

Running Meetings with Robert's Rules of Order

A guide for chapter meetings and convention sessions

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General Procedures

A meeting wouldn't be a meeting without some general rules of procedure and decorum. Robert's Rules, of course, have many of these. We have tried to whittle them down to what we think would be most useful for most chapter meetings and the national convention. Although the rules may seem at times to be trivial or nitpicky or downright weird, they are essentially just a way of ensuring fairness and common courtesy to all members of the meeting.

Getting to Speak

When you have something to say, you have to be *recognized by the chair*. According to Robert's Rules, this is done by standing up and *addressing the chair*. Now this may a bit too formal for many occasions and, admittedly, a few people shouting "Mr. President" every few minutes gets really annoying. So many chapters (and traditionally the national convention) have been a bit less formal and fallen back on simply **raising hands to get recognized. If the chair then calls on you, you may speak.**

As a common courtesy (and according to the Rules), you should **never seek recognition while someone else is talking**. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to get a point across while a dozen people have their hand in the air and are trying so hard to get the chair's attention that they are not paying attention to anything being said. Be polite and wait until they are finished. There are a few instances when it is acceptable to interrupt someone or speak without gaining recognition by the chair, such as when making a point of order or a point of information, but these are pretty rare.

Members who have not yet spoken about the topic at hand always have priority over those who have. According to the Rules, **each member can only speak twice on any given topic** (note: the standing rules of the national convention actually allow each person to speak only once). Additionally, the chair is obliged to try and alternate recognizing those who are for and against the motion being discussed. For example, if someone just spoke against a motion the chair would say something like "Is there anyone who wishes to speak in favor of the motion?" and then recognize someone.

Speaking

After you've been recognized, you may then speak. It's best to start by addressing the chair with their title, but again this may be a bit formal for chapter meetings. **Always address your comments to the chair, even if they involve another member.** This keeps debate from becoming personal. **When referring to other members, use their title and not their name** (i.e., "Brother Smith", or "The delegate from Andronicus.") Using someone's first name implies a level of friendship that may not be appropriate when some of the members present may not know each other very well.

When speaking, you may speak only on the merits of the topic immediately at hand. Anything off the topic is *out of order*, and you can be made to stop talking if someone points it out.

You may speak only a certain amount of time on any given topic. Robert's Rules allows for 10 minutes, the standing rules of convention allow for 2 minutes. Your chapter should have standing rules regarding both how long and how many times members get to talk on any one topic, unless you want to use Robert's standards.

Situations

This is a quick guide listing common situations you may find yourself in and how to deal with them.

- **I want to change the wording of the motion we are discussing.**
 - Move to *amend* the motion and state your change specifically.
 - You must be recognized by the chair.
 - Requires a second.
 - Is debatable.
 - Requires a simple majority to pass.

- **I want to end the discussion and have the vote.**
 - Move to the *previous question*. Remember, when you are voting on the previous question you are voting only on whether or not to end discussion on the motion, not on the motion itself.
 - You must be recognized by the chair.
 - Requires a second.
 - Is not debatable.
 - Requires a 2/3 majority to pass.

- **I think discussion should continue, but I don't want it to go on all day.**
 - Move to *limit debate*, and state specifically how you want to limit it.
 - You must be recognized by the chair.
 - Requires a second.
 - Is not debatable.
 - Requires a 2/3 majority to pass.

- **I want the chair to enforce rules about time limits and the number of times people are allowed to speak.**
 - Make a *point of order* and then point out the rules being violated. The chair is then obliged to enforce the rules.
 - Can be made at any time, even when someone is speaking.

- **The chair has been enforcing rules about time limits and the number of times people are allowed to speak, but I really think we need to discuss this more.**
 - Move to *extend debate* and state specifically how you want to extend it.
 - You must be recognized by the chair.
 - Requires a second.
 - Is not debatable.
 - Requires a 2/3 majority to pass.

- **This motion needs more attention/investigation/discussion than we can give it today.**
 - Move to *refer* the motion to committee, then give the specifics of the committee and when and how you want them to report on the matter.
 - You must be recognized by the chair.
 - Requires a second.
 - Is debatable.
 - Requires a simple majority to pass.

- **I need a bathroom break.**
 - Move to *recess* and state for how long or give a time you want to reconvene.
 - You must be recognized by the chair.
 - Requires a second.
 - Is not debatable.
 - Requires a simple majority to pass.

