

Robert's Rules of Order

Overview and Summary

Dr. Lawrence F. Keller
Facilitator



Prepared for the Cleveland Heights Charter Review Commission
November 2017

The Necessity

Adoption of rules is absolutely necessary for any official government body that is charged with producing a legal document. A legal document is evaluated not only on its content, but also how the document was created. If the creation does not follow the required process, the resulting document can be declared null and void. A charter review commission is definitely a legal government body and may make official recommendations. Thus, the commission at the outset needs to adopt, and follow, procedural rules. The most comprehensive set of rules for an official body is **Robert's Rules of Order**. These are usually adopted by most public bodies. **Robert's Rules of Order** need to be understood. A basic understanding of the **Rules** is the purpose of this document. The **Rules** guide the conduct of the meetings of the body. In addition, the body may need to adopt some additional rules, such as the goals of the process and any situations not covered by **Robert's Rules**. For example, for the adoption of some issues a body may want a supra-majority, such as a two-thirds vote. This can be done with a motion, either at the start of the process or at the time of considering an issue.

The Minimum

Decisions need to be documented, both in the exact wording of the decision and the vote by which it was adopted. The documentation provides proof that the body followed its rules in making decisions.

In terms of Robert's Rules, the minimum is to use motions for adoption and voting. The motion must clearly state what is being voted on. Other motions can be used during deliberations to help the group or body, as **Robert's Rules** calls it, make a decision. Ideally, the spirit of the Rules can be used, such as a member noting it may be useful to consider the subject at a later date, even if the technical language is not used. However, if an issue becomes contentious, the **Rules** may help diminish the emotions. This promotes deliberation. In sum, use the spirit of the **Rules** to promote deliberation, not to complicate or make overly formal how a body reaches important decisions.

Purpose - For Fair and Orderly Meetings & Conventions

Robert's Rules provides common rules and procedures for deliberation and debate in order to place the whole membership on the same footing and speaking the same language. The conduct of ALL business is controlled by the general will of the whole membership - the right of the deliberate majority to decide. Complementary is the right of at least a strong minority to require the majority to be deliberate - to act according to its considered judgment AFTER a full and fair "working through" of the issues involved. Robert's Rules provides for constructive and democratic meetings, to help, not hinder, the business of the assembly. Under no circumstances

should "undue strictness" be allowed to intimidate members or limit full participation.

The Origins

Henry Martyn Robert was an engineering officer in the regular Army. Without warning he was asked to preside over a public meeting being held in a church in his community and realized that he did not know how. He tried anyway and his embarrassment was supreme. This event, which may seem familiar to many readers, left him determined never to attend another meeting until he knew something of parliamentary law.

In 1874, Robert had a few months to devote to writing his book of procedure. He envisioned a book that would be based on the rules of Congress but would be general enough for any society to adopt, while still allowing the society the latitude to make up and adopt for itself any special rules of order that it may need. He wrote the book during 1874 and 1875. When the manuscript was complete, he couldn't find a publisher, so he published it himself by hiring a printer to make 4,000 copies. The book was titled **Pocket Manual of Rules of Order for Deliberative Assemblies**, and it was 176 pages long. He did find a publisher, S. C. Griggs Company of Chicago, who retitled the book **Robert's Rules of Order**. The first edition of 3,000 copies (now a rare book) sold out in four months. A second edition, somewhat expanded and revised, came out in 1876, and a third edition was published in 1893. When the Griggs publishing company went out of business in 1896, the publishing rights were taken over by Scott, Foresman & Company, who held the publishing rights for 100 years until 1996. (Official History in **Roberts Rules** and Wikipedia)

Ruling Principles

The fundamental right of deliberative assemblies requires **all questions to be thoroughly discussed** before taking action.

The assembly rules - they have the final say on everything. **Silence means consent!**

Substance is more important than rules and procedures – rules and procedures are just the means to better substance.

If a body becomes as concerned with or more concerned with rules and procedures than substance, they have displaced their purpose and lost their way forward.

