

Robert's Rules of Order: Brief Summary of Basic Procedures

Prepared for the AMWG Technical Work Group by Mary Orton, January 2000

Introduction

This document is designed to give the reader a brief overview of some of the basic procedures of Robert's Rules of Order. It also conforms to the operating procedures of the Technical Work Group. For a full discussion of the Rules, see *Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised*.

Robert's Rules of Order were designed to protect the rights of the minority, while allowing an organization to accomplish its purpose with civility. Most parliamentarians agree that correct parliamentary procedure should be followed as a matter of course, not only when problems arise. They also agree that strict parliamentary correctness should never be insisted upon for its own sake.

Henry Robert, the original author of Robert's Rules of Order, said, "The great lesson for democracies to learn is for the majority to give to the minority a full, free opportunity to present their side of the case, and then for the minority, having failed to win a majority to their views, gracefully to submit and to recognize the action as that of the entire organization, and cheerfully to assist in carrying it out, until they can secure its repeal." At the same time, he was committed to developing consensus in the groups with which he worked. He was not in favor in the type of consensus demonstrated in the English House of Lords, where a requirement of unanimity or near unanimity had become a form of tyranny in itself. Instead, he saw "that the evolution of majority vote in tandem with lucid and clarifying debate – resulting in a decision representing the view of the deliberate majority – far more clearly ferrets out and demonstrates the will of an assembly."¹

Accomplishing the Business of the Group

Business is brought before an assembly with a *motion* made by a member. Business is carried out by making and voting on motions. Disposing of a motion involves six basic steps, all of which must occur for action to be taken.

1. A member *makes* a motion.
2. Another member *seconds* the motion.
3. The chairperson *states the question on the motion*; that is, restates the motion exactly as it is to be passed.
4. Members *debate* the motion.
5. The chairperson *puts the question* (to a vote).
6. The chairperson *announces the result* of the vote.

¹ Robert, H.M. 1990. *The Scott, Foresman Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*. Scott, Foresman and Company, Glenview, IL.

Conducting Business Without a Motion

Some business can be transacted without a motion. The following motions are generally not needed:

- To approve minutes. The chairperson can simply say, "Without objection [pause], the minutes are approved as distributed." If there are corrections, the chairperson says, "If there are no further corrections [pause], the minutes are approved as corrected."
- To adjourn. If the body meets regularly and follows a regular agenda, the chairperson can ask if there is any further business or announcements; if there is none, the chairperson declares the meeting adjourned.
- To give detailed instructions on a task assigned to a committee or member. Suggestions are in order, but the general principle is that those assigned the task should be free to handle it without detailed instructions.
- Call for the question (or, close debate and vote at once). This is often a waste of time. It takes a two-thirds vote to pass because it shuts off debate when there may be members who wish to speak. Even if it passes, the vote was not on the issue itself but on whether to cut off debate, and a vote on the motion must still be held. Without a call for the question, the chairperson can ascertain if anyone else wants to speak on the motion, and if not, bring the issue to a vote.
- To not do something. No motion is needed, for example, in response to a letter received asking the assembly to do something, if the members are not inclined to do it.

Conducting Business through Motions

The following chart gives you information on the basics of conducting business: how to make a motion, debate a motion, amend a motion, and bring a motion to a vote. Robert's Rules uses the term "the question" to refer to the motion that is pending on the floor. The same terminology has been used here.

You want to:	Do you need the floor?	What do you say?	Chairperson's Action	NOTE:
Obtain the floor.	No	"Mr. Chairperson" or "Madam Chairperson"	The chairperson recognizes you, unless: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ you wish to speak to a motion and the person who made the motion hasn't spoken yet and wishes to, ▪ someone else requested the floor before you, ▪ you have spoken once on the subject and others wish to speak who have not spoken yet, or ▪ you have already spoken twice on the issue during this meeting. 	The person who obtains the floor has the exclusive right to be heard at that time. In cases where the chairperson knows that persons seeking the floor have opposite opinions on the question, the chairperson should let the floor alternate, as far as possible, between those favoring and those opposing the measure.

You want to:	Do you need the floor?	What do you say?	Chairperson's Action	NOTE:
Make a motion.	Yes	"I move to spend \$50 to..."	<p>The chairperson waits for a second. If none is forthcoming, she asks, "Is there a second to the motion?" If there is none, "The motion is not seconded. The next item of business is..."</p> <p>The chairperson may rule "out of order" any motion obviously meant to obstruct or push through an action without discussion.</p>	If you are unsure whether your motion is in order, or how to construct your motion, you may ask the chairperson for assistance.
Second a motion.	No	"I second the motion," or, "I second it," or, "Second!"	The chairperson states the question: "It has been moved and seconded to spend \$50 to..." The chairperson uses the exact wording of the motion. (If the motion needs to be restated in order to be in suitable form, the chairperson negotiates this with the maker of the motion BEFORE the question is stated. The wording in the minutes is exactly as stated by the chairperson.)	<p>A second does not imply support of the motion. It means the seconder wishes for the body to consider the motion.</p> <p>There is no motion on the floor – for discussion or any action – until the chairperson states the question.</p>
Speak to a motion on the floor.	Yes	Confine your remarks to the merits of the pending question, address remarks to the chairperson, maintain a courteous tone, and avoid injecting a personal note into the debate.	The chairperson remains seated and does not interrupt the person who has the floor as long as no disorder arises and the rules are abided by.	<p>Robert's Rules allows a maximum of 10 minutes per speech, and allows each member to speak only twice on the same question on the same day.</p> <p>A motion is open for discussion only when the chairperson says so, after stating the question.</p>

