

How to speak like a Capitol insider

Political jargon can make state politics tough to navigate
Our handy list helps you understand what they're talking about



Capitol Alert

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To those unaccustomed to the inside baseball of policymaking, politicians can sometimes seem like they speak a different language. But fear not! With lawmakers returning from a summer recess Monday, this legislative dictionary will help you decipher how California Capitol creatures conduct business.

Gut and amend: To hollow out an existing bill and fill it with new language. A good way to sneak in new (or old, previously defeated) bills late in a session.

Hijack: To insert an existing policy proposal into a new bill. For example, transplanting a Republican idea into Democratic legislation and claiming ownership.

Interim study: A common tactic to kill bills without the messiness of a vote. Rather than vote an idea down, legislators decide to study it more – after the session ends.

Suspense file: Holding place for legislation that will cost more than a certain amount of money. Many bills never make it off the Appropriations Committee suspense file. Another useful way to let a bill quietly die.

Roll (verb): If you get a bill out of committee whose chair opposes it, you have “rolled” the chair. A good way to get kicked off a committee.

Lay off: To avoid voting on a controversial bill. Effectively the same as a no vote, for purposes of passing a bill, but can look better politically. Synonym for “take a walk.” A common tactic of **mods**.

Stakeholder: Anyone who wants something. Always seem to be meeting somewhere about something. Generally, synonym for “interest group.”

Third house: Sacramento’s lobbying corps, so named because some see them – and the special interests they’re paid to represent – as a coequal third branch of the Legislature.

Sponsor: An outside entity that writes a bill and then gets a lawmaker, or bill author, to carry the bill. Not always forthright about its role.

Across the desk: When a bill or amendment is officially introduced. Common to hear staffers or **third house** denizens ask, “Is that across the desk yet?”

Work the floor: When a legislator moves from desk to desk in the Assembly or Senate to talk to colleagues and build support.

May revision (or the ungrammatical “May revise”): Common term for governor’s May budget proposal. Unlike the January proposal, it reflects new tax revenue and therefore offers the starting point for serious budget talks.

Blue pencil: The governor’s line-item budget veto. Dreaded by lawmakers hoping to protect their spending priorities.

Jungle primary: Derisive nickname for the top-two primaries, in which top two vote-getters advance to general election regardless of party. As in the jungle, it leads to parties eating their own.

District bill: Legislation addressing a specific local issue of the legislator carrying the bill.

Trailer bill: Legislation that implements a specific part of the budget after the budget itself has passed. A useful way to change policy via the budget process.

Two-year bill: A bill that stalls in the first year of session and must wait another year.

Spot bill: A placeholder bill that remains devoid of detail until a lawmaker decides what to do with it.

Free ride: To run for a different office when your current gig is not up for re-election. Even if you lose, you get to keep your current job.

Speakerize: When the Assembly speaker intervenes on a tough bill, either to kill it or to ensure it advances, often to placate campaign donors.

Per diem session: Typically held on Fridays before a holiday weekend, these often-brief confabs fulfill the requirement to meet every three days, which allows legislators to keep their tax-free, \$168-a-day “per diem” stipend.

Poison pill: An amendment added to a bill so it will become indefensible and die.

On call: When the voting roll remains open after an initial count falls short of the needed number for passage, the bill is on call. The author will need to **work the floor** to get enough votes.

Doghouse: The Legislature’s smallest office, located on the sixth floor and generally assigned to an Assembly member who has angered leadership.

Urgency clause: A designation that makes a bill take effect immediately after it is signed instead of the following Jan. 1. Requires a two-thirds vote.

Legislative advocate: Often, though not always, a euphemism for a lobbyist.

Robust: The only type of debate that occurs in the Legislature.

Job killer: Something the California Chamber of Commerce, Republicans and moderate Democrats do not like. Typically affixed to priorities of organized labor, environmentalists and other Democratic allies.

Mod: A moderate Democrat. Friend to business, irritant to Democratic leadership. Not to be confused with 1960s subculture.

Juice committee: Committee that oversees wealthy or politically potent industries. Seen as a good source of campaign money.

Superstaffer: An experienced and therefore extra-effective staff member. More important in the era of term limits, when they outlast elected officials and can arguably have more influence than newbie legislators.

“I wasn’t going to speak today”: The most common sentence lawmakers say before they begin to talk. *Jeremy B. White: 916-326-5543, @CapitolAlert*

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