- **I have no idea what is going on.**
 - Make a *parliamentary inquiry*, and ask the chair to explain what is going on.
 - Can be made at any time, as long as no one is speaking.

- **I want to motion to do something, but I'm not sure how to do it or if it is in order right now.**
 - Make a *parliamentary inquiry* and explain what you want to do to the chair, who should then tell you the proper manner in which to do it.
 - Can be made at any time, as long as no one is speaking.
 - After the chair explains, you do not have the right to immediately make the motion. You must wait until the chair recognizes you in the normal fashion.

- **I have a question for the person who is speaking.**
 - Don't interrupt, it's not nice. Technically, Robert's Rules allows for you make a *point of information* and interrupt a speaker by saying, "Will the speaker yield to a question?" The speaker can then choose to let you ask the question or not. But since both the question and the answer will count towards to speaker's time limit, it is very impolite to use this in situations with extremely strict time limits (like at the national convention). In this case, it is best to wait until the speaker is done and then address the chair with your point of inquiry, who then has the right to decide whether or not to allow it.

- **I have a question for the maker of the motion or someone who has already spoken.**
 - Make a *point of information*, and ask the chair if they will allow a question to so-and-so. If the chair allows it, direct your question through the chair to the person. Never address the person directly.
 - Can be made at any time, as long as no one is speaking.
 - The chair has the right to decide whether or not to allow the question.

- **I made a motion and now I think it's dumb.**
 - Ask *permission to withdraw* the motion.
 - Can be made at any time, though it is polite to wait until someone is done speaking.
 - The chair asks if there are any objections to the motion being withdrawn.
 - If no one objects, the motion is immediately withdrawn.
 - If there is an objection, the request to withdraw becomes a motion which must be seconded, is not debatable, and requires a simple majority to pass.

Terms

Amend

To change the wording of a motion.

Assembly

The people or delegates in a meeting.

Chair, The

The presiding officer of a meeting, whether it is the president or a committee head, etc., always referred to by their title (Madam or Mr. President, Madam or Mr. Chair, etc). The chair essentially runs the meeting by recognizing who gets to speak when.

Motion

The motion is the basic tool for getting things done, from proposing a new rule to changing the wording of something being considered to requesting a bathroom break. To make a motion, you simply use the phrase “I move that...” and state what you want.

Main Motions are any generally any sort of proposals that need to be discussed and voted upon, such as adopting a new rule, raising dues, amending the constitution or by-laws, etc.

Secondary Motions occur during discussion of main motions, and are generally about amending the main motion.

Privileged Motions can be made at any time. The most common is to motion for a recess, i.e. a bathroom break.

Second

Before a motion can be discussed, it must be seconded. This just means that someone other than the person who made the motion also thinks it should be discussed, which they indicate by saying “**Second!**” after a motion is made. Seconding a motion doesn’t necessarily mean you support it—it just means that you think it should be discussed by the assembly. If someone makes a motion and no one seconds it, it dies and cannot be discussed.

Order

The proper manner for doing things, as established by the rules. Certain things can happen only at certain times, otherwise they are *out of order* and are invalidated.

Common Motions

Motion to the Previous Question, or “Call to Question”

The motion to the previous question is actually a motion to stop debate and proceed to a vote. **The call to question does not automatically force a vote on the main motion unless it is passed.** It's a bit confusing, but it is best to envision it that when someone moves to the previous question they are moving to stop discussion. Since this would effectively cut off anyone who still has something to say, a motion to the previous question requires a 2/3 majority to pass. This means 2/3 of the members have to agree to stop discussion. If the motion to previous question does not pass, discussion remains open. If it passes, discussion is stopped, the chair restates the main motion, and the assembly proceeds immediately to vote on it. A motion to previous question is required to stop debate even on amendments or amendments to amendments. However, the chair may opt to skip directly to a vote at any point when it appears no one has any more discussion on a particular topic. You must be recognized by the chair in the normal fashion to motion to the previous question.

Motion to Amend

The motion to amend is used to change the wording of a motion. Common methods of amending motions are by striking out words, substituting words, or adding words. You can also strike, substitute, or add entire phrases or paragraphs to a motion should the need arise. In order to make a motion to amend, you must first be recognized by the chair in the normal fashion. If your motion to amend is seconded, the assembly proceeds immediately to debate it. During this period, members may only talk about the merits of the amendment, and not of the main motion itself. Debate on a motion to amend is ended when a motion to the *previous question* has been successfully passed. The chair then restates the motion to amend, and the assembly proceeds directly to a vote on the amendment. A motion to amend must be passed by a simple majority.