Basic Actions

- Obtain the floor (the right to speak) by being the first to Raise your hand and being recognized by the Chair. Speaking while another has the floor is out of order. Must be recognized by the Chair before speaking.
- Debate cannot begin until the Chair has stated the issue or substance to be discussed which can be done by noting the specific issue on the agenda.
- Before a motion is stated by the Chair (the question) members may suggest modification of the motion; the mover can modify as he pleases, or even withdraw the motion without consent of the seconder; if mover modifies, the seconder can withdraw the second.
- The "immediately pending question" is the last question stated by the Chair. Can be a Motion/Resolution - Amendment - Motion to Postpone.
- The member moving the "immediately pending question" is entitled to preference to the floor.
- No member can speak twice to the same issue until everyone else wishing to speak has spoken to it once.
- All remarks must be directed to the body. Remarks must be courteous in language and deportment - avoid all personalities, never allude to others by name or as to motives.
- The agenda and all reports are merely recommendations. When presented to the assembly and the question is stated, debate begins and changes can occur.

There are four Basic Types of Motions:

1. **Main Motions:** The purpose of a main motion is to introduce items to the membership for their consideration. They cannot be made when any other motion is on the floor, and yield to privileged, subsidiary, and incidental motions. Issues are presented to the body by being placed on the agenda.
2. **Subsidiary Motions:** Their purpose is to change or affect how a main motion is handled, and are voted on before a main motion.
3. **Privileged Motions:** Their purpose is to bring up items that are urgent about special or important matters unrelated to pending business.
4. **Incidental Motions:** Their purpose is to provide a means of questioning procedure concerning other motions and must be considered before the other motions.

Voting on a Motion:

There are five methods used to vote by most organizations, they are:

1. **By Voice** -- The Chair asks those in favor to say, "yes", those opposed to say "no". Any member may move for an exact count.

2. **By Roll Call** -- Each member answers "yes" or "no" as his name is called. This method is used when a record of each person's vote is required or desired.
3. **By General Consent** -- When a motion is not likely to be opposed, the Chair says, "if there is no objection ..." The membership shows agreement by their silence; however, if one member says, "I object," the item must be put to a vote.
4. **By Division** -- This is a slight variation of a voice vote. It does not require a count unless the Chair so desires. Members raise their hands or stand.
5. **By Ballot** -- Members write their vote on a slip of paper, this method is used when secrecy is desired.

There are two other motions that are commonly used that relate to voting.

1. **Motion to Table** -- This motion is often used in the attempt to "kill" a motion. The option is always present, however, to "take from the table", for reconsideration by the membership.
2. **Motion to Postpone Indefinitely** -- This is often used as a means of parliamentary strategy and allows opponents of the current main motion to test their strength without an actual vote being taken. Also, debate is once again open on the main motion if the motion is defeated. A later motion to reconsider can bring the matter before the body even if this motion succeeds.

Types and Specifics of Motions

A. Privileged Motions: Motions which do not relate to the pending question but have to do with matters of such urgency or importance that, without debate, they are allowed to interrupt the consideration of anything else.

1. **Adjourn:** Terminates the meeting. "I move that we adjourn."
2. **Recess:** Permits a short intermission in a meeting. "I move that we recess for 10 minutes" or "... until 2:00" or "... until called to order by the chair."
3. **Raise a question of privilege:** Permits a request or question about a main motion relating to the rights and privileges of the assembly or any of its members to be brought up for immediate consideration because of its urgency. "I rise to a question of privilege affecting the assembly."
4. **Call for the orders of the day:** Requires that the adopted agenda or order of business be followed. "Mr. Chair, I call for the orders of the day" or "Madam President, I demand the regular order."

B. Subsidiary Motions: Motions which assist the assembly in treating or disposing of a main motion. They have the effect of hastening action upon, delaying action upon, or modifying the main motion.

