

INTRODUCTION

Study committees of the National Academies make unique and often indispensable contributions to the welfare of the nation by addressing questions in science, medicine, and engineering with significant public policy implications. The analysis of complex issues through a committee process is enormously challenging and the stakes are high because the results are likely to influence governmental decisions. Although many elements contribute to a successful committee report, an effective chair is essential.

Chairs are selected because they are outstanding individuals who have made major contributions in their professional fields. Sometimes a chair has considerable expertise in the subject being studied. At other times, a chair lacks such expertise but brings an objective perspective to a controversial subject. Above all, a chair is a leader—an individual who inspires colleagues and keeps them focused on the necessary effort to complete a study. Chairs direct the deliberations of committees, organize the drafting and revising of reports, and represent the committee and its work to the public. The task can be demanding and complex. It usually also is productive, enjoyable, and rewarding.

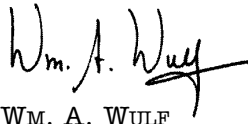
This guide presents a broad overview of the chair's role in the committee process. It has been assembled from interviews with particularly successful chairs who have experienced the broad range of situations that chairs are likely to encounter, and with the advice of skilled study directors who have supported both highly productive and troubled committees. Every committee is unique. Every chair will have a distinctive approach to the work of the committee. But there also are predictable characteristics of the committee process, and anticipating these can prevent unnecessary difficulties. This guide discusses some of the common challenges faced by a chair. We hope

that it is useful in completing an important task and making the experience for chairs both successful and enjoyable.

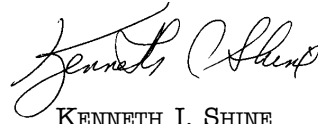
We particularly wish to acknowledge the work of Carlton Stoiber for his original cartoon creations, which add a distinctive touch to the brochure. Academy members Marye Anne Fox, Gordon Orians, Guy Stever and Gilbert White spoke on videotape with Bruce Alberts about their experiences from chairing many NRC study committees. These interviews served as an invaluable source of information. The sidebars on the study process, highlighting actions for chairs to take at important stages of a project, are abstracted from papers prepared by Archie L. Wood for the Good Practices Data Base and used in our staff development program. Several members of our staff and other individuals assisted in the preparation of the brochure and provided insightful comments on the early drafts. Steve Olson helped edit the text. We are very grateful for all of the many contributions that have made this brochure possible.



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Roles of the COMMITTEE CHAIR

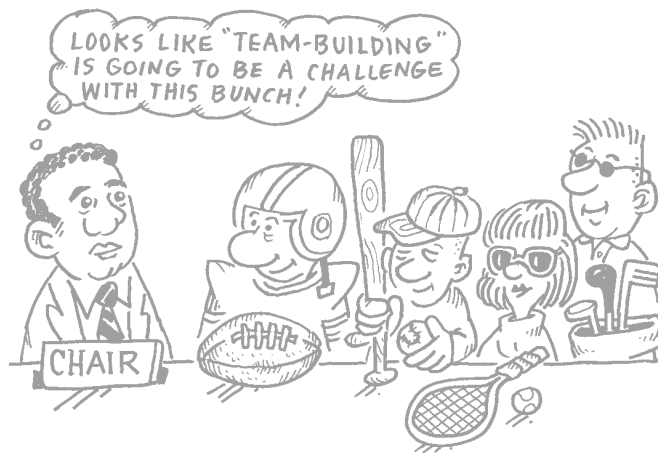
The chair plays four key roles in every study:

- ◆ **Leader, facilitator, and team builder for the committee**
- ◆ **Principal architect and integrator of the committee's report**
- ◆ **Adviser to the study director on the management of the project**
- ◆ **Chief spokesperson in representing the committee to reviewers, sponsors, and the public**

This guide describes each of these roles in turn.

Leader, Facilitator, and Team Builder for the Committee

Committees of the National Academies have distinct characteristics that will be novel for many first-time members. These pose challenges to the chair and staff. The institution's study committees are multi-disciplinary. Members are invited to serve because they possess personal expertise—not because they represent specific institutional or constituency interests. Further, the study process aspires to develop a consensus product. This consensus process must not only modulate diverse viewpoints, but blend diverse expertise to achieve new insights or interpretations of relevant scientific evidence. This requires active participation by all members of the committee. To achieve this goal, the chair must encourage contributions from all committee members and guide the deliberations. In this role, the chair serves both as the leader of the committee and as the skillful facilitator of discussion. At later stages of the process, the chair must also be a team-builder in order to achieve consensus on key issues.