Motion to Limit or Extend Debate

A motion to *limit* debate can be used to set up time limits for speakers, set a time limit for discussion for the topic, limit the number of times people are allowed to speak, or otherwise reduce the amount of time allowed for discussion from the default rules. A motion to *extend* debate can be used to increase time limits, the number of times people can speak, or otherwise increase the allowable discussion time from the default rules. In order to make a motion to limit or extend debate, you must be recognized by the chair in the normal fashion. You must then state specifically how you wish to limit or extend debate. If someone seconds, then the assembly immediately proceeds to a vote. A motion to limit or extend debate must have a 2/3 majority to pass.

Motion to Refer to Committee

This is pretty self-explanatory. This takes the topic you are discussing and dumps it in the hands of a committee to further discuss or resolve. You must be very specific when making this motion, stating exactly which committee you are referring it to, to what extent they should resolve the issue, and when they should report on their findings. Examples: “I move that the social committee select two of these locations for us to vote on at the next meeting,” or “I move that this be referred to a new committee consisting of one person from each

major, which will give a report and recommendation two weeks from now.” You must be recognized by the chair in the normal fashion to make a motion to refer to a committee and it must be seconded. It is then debatable until someone successfully motions to previous question.

Motion to Recess

The motion to recess is used to ask for a short break. When motioning to recess, you should specify for how long you want to recess, such as “I motion for a ten minute recess,” or “I motion to recess until 3:00 PM.” In order to make this motion, you must be recognized by the chair in the normal fashion. The motion to recess is immediately put to a vote if someone seconds it, and it requires a simple majority to pass.

Point of Order

This is used to point out when something is against the rules, which can be anything from someone talking too long to a vote being done improperly. If something is out of order, all you have to do is get the chair’s attention by saying “Point of Order”, and then describe how the rules are being broken. Then the chair has to enforce the rule you pointed out.

Point of Information

There are two basic types of this. The first is when you want to ask a question of the maker of a motion or someone who has already spoken. To do this, just wait until no one else is speaking and then get the chair’s attention by saying “Point of Information” and then ask for permission to ask a question. The chair can then decide whether or not to allow you to ask the question. The second type of point of information is the *parliamentary inquiry*. You can make one of these when you are unsure of how to properly do something, or are confused as to what is going on and want some clarification. Again, when no one is speaking, you can get the chair’s attention by saying “Point of Information,” say you have a *parliamentary inquiry*, and then ask the chair your question. When you make a parliamentary inquiry, the chair does *not* have the right to decide whether or not to allow you to ask the question—he has to answer it.

Permission to Withdraw a Motion

You can do this if you’ve changed your mind about a motion you’ve made, and want to unmake it. Unfortunately, you can’t do this whenever you want. You can only do it after you’ve been called on by the chair, as if you were wanting to speak on the motion. When the chair calls on you, you may ask for permission to withdraw your motion. The chair will then ask if there are any objections—if there aren’t, then you get to withdraw the motion. But if someone doesn’t want you to withdraw it, then your request to withdraw becomes an actual motion that has to be seconded and voted on.

Voting

This section describes the different types of votes and some general rules about voting.

Voice Vote

The most common type of voting, this is when the chair says “**Those in favor of the motion, say aye.**” All members in support of the motion call out “aye”. Next, the chair says “Those opposed, say no” after which opponents call out “no”. If there is a clear majority, the chair announces the result. If there is not a clear majority, a member may call for the vote to be retaken by calling out “**division!**”

Hand Vote

A hand vote works the same as a voice vote, where the chair first calls for those in favor to raise their hands. Without counting, they then call for those opposed to raise their hands. If a majority is seen, the chair will announce the result. Again, a member may call “**division**” if they believe there was not a clear majority. In addition, a member may **ask that the vote be counted**. The chair then retakes the vote in the same way but counts the votes for and against the motion.

Counted Vote

This is simply the counted version of the hand vote. Some groups may choose to skip the uncounted hand vote since it really does little more than the voice vote.

