

## 4.4: A Brief Introduction to Robert's Rules of Order

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify ways in which parliamentary procedure can help a group conduct its business effectively
2. Distinguish between *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR)* and related summaries of parliamentary procedure
3. Master terminology related to major actions undertaken within parliamentary procedure

*Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use. - Emily Post*

In the previous two sections, we considered a number of practical planning, human relations, and communication guidelines to help you get ready for a meeting and facilitate it. Now we'll discuss a system of formal rules called "parliamentary procedure" which you may follow as you facilitate a meeting to save lots of time, prevent ill feelings, promote harmony, and ensure that everyone's viewpoints can be expressed and discussed democratically.

### Why Parliamentary Procedure?

It's easy to make fun of individuals or groups who follow procedures "to the letter," especially in a country like the United States where we at least say that we prize spontaneity and self-determination. When it comes to most groups you work in or lead as a student or employee, you'll probably be able to get away with conducting their meetings fairly informally, or even "by the seat of your pants." In such groups—"among friends," as it were—parliamentary procedure may seem boring or unnecessary. You may just assume, for instance, that you'll observe the will of the majority in cases of disagreement and that you'll keep track of what you do by taking a few simple notes when you get together.



Figure 4.4.1

But what about when you're asked to chair your children's PTA someday? Or when you're elected president of a community service group like Kiwanis or Rotary? Or when you become an officer in a professional society? Under those circumstances, you'll have entered a "deliberative assembly"—a body that considers options and reaches decisions—and you'll benefit from knowing at least the rudiments of parliamentary procedure in order to fulfill your duties within it. When you're in charge of running such a group's meetings, you should be able to ensure that things run smoothly, efficiently, and fairly. As odd as it sounds, under those circumstances, you'll probably actually find that imposing regulation on the group is necessary to preserve its freedom to act.

On a very practical level, parliamentary procedure can help you answer these common, important questions as you lead a meeting:

- Who gets to speak when, and for how long?
- What do we do if our discussion seems to be going on and on without any useful results?
- When and how do we make decisions?
- What do we do if we're not ready yet to say yes or no to a proposal but need to move on to something else in the meantime?
- What do we do if we change our minds?

Learning some parliamentary procedure promises at least two personal benefits, as well. First, you'll probably discover that the structures you become familiar with through using parliamentary procedure boost your confidence in general. Second, you're apt to

find that you've laid the foundations for establishing yourself as a solid, reliable leader. Third, although you shouldn't be stricter or more formal than is good for your group, using parliamentary procedure regularly and as a matter, of course, should contribute to the impression that you care about consistency, equity, and efficiency in your dealings with other people in general.

## Background of *Robert's Rules*

Henry Martyn Robert was an engineer who rose to the rank of brigadier general in the U.S. Army and first put together his *Rules of Order* in 1876. His aim was to keep that publication to 50 pages, but its first edition contained 176 pages. The eleventh edition now runs nearly four times as long—more than 650 pages. This current edition, abbreviated as “RONR” (*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*), was formulated by a team of parliamentarians which includes Robert's grandson.

A shorter summary, also prepared in part by Henry Martyn Robert III, comprises the most important features of RONR. It includes the contention that “at least 80 percent of the content of RONR will be needed less than 20 percent of the time” in even the largest, most complicated groups (Robert, H.M., Evans, W.J., Honemann, D.H., & Balch, T. J. (2011). *Robert's rules of order newly revised, in brief*. Philadelphia: Da Capo Press.). Thus, a formal group which adopts RONR as its parliamentary authority may decide to use the summary volume to help it get through most common operational situations, since the summary's sections are all linked item-by-item to more detailed portions of RONR itself.

## Ingredients of RONR

*Robert's Rules* offers guidance for all the essential processes a group is apt to conduct. It suggests that a group select a chairperson (“chairman” in Robert's original language) and a secretary, that it decide on what proportion of its membership constitutes a quorum and is thus able to conduct substantive business, and that it follow at least a “simplified standard order of business” which may be as straightforward as this:

1. Reading and approval of minutes. Deciding whether notes of the previous meeting, generally taken by the group's secretary, can be accepted as written or need to be modified.
2. Reports. Statements by officers and heads of committees, along with any recommendations associated with them. For instance, the finance committee of a student government association might propose that the association as a whole spend money from a particular budget to send a student representative to a professional conference or purchase new bookkeeping software for the association's treasurer.
3. Unfinished business. Some groups use the term “old business” in this part of their agendas and allow members to bring up any topics that have occupied the body's attention throughout its history, but RONR discourages this. Instead, it insists that “unfinished business” be restricted to items which were left incomplete at the conclusion of the previous meeting or which were scheduled to be considered in the previous meeting but could not be because of insufficient time and were therefore specifically postponed to the next one. (Robert, H.M., Evans, W.J., Honemann, D.H., & Balch, T. J. (2011)).
4. New business. This part of a meeting revolves around motions introduced by members and considered by the group as a whole.

## Agendas

Although a bare-bones standard order of business may satisfy the requirements of RONR, most groups decide to make use of an agenda such as the ones we've discussed in earlier sections of this chapter. Such agendas, if and when they are approved by groups at the outset of their meetings, may be individualized to name the persons who are to give reports and make recommendations. They may also include timelines that refer to specific topics, offer background information, and say when breaks will take place. RONR recognizes that every group has a personality of its own and should have the flexibility to express that personality through a well-crafted agenda tailored to meet its needs.

## Making Decisions

Generally speaking, RONR specifies that decisions about proposals should be made as soon as possible after the proposals are made. For instance, if a recommendation is made during an officer's report, it should be handled at that time.