1. **Lay on the table:** Lays a pending question aside *temporarily* when something more urgent has arisen. "I move to lay the question on the table" or "I move that the motion be laid on the table."
2. **Previous question:** Ends debate and orders an immediate vote. "I move the previous question" or "I move we vote immediately on the motion."
3. **Limit or extend debate:** Modifies debate by limiting or extending the number or length of speeches. "I move that debate be limited to one speech of two minutes for each member" or "I move that the speaker's time be extended three minutes."
4. **Postpone to a certain time:** Defers consideration to a definite day, meeting, or hour, or until after some particular event. "I move that the question be postponed until the next meeting" or "I move to postpone the motion until after the address by our guest speaker."
5. **Refer to a committee/sub-committee:** Gives a motion more detailed attention or permits it to be handled in privacy. "I move to refer the matter to the Program Committee."
6. **Amend:** Modifies a main motion by inserting, adding, striking, striking and inserting, striking and adding, or substituting some specific language. "I move to amend by adding the words . . ." or "by striking . . ." or "I move to substitute for the pending motion the following:"
7. **Postpone indefinitely:** Disposes of a question without bringing it to a direct vote. "I move that the motion be postponed indefinitely."

C. Main Motion: A motion which brings business before the assembly and which can be made only while no other motion is pending. "I move we have a banquet." For the Commission, placing an item on the agenda brings it before the body at the next meeting.

D. Motions that Bring a Question Again Before the Assembly: Motions which bring up a previously considered question.

1. **Reconsider:** Allows a question previously disposed of to come again before the assembly as if it had not previously been considered. The motion to reconsider can be made only by a member who voted on the prevailing side and only on the same day the original vote was taken. The motion is debatable only if the motion to be reconsidered is itself debatable. "I move to reconsider the vote on the motion relating to the annual banquet."
2. **Discharge a committee/sub-committee:** Takes a matter out of a committee's hands and places it again before the assembly. "I move that the committee considering what band to hire for the benefit dance be discharged."
3. **Rescind a motion previously adopted:** Voids a motion previously passed. "I move to rescind the motion passed at the last meeting relating to where we will go on the ski trip."

4. **Take from the table:** Allows the assembly to resume consideration of a motion previously laid on the table. "I move to take from the table the motion relating to presenting plaques to graduating members."

E. Incidental Motions: Motions which deal with questions of procedure and arise out of another pending motion or item of business. With the exception of the motion to appeal from the ruling of the chair, they are not debatable.

1. **Point of information:** Inquires as to the facts affecting the business at hand and is directed to the chair or, through the chair, to a member. "I rise to a point of information" or "A point of information, please."
2. **Parliamentary inquiry:** Requests the chair's opinion-not a ruling-on a matter of parliamentary procedure as it relates to the business at hand. "I rise to a parliamentary inquiry" or "A parliamentary inquiry, please."
3. **Division of the assembly:** Calls for a verification when a member doubts the accuracy of a voice vote or show of hands. "Division!" or "I call for a division."
4. **Division of a question:** Permits a motion to be divided into two or more parts in order that they may be considered separately. "I move to divide the motion so that the question of purchasing decorations can be considered separately."
5. **Withdraw a motion:** Permits a member to remove his or her question from consideration even after the motion has been restated by the chair. "Mr. Chair, I move that I be allowed to withdraw the motion."
6. **Objection to consideration:** Suppresses business that is undesirable or that might prove damaging to the organization. "Madam President, I object to the consideration of the question."
7. **Suspend the rules:** Temporarily sets aside a rule to permit the assembly to take an action it could not otherwise take. "I move to suspend the rules which interfere with considering the motion to hold a get-acquainted happy hour for new members."
8. **Appeal from the ruling of the chair:** Challenges a ruling of the chair. A majority vote is required to overrule the Chair. "I appeal from the decision of the chair."
9. **Point of order:** Challenges an error in procedure and requires a ruling by the chair. "I rise to a point of order" or "Point of order!"

Sources: www.robertsrules.org; www.yourparliamentarian.com.