Each committee receives many bill referrals over the course of a Congress – far more than the panel is capable of pursuing in any detail. The committee’s chair has the chief agenda-setting authority for the committee; in essence, the chair identifies the bills or issues on which the committee will try to formally act through hearings and/or a markup.

The first formal committee action on a bill or issue might be a hearing, which provides a forum at which committee members and the public can hear about the strengths and weaknesses of a proposal from selected parties – like key executive branch agencies, relevant industries, and groups representing interested citizens. Hearings are also a way to spotlight legislation to colleagues, the public, and the press. At the hearing, invited witnesses provide short oral remarks to the assembled committee, but each witness also submits a longer written version of his or her feedback on the bill. After witnesses’ oral statements, members of the committee take turns asking questions of the witnesses.

While these hearings provide the formal public setting at which feedback is solicited on the policy proposal, committee members and staff engage in additional assessment of the approach through informal briefings and other mechanisms. Also note that a hearing is not required from a procedural standpoint for a bill to receive further action from the committee.

A committee markup is the key formal step a committee ultimately takes for the bill to advance to the floor. Normally, the committee chair chooses the proposal that will be placed before the committee for markup: a referred bill or a new draft text. At this meeting, which is typically open to the public, members of the committee consider possible changes to the proposal by offering and voting on amendments to it, including possibly a complete substitute for its text.

A markup concludes when the committee agrees, by majority vote, to report the bill to the chamber. Committees rarely hold a markup unless the proposal in question is expected to receive majority support on that vote. The committee may vote to report a referred bill, with recommended changes that reflect any amendments adopted during the markup. As an alternative to a referred bill, it may instead report out an original or clean bill that was basically written in the markup process itself from a draft proposal.

Most House and Senate committees also establish subcommittees – subpanels of the full committee where members can further focus on specific elements of the policy area. The extent to which subcommittees play a formal role in policymaking – for example, by holding hearings
or marking-up legislation prior to full committee consideration - varies by chamber and by committee tradition and practice. Whatever role a full committee allows its subcommittees to play, subcommittees cannot report legislation to the chamber; only full committees may do so.

Source: https://www.congress.gov/legislative-process/committee-consideration