

LWVN Observer Handbook

League observers are much like reporters. Often called the “eyes and ears” of the League, observers serve a vital function: giving membership an unbiased report of what occurs at municipal meetings. Observer notes and experience are essential to the Newton league’s being able to take intelligent and timely action.

Why observe?

Being an observer is fun—you learn who the players are, get the information first, and can share it with other members who are interested in that board or commission’s work. It is also the best way to become knowledgeable about local government and how it works. It’s also a great stepping-stone to elected or appointed office!

Members who regularly attend a local committee’s meetings will learn what lobbying techniques are effective, who is approachable, and what timing is best for League action.

Also:

- Observers give the League warning of upcoming issues.
- Observing trains future leaders (league leaders as well as political leaders!).
- Observers increase the League’s visibility.
- Observing can help in networking with other groups.

Observer Conduct

Unbiased reporting, strong attention skills—and a poker face—are essential for good observing.

Before the meeting:

- Know what issues the relevant League committee is following: for instance, the League Education committee for the School board.
- Be familiar with the minutes of past meetings you haven’t attended (many are now posted on the city’s website)
- Understand the function and responsibilities of the board/agency you’re observing.

- Get an agenda (also usually posted), or request one from the committee chair/staff person.
- Know the names of the board/committee members.
- Call ahead to request copies of print documents that the members will be discussing.
- Bone up on the applicable local, state and national positions.
- Know the basics of the state's Open Meeting Law (on our website www.lwvnewton.org).

At the meeting:

- Arrive promptly.
- Identify yourself to the chair or staff member responsible for the meeting.
- Take notes. Observe. Do not indicate an opinion.
- You may ask questions for clarification or information, but keep it impartial.
- You may state League positions and procedures generally, if asked. If you don't know them, get back to the questioner afterward.
- You **may not** speak for the League unless authorized to do so by the Board. If you are, you will have a written statement. Give a copy to the board and to the media, if present.

After the meeting:

- Write up your observer notes (ASAP). Send in email format to the appropriate League committee chair. Recommend action.
- You may be asked to present information about your observations either in a League Newsletter article or at a League meeting.

About reporting:

Formal Reports:

- Include the name of the committee/board, date, time and names of officials present and absent
- Describe the main actions, particularly those items pertinent to League program

- Comment (in your report only) on the conduct of the meeting, standards used to reach decisions
- Include pertinent personal observations on attitude of participants, both the members of the board or agency and those in the audience.
- Remember to include your name!
- Attach the agenda.

Informal: If the board/agency you are observing is acting according to established procedures and is reasonably covered in newspapers, there may be no need for a formal report. You can send a quick email saying you attended, what business, if any, was conducted, and any information vital to the pertinent League committee.

BUT: If the League has special concerns or an observer finds conduct questionable, a formal report should be done.