Many members will be new to our committee process. Therefore the chair must model the behavior expected of members. A chair helps to frame the issues and sets the tone for the committee's discussions. At the first



meeting, which is vitally important to the entire process, a chair sets expectations about the contributions expected from committee members. A chair who is committed and serious will elicit similar levels of commitment and seriousness from the committee. The responsibility that a chair brings to the analysis of issues and the drafting of a report will determine how the rest of

the committee approaches the task. The aim should be an ambitious one: to produce a novel consensus report, one that goes well beyond conventional wisdom and could not have been written by a small subset of the committee members alone.

At the first meeting the chair must guide the committee to agree on a work plan and, if possible, on a report architecture. It also is essential for the committee to decide at the outset who the principal audience for its report will be. But first the chair must ensure that the committee clearly understands why it was constituted, its charge, and what is expected of it by the institution and by the sponsors of the study. This discussion should not be short-changed. Members will bring to the study personal interests that extend beyond the charge to the committee and may desire to reframe the issues. It is important to invite sponsors to talk with the committee at its first meeting and to spend as much time as necessary ensuring that the focus and boundaries of the charge are well understood. If the committee considers it essential to modify its charge, it can do so only with the formal approval of the institution.



Conferring with Staff before the First Meeting

Some chairs take a “hands-on” role in many aspects of a study. Others prefer to delegate more responsibility to staff working under their guidance. Early consultation between the chair and staff (including, as needed, the board or division director and the Executive Director of the commission or major unit) can help work out these roles and responsibilities before the committee is convened for its first meeting.

In preparing to confer with the staff, the chair should have reviewed:

- The study prospectus approved by the institution
- The statement of task outlining the specific charge to the committee and proposed products
- The provisional membership of the committee, which generally will be posted on the Internet with biographies (statements of qualifications) for public comment
- A tentative work plan prepared by staff, with schedule and milestones
- The financial, personnel, and information resources available to the committee
- The institution’s policy document on compliance with Section 15 of the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) Amendments of 1997

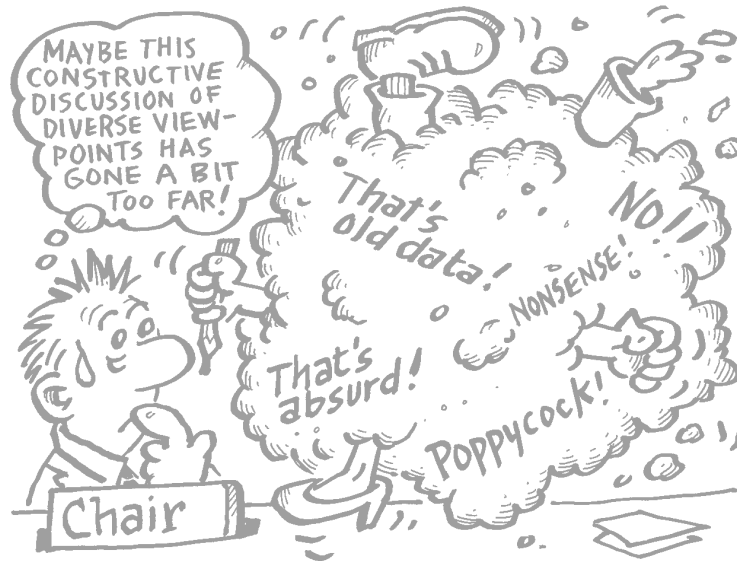
In the conference with staff, the chair should:

- Determine if the charge is clear—particularly in its descriptions of what is within and outside the scope of the study—and decide how best to communicate the charge to the committee
- Understand the expectations for the study of the sponsors, other important audiences such as the Congress, and the institution
- Develop a preliminary conception of the report’s architecture for discussion by the committee at its first meeting
- Understand the expertise on the committee and the process by which the institution will finalize the provisional committee appointments
- Understand the institution’s report review and release process

At the conclusion of the conference, the chair should have:

- Ascertained if the tentative work plan is reasonable in light of the charge to the committee
- Flagged issues, if any, for discussion by the committee, including the possibility of revisions to the statement of task, schedule, milestones, or physical resources
- Outlined objectives the committee should expect to accomplish at and in between each of its meetings
- Identified prospective presentations to the committee from external sources as well as from the members and staff
- Approved a draft agenda for the first meeting
- Clarified the role of the chair and the role of the staff in the conduct of the study

The chair must encourage the expression and constructive discussion of diverse viewpoints. At every meeting, each committee member should feel that he or she has had a full opportunity to express opinions and otherwise contribute to the study process.



