



# Roberts' Rules of Order **Beginner's Guide**



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# Why Use Roberts' Rules of Order

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## A Brief Introduction to the Theory of Roberts' Rules of Order

To understand how to use Robert's Rules of Order to run a meeting, you should understand a little bit about parliamentary law. Parliamentary law is a branch of common law that governs the proceedings of deliberative assemblies. *Robert's Rules of Order* is a specific variant of it that is both a theoretical basis and a 'how-to' guide for conducting business in democratically elected deliberative assemblies.

*Robert's Rules of Order* balances these 3 fundamental principles:

- Protection of the rights of members, and those whom they represent.
- The requirement for a deliberative process of full and free discussion as a prerequisite to democratic decision-making.
- Protection against instability.

While organizations are able to adapt *Robert's Rules* to suit their specific context, an adaptation that violates these three principles means that the organization is no longer using *Robert's Rules*, and is in fact violating them at a fundamental level.

### ***Protection of the rights of members, and those whom they represent.***

1. All members represented by and serving on a deliberative assembly have the right for their views to be heard.
2. 'Points' exist so that members can ask questions that enable them to participate more fully.
3. Members who are absent have the right to attempt to have business reconsidered.
4. Quorum requirements ensure that a vocal minority cannot 'take over' the business of an assembly.

### ***The requirement for a deliberative process of full and free discussion as a prerequisite to democratic decision-making.***

1. Every member is guaranteed at least one speaking turn.
2. Limiting debate in any fashion, including calling the question, requires a 2/3 majority.
3. Those with strong views to the contrary need not feel like they must compromise their views to let the business of the organization go forward.
4. They are, however, expected to respect the will of the assembly once a decision is made *because* they had a fair opportunity to convince the majority that they were right.

### ***Protection against instability.***

1. It is always harder to reverse a decision than it was to make it in the first place.
2. The Chair is always right about procedure, unless her/his ruling is successfully overturned by a vote of the assembly.
3. Quorum requirements ensure that an assembly does not vary in composition between meetings.
4. Minutes provide a record of business that serve as institutional memory for the organization.

## Why use rules at all?

There are several common myths about parliamentary rules that tempt assemblies into 'just having meetings.' Below, we discuss four common myths and why they're wrong.

### ***Using Robert's Rules is inefficient. We should make decisions faster.***

*Robert's Rules of Order* are quite efficient in the context of deliberative assemblies. They keep discussion focused on the decision that needs to be made, encourage people to prepare in advance, and ensure a balance between the speed of decisions and the openness of discussion. Open discussion helps an organization be more transparent, and helps eliminate mistakes. It also lessens the chances of members becoming bitter with decisions they disagree with because they could see how and why the decision was made, and had the chance to participate themselves.

### ***Robert's Rules generates unnecessary paperwork.***

*Robert's Rules* generates necessary paperwork; namely, agendas and minutes. That paperwork creates institutional memory for the organization, and allows people to participate in decision-making. It also creates a record that ensures that decisions are enforceable. Plus, using motions to make decisions makes it easier people to understand the outcomes of discussions that they were not present at.

### ***This particular section of Robert's Rules doesn't make any sense. We should just get rid of it.***

Parliamentary law has been evolving since the 1500s, with contributions from some of the greatest thinkers of our time. The rules make sense, even if they don't make sense to you... yet. It might need some tweaking to work for your organization, but don't undertake to rewrite the rules from scratch without understanding them first, or without the some help.

### ***Robert's Rules are too complicated. Isn't it simpler to just have a meeting without all this rules business?***

Sometimes, but probably not for your group. You need rules so that everyone is on the same page about what's going on and are equipped to participate effectively, so that no one can 'cheat' or pull the discussion really off-track, and so that people don't get bullied or unfairly silenced.

# Simplified Glossary

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## MOTION: the 'unit of business' debated by an assembly

**Main Motions:** must be seconded and are debatable, amendable, and reconsiderable. They are the motions to which all other motions react.

**All Other Motions:** There are 86 kinds of motion that can be made under Roberts' Rules of Order. They act on the business of the assembly in different ways. See the summary chart examples.

## DEBATE: a structured discussion about a motion

A member must be recognized by the chair as "having the floor". They have a limited time to speak, and must stay on topic and respect decorum. Debate proceeds until the motion is put to a vote.

## AMENDMENT: a formal process used to propose changes to motions

Only certain types of motions can be amended. See the summary chart for more information.

## VOTE: how an assembly decides whether to support a proposed motion

When put to a vote, motions pass or fail. A motion that passes has a majority (as defined in the organization's bylaws) in favour, and is carried or adopted. A motion that fails does not have a majority in favour, and is not acted upon.

## CHAIR: the person responsible for ensuring that the rules are observed

A chair may be voting or nonvoting. It is their primary responsibility to facilitate the meeting by enforcing the rules, so they must be impartial.

## DECORUM: debating in a respectable and orderly manner

Debate is confined to the merits of the motion before the assembly. Members refer to one another respectfully, do not attack motives, do not interrupt, and do not speak against their own motions.

## POINTS: allows a member to ask a question or interrupt debate

**Point of information:** a member asks a question of another member. Cannot interrupt a speaker.

**Point of order:** a member believes procedure is not being followed and brings it to the chair's attention. Cannot interrupt a speaker, but must be raised as soon as possible.

**Point of parliamentary inquiry:** a member asks a question related to procedure. Cannot interrupt a speaker.

**Point of privilege:** something is preventing a member from participating. Can interrupt a speaker.

# Summary Chart of Important Terms

	Undebatable	Opens main question to debate	Cannot be amended	Cannot be reconsidered	Requires a 2/3 majority vote	Must be Seconded	Can interrupt a speaker
Adjourn	✓	-	✓	✓	-	✓	-
Adjourn, Fix the Time to which to	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Amend	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Amend an Amendment	-	-	✓	-	-	✓	-
Amend the Rules	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	-
Appeal, relating to indecorum	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	✓
Appeal, in all other areas		-	✓	-	-	✓	✓
Call to Order	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	✓
Close Debate, motion to	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	
Commit to Refer	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	-
Extend the Limits of Debate, motion to	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	-
Fix the Time of which to Adjourn	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Continue Speaking after indecorum	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	-
Lay on the Table	✓	-	✓	✓	-	✓	-
Limit Debate, motion to	✓	-	-	-	✓	✓	-
Objection to Consideration of a Question	✓	-	✓	-	✓	-	✓
Orders of the Day, motion for the	✓	-	✓	-	-	-	✓
Postpone to a Certain Time	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Postpone Indefinitely	-	✓	✓	-	-	✓	-
Previous Question	✓	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-
Priority of Business, questions relating to	✓	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Privilege, Question of	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Reading Papers	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	-
Reconsider a Debatable Questions	-	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Reconsider an Undebatable Question	✓	-	✓	✓	-	✓	-
Refer (same as commit)	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	-
Rescind	-	✓	-	-	-	✓	-
Rise (in Committee equals Adjourn)	✓	-	✓	✓	-	✓	-
Special Order, to make a	-	-	-	-	✓	✓	-
Substitute (same as Amend)	-	-	-	-	-	✓	-
Suspend the Rules	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	-	-
Take from the Table	✓	-	✓	-	✓	✓	-
Take up a Question out of its Proper Order	✓	-	✓	-	✓	-	-
Withdrawal if a Motion	✓	-	✓	-	-	✓	-