Roll Call Vote

It is not uncommon to see the roll call vote happen at convention, but it typically does not happen during chapter meetings. If you still want to know what it is, read on. A roll call vote is literally what you think it would be. The chair reads the names of each voting member, and after hearing their name, the member calls out yes (or aye) or no. You can see why this may be a bit intense for chapter meetings, where votes may be more personal than convention voting, where one person’s vote represents a group of people.

Secret Ballot

This is the one type of vote where each member’s vote choice is not known to everyone else. This is used for elections, but may also be used for regular motions, especially more sensitive topics. This is also the most paper-traceable vote and the final destination if division is repeatedly called for. A ballot vote may be called for when the original motion is initially about to be voted upon.

Additional notes on voting

- A member may change their vote at **any point during the voting process** before the final result is recorded. This means, if a voice vote is made but division is called and voting moves to a counted hand vote, any member may change their vote.
- “Unanimous consent” instead of voting: This allows a simple decision to be made by the group without the formality of motioning and voting. An example of when this is useful may be that a speaker has reached the time limit on a topic but the membership still wants to hear them finish. The chair may ask “**Is there any objection** to the member’s time being extended by two minutes?” After pausing, if no member calls out “**I object**” the chair may say “**I hear no objection**, so the member’s time is extended by two minutes.”
- Any member whose right to vote has not been taken away by disciplinary matters has the right to vote, whether or not they have paid their dues. However, a group’s constitution and by-laws may take away a member’s right to vote if they are delinquent in their dues. Remember, any time Robert’s Rules may conflict with an organization’s Constitution and By-Laws, the group must follow the C&BL.
- A **majority vote** is defined as *more than half of the votes cast*, excluding abstentions, at a regular meeting with a quorum present. This vote is typically used for elections or adopting a motion.
- A **two-thirds vote** is defined as *at least two-thirds of the votes cast*, excluding abstentions, at a regular meeting with a quorum present. This vote is most commonly used for suspension of the rules, or to close, limit, or extend debate.
- The final kind of voting you may experience is the **mail vote**. This is used when a vote of the entire membership is needed when convention is not in session, most commonly to vote to **admit a new or reactivated chapter**. Each active chapter and alumni association in good standing is mailed a ballot by certified mail, and they have 30 days in which to respond. It is important for each member organization to promptly reply because a majority of possible votes must be received in the affirmative in order for the motion to pass.

Robert's Rules Example

This document will walk you through a situation at a meeting in which Robert's Rules is used to make, amend, and vote on a motion. This example should be read after understand definitions of basic Robert's Rules terms.

- 1) **Motion:** I move that all meetings be limited to one hour. Emily is narcoleptic and cannot be of use longer than an hour
 - a) **Point of information:** All meetings or just chapter meetings? [*Note: the point of information may be called out at any time, without gaining the floor.*]
Response: The motion says says *all*.
Chair calls on next person
 - i) **Friendly amendment:** I would like to make a friendly amendment to reword the motion to read "I move that all *chapter* meetings be limited to one hour."
This is an opportunity for the chair to ask for **unanimous consent** rather than having a vote.
Chair asks if there are any objections. If there are no objections the chair can declare the amendment accepted.
However, somebody objects.
(1) Now it is open to debate.
Discussion ensues.
 - (a) A member calls to **move to previous question** – instantly calls for a vote on the amendment.
Chair states the question: "I move that the motion be changed to read, 'I move that all *chapter* meetings be limited to one hour.'" A voice vote is taken.
The motion passes unanimously.
We now move back to the original motion, with the new wording.
 - b) Someone decides to question why we have chapter meetings.
Someone says (interrupting them) "**point of order**, his statement does not apply to the question at hand." This ends the debate on why we have chapter meetings, since it is an entirely different topic for discussion.
 - c) Motion is made to to **lay it on the table**, and it must be seconded. This would put off the discussion until a future meeting. It is not debatable, so a vote is taken immediately.
Did not pass
 - d) Motion is made to **move to committee** to discuss Emily's medical history.
A discussion ensues on whether it needs to be sent to committee?
 - i) Call to question.
Chair states, A motion has been made to move to committee.
Vote
Does not pass
 - e) Back to original motion. This would be a good point for the chair to clarify that motion at hand is "I move that all chapter meetings be limited to one hour."
Discussion
Move to previous question, ends discussion
 - f) Vote on motion
Passes... (see **Voting** section)