The chair, in partnership with the study director, must keep the committee members actively engaged in the study process. Volunteers must always feel that their time is being used productively, which requires careful planning of each meeting agenda and of work assignments between meetings by both the chair and the staff. The first meeting should set the example. All members should be encouraged to draft one or more sections of the report—

with the understanding that there is no exclusive ownership of specific issues. First-time committee members may incorrectly assume that they have the same prerogatives as they have when writing a chapter in an edited textbook—where there is deference to the author's language. Thus, while it is important for



members to write portions of the report, it is also crucial for them to understand that their writing—and even some of their conclusions—will undergo extensive modification through the committee's deliberative process.

The Plan for the First Committee Meeting

When committee members assemble for the first time, they are likely to have many questions, such as:

- What is the study really about?
- What is the plan for the study?
- Who are my colleagues on the committee?
- What can I contribute?
- What is the role of the staff?

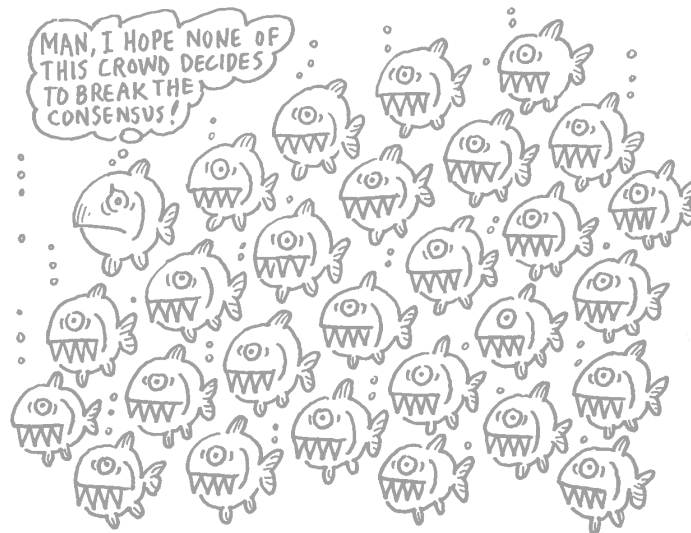
The answers to these questions create impressions that will influence the study throughout its course. Thus, it is very important for the first meeting to be well planned and conducted.

The objectives of the first meeting almost always include the following:

- To introduce the committee to its charge by clearly conveying the statement of task and the study's origins and context
- To describe the expectations for the study of the sponsors and other audiences
- To identify issues that may be potentially controversial or contentious
- To complete the formation of the committee and acquaint members with one another through discussion of the committee's composition and balance in light of its charge
- To explain the institutional process, including report review and release, under which the study will be conducted
- To discuss and adopt a work plan for the study that encompasses such elements as research methods, writing assignments, topics for future meetings, and so on
- To allow committee members to get better acquainted and begin the process of building trust among them

As the study nears completion, the chair should ensure that the entire committee takes full ownership of the report that it has produced and signs off on the report's findings, conclusions, and recommendations. This is much easier if most committee members have contributed text and engaged in the process of reviewing and revising the draft versions of the report. At this stage it is also extremely important the committee understands the nature of the institution's report review process. Committees are sometimes unprepared to justify their work in a rigorous review. Under these circumstances, they may resent the fact that the review may produce demands for significant changes to the findings and recommendations in the report. The chair and study director should remind the committee of this step throughout the deliberative process—particularly if the committee begins to endorse findings and recommendations that are not based strongly on evidence.

Committees have a diverse composition—this both adds to its strength and complicates the process of reaching consensus. The chair therefore must always be concerned with the committee's progress toward consensus. A complicating factor is that standards of evidence can be quite varied among different professional disciplines, making the process of determining when a finding has an acceptable evidence base contentious. Fairness and flexibility are required to move beyond initial differences that sometimes can be considerable, to achieving a group consensus that goes well beyond the obvious, and yet move the issues forward. However, when consensus is not possible or if reaching consensus would skew an important majority position of the committee, it is better to expose the lack of consensus than to obscure it completely through compromise.



