

Robert's Rules of Order – Simplified

Robert's Rules of Order, widely known as parliamentary procedure, was developed to ensure that meetings are fair, efficient, democratic and orderly.

Guiding Principles.

- Everyone has the right to participate in discussion if they wish, before anyone may speak a second time.
- Everyone has the right to know what is going on at all times. Only urgent matters may interrupt a speaker, although the Chair may ask speakers to draw to a close if time is tight.
- Only one thing (motion) can be discussed at a time.

A **Motion** is the topic under discussion (e.g., "I move that we add a coffee break to this meeting").

The majority rules. This a basic tenet of the democratic process. The minority have the right to be heard, but once the majority have made a decision, the minority must respect and abide by that decision. A majority vote is defined as more than half the votes cast by those present at the meeting.

Unanimous Consent. If a matter is considered relatively minor or opposition is not expected, a call for unanimous consent may be requested. If the request is made by others, the chair will repeat the request and then pause for objections. If none are heard, the motion passes.

Silence or abstaining is consent. Those members who do not vote are in essence, agreeing to go along with the decision of the majority. Abstentions should generally be avoided. Unless you have a specific reason for abstaining (for example you have a conflict of interest), you should vote for or against the motion and not sit it out. Even if you don't like either option, voting is part of your job.

The Two-Thirds Vote Rule. This is only necessary when you are limiting or taking away the rights of members or when you are changing something that has already been decided. A 2/3rds vote is defined as 2/3rds of the votes cast by those present at the meeting.

A Typical Sequence.

After being recognized by the chair, any member can make a suggestion or introduce a discussion (aka "introduce a motion") when no other discussion/idea/suggestion is on the table.

Each motion must be disposed of (passed, defeated, tabled, referred to committee, or postponed indefinitely). The secretary should record the names of the originator of the motion and the second.

At this point the board discusses the motion. *No other business of the board can happen until the motion has been resolved.* (The official language is that the motion is 'privileged'.)

In a small board meeting, consensus or a voice vote is usually enough for the chair and secretary to tell whether a vote has passed, and who voted on which side. But sometimes it's not clear. If either the chair or the secretary is unsure, they should ask for a roll-call vote in which everyone gives their vote one at a time so there is no confusion. If a member of the committee is unsure that the chair has made the right call, they too can ask for a roll-call vote.

The two results of the vote are simple to understand: a motion can be approved (the majority vote for it), or it can be defeated (the majority vote against it). After votes have been counted, the board chair should say something like "The motion passes" or "The motion fails" for absolute clarity. No one should be in doubt about what happened.

Sometimes, though, a motion can be resolved without a vote if the board votes to 'table' it, which means the board instead votes to postpone further consideration of the motion until a later meeting.

How to Do Things.

New Idea/Discussion. After recognition by the chair, present your idea/motion.

Discussion before a motion, not after. In some cases, in small boards a general discussion can be useful to lead to a proposal to take forward (i.e. a motion) as opposed to starting with a motion and then discussing it. The downside of this is that it's easier to get onto other business unrelated to the topic. So you can do this so long as the chair is diligent to limit discussion to the matter at hand and guides the group towards a proposal.

Change the Wording of a Motion. After recognition by the chair, move to amend ('I would like to amend') by

- adding words,
- striking words or
- striking and inserting words.

Friendly amendments. While not an 'official' part of Robert's Rules, this is common practice, especially in small board meetings. Basically, it means that someone in favour of the motion suggests something that would improve the original motion, or make it more palatable to someone who is not currently in support.

For example: "I'd like to suggest a friendly amendment, Bob. Where it says, 'term limits are three years long,' I'd like to suggest we add the phrase 'renewable once.'" For some reason this is directed to Bob (the person who made the original motion in my example), and Bob can choose to accept it, or not.

This is workable shorthand for amending a motion. If there have been any amendments (friendly or otherwise) to a motion, the chair always reaffirm the final text of the motion being voted upon before calling for the vote.

Changes Beyond Simple Word Changes. Move to 'substitute' your motion for the original motion. If it is seconded, discussion will continue on both motions and eventually the body will vote on which motion they prefer.

More Time to Study/Investigate the Idea being Discussed. Move to 'refer to a committee'. Try to be specific as to the charge to the committee and who would be on it if it isn't clear.

More Time for You to Consider/Study/Investigate the Proposal. Move to postpone to a definite time or date.

Limit the Current Discussion. Move to limit debate to a set period or to a set number of speakers. Requires a 2/3rds vote.

Draw the Current Discussion to a Close. Move to close the debate. Also referred to as calling the question. This cuts off discussion and brings the assembly to a vote on the pending question only. If there isn't a clear consensus among the board, it requires a 2/3rds vote.

Postpone a Motion (Discussion or Decision) to a later time. Move to table the motion. The motion may be taken from the table after 1 item of business has been conducted. If the motion is not taken from the table by the end of the next meeting, it is dead. To kill a motion at the time it is tabled requires a 2/3rds vote. A majority is required to table a motion without killing it.

Any member can:

Bring back a Discussion drifting from the agenda by asking for the discussion to come back to the point (aka call for “orders of the day”).

Ask for a Short Break for a set period of time (aka “move to recess”).

End the Meeting (aka “move to adjourn”).

Ask for a roll call vote to be taken if unsure the chair announced the results of a vote correctly. (aka call for a “division of the house”).

Ask for clarification if confused about a procedure (aka “call for point of information”) or where the discussion has got to.

Change your mind about something that was voted on earlier in the meeting and **can ask to come back to the topic** (aka “move to reconsider”). The majority of the board must agree for the discussion to be reintroduced.

Ask to change an action/decision voted on at an earlier meeting (aka “move to rescind”). If previous written notice is given, a simple majority of the group is required to bring up a new discussion. If no notice is given, a 2/3rds vote is required.

You may INTERRUPT a speaker for these reasons only:

- to get information about business or the conduct of the meeting (“point of information”)
- if you can't hear, safety reasons, comfort, etc. (“question of privilege”)
- if you see a breach of the rules (“point of order”)
- if you disagree with the chair's ruling (“appeal”)
- if you disagree with a call for Unanimous Consent (“object”)

Tips and Reminders for the Chair

A skilled chair allows all members to voice their opinions in an orderly manner so that everyone in the meeting can hear and be heard. The following tips and reminders will help chairpersons to run a successful and productive meeting without being run over or running over others.

- Make sure meetings have clear end times, signalled in advance
- Stick to the agenda to keep things moving and gently guide the group back when off-track.
- Let the group do its own work; don't over command.
- Control the flow of the meeting by recognizing members who ask to speak.
- Let all members speak once before allowing anyone to speak a second time.
- Model courtesy and respect, and insist that others do the same.
- Help to develop the board's skills in parliamentary procedure by properly using motions and points of order.
- Give each speaker your undivided attention.
- Keep an emotional pulse on the discussions.
- Allow a consensus to have the final authority of the group.

Robert's Rules of Order: Quick Reference

	Must Be Seconded	Open for Discussion	Can be Amended	Vote Count Required to Pass	May Be Reconsidered or Rescinded
Main Motion	X	X	X	Majority	X
Amend Motion	X	X		Majority	X
Kill a Motion	X			Majority	X
Limit Debate	X		X	2/3rds	X
Close Discussion	X			2/3rds	X
Recess	X		X	Majority	
Adjourn (End Mtg)	X			Majority	
Refer to Committee	X	X	X	Majority	X
Postpone to a later time	X	X	X	Majority	X
Table	X			Majority	
Postpone Indefinitely	X	X	X	Majority	X