You want to:	Do you need the floor?	What do you say?	Chairperson's Action	NOTE:
Amend a motion that is on the floor.	Yes	<p>"I move to amend by adding..." or "I move to amend by striking the word 'fifty' and inserting the word 'sixty-five.'"</p> <p>This motion is debatable if the main motion it amends is debatable. Debate must be confined to the merits of the amendment, not the merits of the main motion.</p>	Amendments designed to defeat the main motion can and should be ruled out of order by the chairperson.	Motions to amend are acted upon before voting on the main motion.
Dispose of a motion permanently without voting on it.	Yes	<p>"I move that the motion be postponed indefinitely."</p> <p>The motion is not amendable. Debate may go fully into the merits of the main question.</p>	<p>This motion is in order only when the main motion is pending; not, for example, if an amendment is being considered.</p> <p>If the motion passes, the motion is suppressed for the current session (i.e., series of meetings).</p>	This motion, if passed, indicates the group declined to take a position on the motion in question.
Withdraw your motion.	Yes	<p>"Mr. Chairperson, I ask permission to withdraw the motion."</p> <p>This request is neither amendable nor debatable.</p>	<p>The chairperson first treats it as a unanimous consent request: "Unless there is objection [pause], the motion is withdrawn."</p> <p>If there is objection, the withdrawal may be moved by the person requesting permission. This motion needs a second. Any other member can obtain the floor to move "that permission to withdraw the motion be granted." No second is needed here.</p>	<p>This may be done at any time before voting on the question has begun, even after the motion has been amended.</p> <p>Any member may suggest to the maker of the motion that he withdraw his motion, which he may choose to do or not.</p>

You want to:	Do you need the floor?	What do you say?	Chairperson's Action	NOTE:
Bring the motion to a vote, as the chairperson.	No	The chairperson may initiate the action, saying, "Are you ready for the question?" If no one responds by asking for the floor, the motion is put to a vote.	The chairperson repeats the motion and, if necessary, makes sure members understand the effect of an "aye" vote and of a "no" vote. "The question is on the adoption of the motion to spend \$50 to..."	The chairperson may take a formal vote by voice vote or by show of hands. The chairperson announces the results of the vote as soon as the vote is completed.
Bring the motion to a vote, as a member.	Yes	<p>"I move the previous question."</p> <p>This motion is not debatable and not amendable.</p> <p>This motion must be passed with a 2/3 vote, because it ends debate.</p>	<p>The chairperson recognizes this motion when debate appears to have closed, and may ask for unanimous consent instead of asking for a vote on the motion for the previous question. The chairperson says, "Are you ready for the question?" If someone wishes to continue debate, the chairperson may honor that request, or ask for a vote on the motion.</p> <p>If the vote on the motion on the previous question passes with the 2/3 majority required, the chairperson then brings the main motion to a vote.</p>	<p>The chairperson may ignore a premature call for the previous question. It is usually better to allow the entire useful debate to occur, as cutting off debate can limit the right of the minority to be heard.</p> <p>Sometimes, however, calling for the question can motivate unanimous consent to ending debate.</p>

You want to:	Do you need the floor?	What do you say?	Chairperson's Action	NOTE:
<p>Take action without a formal vote or without a motion, as the chairperson.</p>	<p>No</p>		<p>The chairperson states, "If there is no objection [without objection], the minutes will be approved." She pauses and if no member calls out, "I object," the action is decided upon.</p> <p>A member may object, not to the proposed action, but to the action being taken without a formal vote. No member should hesitate to object if he feels it is desirable to do so, but should not object merely for dilatory purposes.</p>	<p>Unanimous consent or general consent is generally used when there seems to be no opposition on routine business or on questions of little importance, in order to save time.</p> <p>The minutes should indicate that an action was taken "without objection," with no reference to unanimous consent.</p>
<p>Remove the normal limits on the number of times members can speak in discussion of an item.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	<p>"I move that the question be considered informally."</p>	<p>If the motion passes, once the vote is taken, the chairperson says, "The question is now open to informal consideration. There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak on the question or any amendments."</p>	<p>The rule remains in effect that you may not be called on to speak if another member, who has not yet spoken, wishes to do so.</p> <p>The group can, by 2/3 vote, limit the number or length of speeches, or in any other way limit or close debate.</p> <p>As soon as the main question is disposed of, the informal consideration automatically ceases, without any motion or vote.</p>