Meeting Management

Much must be accomplished in the limited time the committee is together on a typical study over the course of four to six meetings.

In planning a committee meeting, chairs should keep certain considerations in mind:

- Every meeting should have clear objectives derived from the study's work plan and from the progress of the project to date.
- Each meeting's agenda should be designed to support that meeting's objectives and should state those objectives clearly.
- The purpose, scope, and duration of every invited presentation should be defined before the presentation is requested.
- The meeting agenda should be lean and flexible since meetings often run short on time.
- Closed meetings or sessions of just the committee members and staff also should have specific agendas.
- Periodic breaks and committee socials should be scheduled to pace the committee's work and to promote effective working relations among the members and staff.

Many preparations are needed as a meeting is planned:

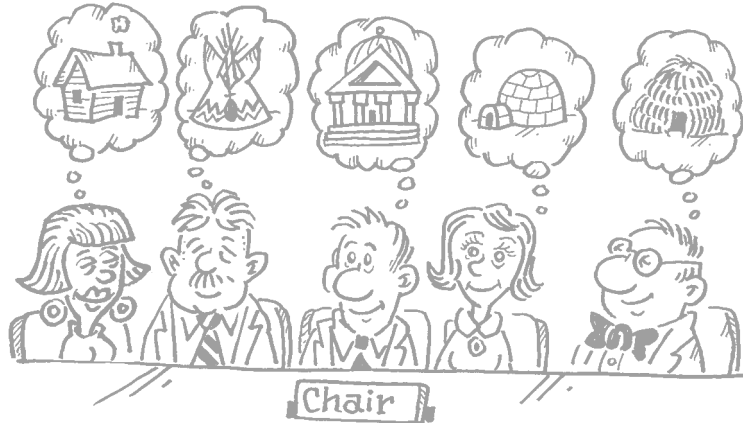
- Requests should be made in writing for every presentation to the committee. These requests should clearly indicate what the committee would like to know and the context for the information being sought, as well as the time that will be allotted for this purpose.
- Committee members should be sent reading materials for the meeting far enough in advance that they can be well prepared.
- The chair should be fully conversant with the meeting agenda and overall work plan.

Effective chairs have developed many ideas for managing meetings successfully:

- Be clear that all members are expected to be present for the entire meeting.
- Make sure that each speaker is aware of the time constraints on his or her presentation. Be strict in pushing along speakers who are taking too much time.
- Watch for members who are holding back their opinions and draw them into the meeting.
- Be quick to bring straying discussions back to the focus of the meeting.
- At the end of the meeting, note what was accomplished, what remains to be done, and what subsequent actions are to be taken by the committee members and staff.

Principal Architect and Integrator of the Committee's Report

The chair directs a creative effort that starts with the development of a report's architecture and progresses through information gathering, information analysis, and committee deliberations, resulting in the conclusions and recommendations of a final report.



Discussions by the committee must get underway early with respect to the structure of a report. It is the chair's responsibility to spearhead such discussions with the preparation of a "strawman" or a draft working outline of the report, typically before, during, or immediately after the first committee meeting.

Thinking about report dissemination and outreach also should begin at the outset of the study, concurrent with the committee's discussions on the structure of the report. Starting as early as the first meeting, the chair and staff should lead a discussion with the committee about the various audiences to whom the report should be disseminated.

The chair, working with the study director, makes team or individual work assignments—including writing tasks—both when the initial report is being written and when drafts are being revised. To ensure efficiency, approximate page limits for each contribution should be agreed to before writing assignments are begun. For the same reason, it is often useful to request a draft outline from a committee member before he or she invests the time required to produce the draft text.



