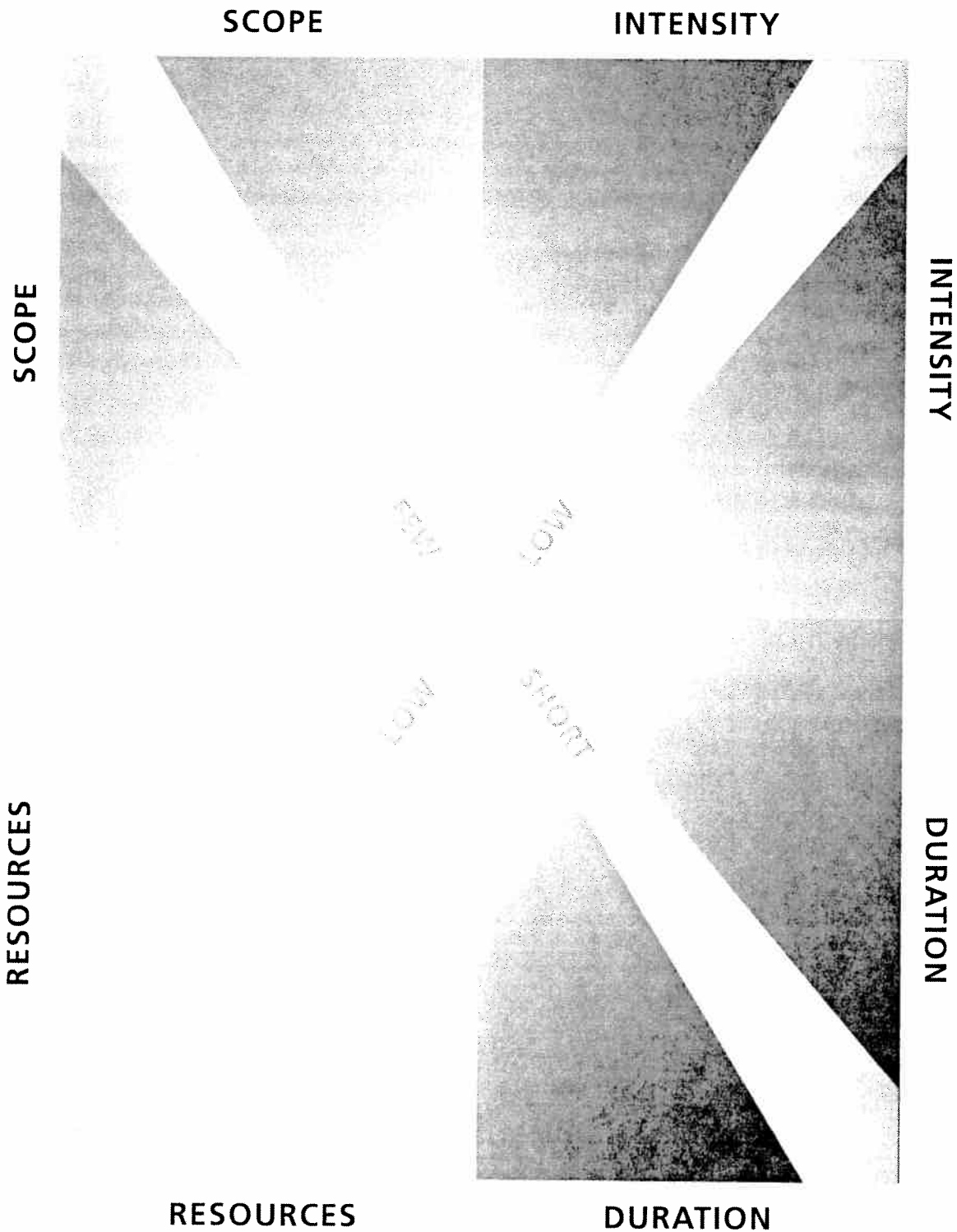
Possible action to be taken:

Possible action to be taken:

Possible action to be taken:

DRAFT

IDENTIFYING PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES TRIGGERING MECHANISMS



STUDENT HANDOUT 5 – PROPOSING A PUBLIC POLICY

Writing the appropriate language for a public policy or a bill can be tricky. Sometimes even the people who serve as state legislators need help. The following guidelines are taken from the Montana State Legislature website.. It provides state legislators with a series of questions they need to answer so that the people in the bill drafting office of the legislature can turn their ideas into a bill and then if passed by the legislature, a law.

Review the ten questions that the legislators need to answer. They can help you as you prepare the class policy that you need when you are working on the third task of the portfolio development – Proposing a Public Policy. While you may not be writing actual legislation for your policy, the questions will help you clarify your thinking about what you should be addressing.

A Legislative Services bill drafter must translate objectives and policies of the legislator requesting a bill into clear, concise language meeting the requirements of the Bill Drafting Manual. To do this, the drafter needs complete information from the requesting legislator. Legislative Council rules say that "All bill drafting requests must be specific as to what the legislator wishes to accomplish and must also outline the method which will achieve that end. A drafter, with the concurrence of the Executive Director, is authorized to return a bill drafting request to a legislator for more information." A legislator requesting a bill should be able to answer as many of the following questions as possible. Please use the following questions to help you do so.

1. What exactly is the problem that needs to be solved?
2. Who has experienced the problem – is it perceived as widespread or local in nature?
3. What is the proposed solution to the problem?
4. How should the solution be achieved, i.e. what action should government take to intervene in the problem?
5. What results are desired; if the bill passes, what results would show that the solution had been achieved?
6. Who should the drafter contact for information? (Be sure to give a copy of this form to each person you name indicating they should be prepared to answer these questions.)
7. Do you know of specific existing statutes that should be changed to achieve your proposed solution?
8. Is there specific legislation from another state, organization, lobbyist, agency, or other source that should serve as a model for your bill? If you think you heard or read about something somewhere, try to find as specific a reference as possible on it, i.e. specifically where you learned of it. If you have a copy, please provide it.
9. Does the solution require additional money? How should the money be raised or from what existing source should it come? (Mandates to local governments must authorize a source of funding.)
10. What alternatives to legislation have been considered to solve the problem? How have they failed?

URL Source: <http://leg.state.mt.us/css/research/information/draftques.asp>