Developing the Study Report

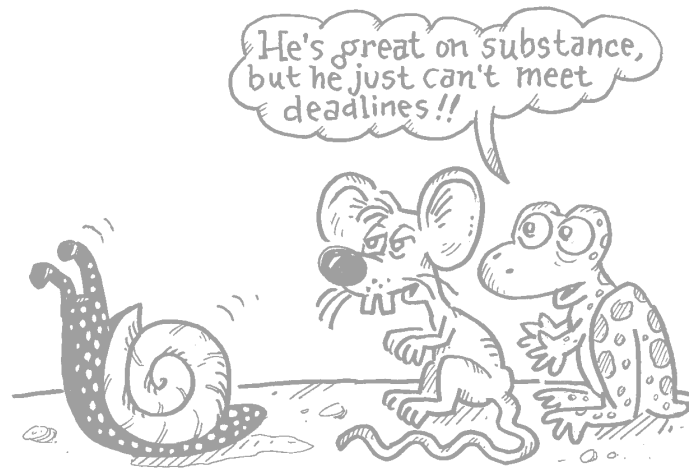
Creating, writing, and revising the committee's report is the most challenging and difficult part of a study — and is a source of frustration most often cited by volunteers. Snags during report development are among the most common causes of project delays.

Problems in report writing are often symptomatic of other underlying problems, and their early detection by the chair or staff can prevent more serious difficulties later. It is therefore important to have a clearly defined approach to report development and a set of milestones against which progress can be gauged and problems noted and corrected.

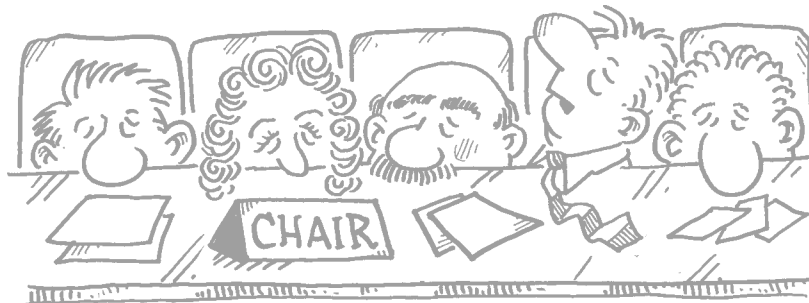
Some key principles include:

- Get early agreement by the committee to the report development process. This usually can be accomplished as part of the committee's discussions and agreement on the project's work plan.
- Prepare a preliminary outline but don't rush the writing of text until the committee knows generally what it wants to say.
- Expand the preliminary outline of the report to flesh out the committee's messages, but still without writing large blocks of text.
- Develop a report concept to highlight what each chapter of the report will cover, show how the chapters relate to each other, and demonstrate how the report will tell its "story."
- Use the report concept as a vehicle for making non-redundant writing assignments to committee members and staff.
- Develop the first draft of the report as progress is made in the data and information collection phase of the project.
- Refine the first draft and, in concert with the committee's deliberations, develop the document that is to be sent to external review.
- Ensure that the review draft is complete in all respects and has the committee's concurrence.
- Ensure that if any written dissents (or minority opinions or positions) are to be carried forward into the published report, they are prepared before the report enters review.
- Insist that the report meets institutional standards for clarity, style, and format. With minor editorial revisions and preparation of final figures, the report should be essentially ready for publication upon entering review.
- Remember that the most critical factor in completing a report review efficiently is generating a review draft that is of high quality in both substance and form.

As the development of a report progresses, the chair should review the drafts and ensure that the report as a whole evolves as a consistent, well-reasoned, and coherent document. If certain committee members are not contributing or lagging in the completion of their assignments, the chair should expect to send e-mails and make phone calls to remind these members of missed writing deadlines.



Whether the chair should draft major sections of the report or assess, revise, and integrate drafts prepared by others depends on factors specific to the project. If the chair is the initial drafter of large sections of the report, he or she may have less time to act as architect and integrator of the entire report. On a study with sharp differences of view, the chair may reserve the right to compose a "neutral version" of sections, or a version that incorporates the arguments for the opposing sides, rather than writing initial drafts. On the other hand, if a chair brings special expertise to particular topics, she or he may be the best choice as the initial writer on those topics. **Most of all, by the example that is set, the chair determines the work ethic for the committee: To be an effective leader he or she must be seen by the rest of the committee to be committing as much, if not more, time and effort as any other member.**



Toward Excellence in Reports

Reports of the institution are the principal enduring products of studies. The quality of a report is the single most important indicator of a successful project.

Some key principles for achieving a high-quality report—particularly reports that carry any finding, conclusion, advice, or recommendation of the committee—include the following:

- The report must respond to the statement of task in its entirety.
- The report is a work of scholarship and scientific inquiry. Its development should be guided by the usual standards for scientific, scholarly writing.
- The report's tone and substance should be objective and free from prejudice and self-interest.
- The findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the committee should flow logically from the data and information on which the report relies and from clear and coherent arguments presented in the report.
- Sources of information and data must be cited through footnotes and lists of references. Selection of sources should be based on their quality and authoritativeness.
- The report should distinguish the committee's evaluations and judgments from the work of others.
- Judgments of the committee are appropriate but should be identified as such. The rationale for the judgments should be explicit.
- The expertise and authority of the committee members should be demonstrated through analysis and reasoning rather than being presumed as sufficient ground for findings, conclusions, or recommendations.
- Uncertainties in the evidence, in the lines of reasoning employed, or in the committee's judgments should be explicitly identified and addressed.
- Consensus on findings, conclusions, and recommendations is a highly desirable attribute of reports. However, if reaching consensus would skew an important majority position of the committee, it is better to expose the lack of consensus than to obscure it completely through compromise.
- In the event of failure to reach consensus, it is important to clearly identify and bound the areas about which disagreements still remain on the committee. If properly explained, a minority opinion or position could help direct attention to issues or areas where additional knowledge is especially needed.
- Most reports have several audiences. The report (or parts of the report) must be cast to communicate its message to all interested audiences. Sometimes, it may be of value to prepare—for wider public dissemination—a second, shorter version of a report that is much more expressive of its findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
- Clarity and readability of the report are very important. They come in part from good organization of the report, from attention to all levels of the report—chapter, section, paragraph—and from clear writing.

Adviser to the Study Director

The chair and the study director are a management team, and they complement each other's roles. This partnership is crucial to the success of a study. The study director works with the chair to design the meetings of the committee, prepare background materials for the committee, write or edit portions of the report, and stay in regular contact with all members of the committee. The study director also has the primary responsibility for monitoring the committee's progress relative to the study plan, tracking the project's financial status against a time-phased budget keyed to the plan, ensuring that the statement of task is being followed, and taking actions needed to keep the project on course. The chair serves as the study director's adviser and guides his or her actions. As partners in managing the study, they identify problems, agree on strategies to resolve them, and team up to keep the committee moving on schedule.

Prior to the first committee meeting, the chair should meet with the study director to review the statement of task in detail and design a tentative project work plan and meeting agenda that will be presented at the beginning of the first meeting for the committee to review.

At and between all committee meetings and events, the chair and study director should work in concert to manage committee activities effectively and guide the study process to a successful conclusion, with close attention to schedule and resource constraints.

The chair needs to work with staff and support them in their interaction with committee members. During the report review process, it is the responsibility of the chair and staff to ensure that each committee member has the opportunity to examine and concur with responses to reviewers' comments and to sign-off on the revised report before it is released to the sponsor and to the public. The chair should also work with the study director and committee to develop plans for the effective dissemination of the committee's report, and the engagement of the committee in the process.

The chair must understand what physical resources (staff personnel, number of meetings, consulting, and so forth) can be provided to the committee within the overall resources available to the project. If unforeseen circumstances lead the committee to revise the statement of task (i.e., its charge) or undertake work that would require expanding the schedule or budget, the chair should ensure that all options have been reasonably assessed and that the committee has provided the study director with a convincing rationale to present to the institution's leadership and the study's sponsor.

Responding to Report Review

Report review is the last opportunity a committee has to ensure that its report is technically sound, clear, and objective. It also is the process by which the imprimatur of the institution is placed on the committee's work.

Some key principles include:

- The review process centers on the responses a committee prepares in the process of revising its draft report based on the comments received through an independent review.
- The audience for comments made in response to review is the report review coordinator along with a monitor appointed in some instances by the institution's Report Review Committee. They will recommend whether or not the committee's responses are adequate to warrant public release of the report.
- Report review is an integral part of the committee's deliberative process. A report is not finished until the review process is completed.
- Experience shows that review almost always strengthens a report substantially.
- It is important for the chair to ensure that every review comment is mined for its maximum value and that the committee is thorough and thoughtful in preparing its response to review. Even seemingly minor review comments can have important implications for the content and structure of the report.
- Report review does not have to be a drawn-out or difficult experience. If a draft report is sound going into review and if the review comments are responded to promptly and thoroughly, the review process can be expeditious.

In the unlikely event that the chair experiences problems in working with the study director or other staff, this quickly should be brought to the attention of the unit head (usually the board or division director and on occasion the Executive Director of the commission or major unit). As the study nears completion, other support services within the National Academies will enter the process to help design a release plan, prepare the report for publication, and handle publicity around the release.

Spokesperson for the Committee

The chair is the chief spokesperson for the committee and its report.

The chair should take advantage of the extensive capabilities available within the institution to assist in planning and carrying out all dissemination and outreach activities.

The chair, working in concert with the committee and staff, should ensure that a dissemination plan is in place by the time the report is completed.

Once the committee's report is released, the chair often will be asked to represent the perspective of the committee through such dissemination activities as briefings, press conferences, preparation of "op-ed" articles, or the provision of congressional testimony. Selected committee members may also be recruited to participate in such activities.

During the course of a study, the chair may prefer to delegate some of the roles described above, specifically assigning certain tasks to staff and other committee members. But the chair remains the principal intellectual leader for the committee throughout the project, and he or she must take the ultimate responsibility for making sure that a high-quality report is produced in a timely manner. The full resources of the National Academies will be made available to help chairs in this task, but it is critical to communicate concerns before a major problem develops.



Report Dissemination and Impact

Most studies are carried out for the purpose of having some impact on public policy. Dissemination is essential to this purpose as was recognized in the original charter to the National Academy of Sciences: "...the Academy shall, whenever called upon by any department of the Government, investigate, examine, experiment, and report upon any subject of science and art."

Some key principles include:

- Every report has one or more audiences and should be disseminated. Dissemination planning should start well in advance of a report's release.
- Dissemination requires cooperation among the chair, members of the committee, the project staff, and the staffs of the Office of News and Public Information (ONPI), the Office of Congressional and Government Affairs (OCGA), and the National Academy Press (NAP). The chair and staff together generally represent the committee in working with ONPI, OCGA, and NAP and preparing a dissemination plan.
- The dissemination plan should reflect an agreed-upon sequence of activities and events that can include press conferences, public presentations, congressional testimony, and the preparation of press releases, report summaries, and op-ed articles. The media relations strategy should be coordinated through ONPI and the congressional relations strategy, if needed, through OCGA. The plan should be shared with the committee.
- Dissemination events requiring the participation of the chair and members of the committee should be rehearsed.
- Dissemination activities should be followed up by the staff, committee members, and institution's leadership, as appropriate, to ascertain the impacts of a report over both short-term and long-term periods. "What difference did the report make?" is a strategically important question for the institution to explore because the answers could have significant leverage in its future activities and outreach.

Lessons from **Experiences of Past Chairs**

“The success of a committee depends a great deal on how well it is put together in the beginning, even before the committee has its first meeting. And if the chair can be brought into that process at any stage, it’s a very good thing.”

—Guy Stever

“Every chair should consider writing a brief letter to committee members outlining his or her view of the charge, providing some context-setting statements, and offering some guidance (both “do’s and don’ts”) to prepare for the first meeting and think about the committee’s unique role—i.e., about what it is going to do that no one else had done before.” —Gordon Orians

“Staff contribution is often very large. They add a great deal to the definition and expression of ideas. They are very much a part of the team.”

—Gilbert White

“The first meeting is to, first of all, get the committee members to know each other and their backgrounds so that one can understand the basis from which the members move into discussion. Sponsors should be invited to set the context for the study and elaborate on their sense of the charge.” —Marye Anne Fox

“Write the conclusions and recommendations and then have the chapters come in parallel. Formulating conclusions and recommendations means you have gone through the intellectual rigor of discussion, debate, and deliberations and come to consensus in terms of which direction the committee wants to go.” —Marye Anne Fox

“Consensus may mean that there are different points of view. Very often the differences relate to value systems rather than to scientific fact or relationships. These can be recognized and stated in a way that all members recognize as fair and balanced. It’s very important for the chair and committee to recognize that it can achieve consensus as to what the issues are and what the different views on those issues are without necessarily coming to complete agreement.” —Gilbert White

“Every review process I’ve seen has dramatically improved the reports.”
—Gordon Orians

“New chairs ought to know that it can be fun and that it is extraordinarily educational even as it is challenging. There are very positive rewards and good feelings afterwards.”
—Gordon Orians

Useful References

The National Academies: A Unique National Resource, 1998

Getting To Know the Committee Process, 1998

Guidelines for the Review of Reports, 1997

Spreading the Word: A Guide for Disseminating the Work of the National Academies, 1995

Cartoons by Carlton Stoiber.

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