Nothing may be decided in RONR unless a motion—a formal proposal put forth orally by a participant in the meeting—has been made. The proper way to submit a motion is to say, “I move that...” (not “I make a motion that...”). Some groups may decide that any motion raised by a member will be deliberated, but RONR requires that nearly all motions receive a second before the chairperson can proceed with the next step. That step is for the chairperson to “state the question”—that is, announce to the group that a motion has been made and seconded and is open for debate. Details on exceptions to this process can be found in RONR itself, but the basic reason for requiring a second is to ensure that more than a single individual would like to consider a proposal.

Assuming that the person who submits a motion has done so according to the procedures of the group, the motion is considered to be pending, and its initial form it is referred to as the “main motion.” The chairperson is responsible for soliciting and guiding debate about any motion.

In the course of debate, the main motion may be amended or withdrawn, in part according to subsidiary motions and in part according to the will of the person who originally proposed it. It’s also possible for a group to refer a matter to a subgroup or postpone discussion of it to a set time.

Generally, members should be recognized by the chairperson in the order in which they make it clear that they wish to speak. RONR stipulates that a speaker has up to 10 minutes each time he or she speaks and that the speaker isn’t permitted to “save” time or transfer it to another person. If a motion being considered in a large group is particularly controversial, the chairperson should make an effort to recognize proponents and opponents back and forth so as to ensure balance in the presentations.

When debate ceases on a motion, the chairperson should say “The question is on the adoption of the motion that...” and put the question to a vote of the membership. When the vote has been observed or tallied, the chairperson announces which side “has it”—that is, which side has won the vote. He or she then declares that the motion has been adopted or lost and indicates the effect of the vote, as necessary.

For instance, someone in a student committee might move that \$250 be spent toward sending Jamie, its vice president, to a conference in New York City. After the motion has been seconded and debated, you as the chairperson might call for a vote and announce afterward, “The ‘ayes’ have it. The motion carries, and Jamie will receive \$250 toward expenses for the trip to New York. Jamie, you’ll need to talk to Cameron, our treasurer, to get a check cut for you in advance of your travel.”

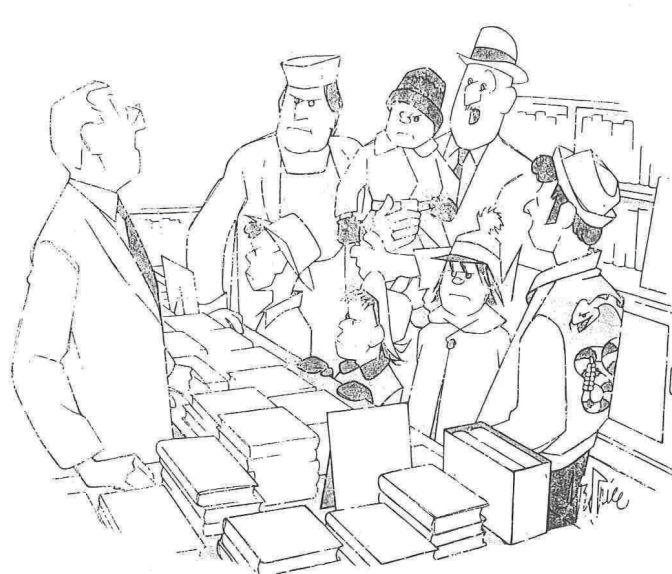
## Being Civil

The point of following *Robert’s Rules* is to preserve order, decorum, and civility so that a group can make wise decisions. RONR allows a group’s chairperson to rule people’s comments out of order if the comments are irrelevant (not “germane”) or are considered to be personal attacks.

*Robert’s Rules* even makes provisions for group members to avoid direct attack. It attempts to accomplish this by allowing members of a group to refer to each other in the third person—e.g., “the previous speaker” or “the treasurer”—rather than by using each other’s names. Unfortunately, in long-established organizations such as the US Congress people sometimes get away with incivility even within such tight interpretations of the strictures of RONR. Consider the story, which may or may not be historically accurate, of two US Senators. Senator Smith had just spoken passionately in favor of earmarking funds to build a bridge across a certain river in his state. Senator Jones said, “That’s ridiculous. We don’t need a bridge there. I could pee halfway across that river!” Senator Smith retorted, “The previous speaker is out of order!” to which Senator Jones replied, “I suppose I am. Otherwise, I could pee all the way across it.”

## More Details

How punctiliously a particular group observes the requirements of RONR will depend on the group’s purposes, its level of formality, and sometimes even on the personalities of its members and leaders. One statewide college faculty organization in the Pacific Northwest prides itself on operating according to what it jocularly calls “Bobby’s Rules of Order,” although its bylaws stipulate that it is governed by RONR. The faculty organization has found for nearly 40 years that it can achieve its aims and maintain civility without observing many of the official trappings of RONR. Your group, on the other hand, may want and need the consistency and specificity of RONR to get its work done.



A copy of "Robert's Rules of Order"

Figure 4.4.2

In any case, knowing the basic nature of *Robert's Rules* and how to get guidance on its finer points can be advantageous to anyone who wants to promote efficient operations and decision-making by a group. In addition to referring to *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised In Brief*, you may want to consult the website of the American Institute of Parliamentarians at [www.parliamentaryprocedure.org](http://www.parliamentaryprocedure.org) for further information.

### Key Takeaway

*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (RONR)*, a thorough and well-established system of parliamentary procedure, can be followed in greater or lesser detail as a group attempts to ensure civility, fairness, and efficiency in the conduct of its business.

#### Exercise 4.4.1

1. Watch a broadcast on C-SPAN television of either the opening of a session of the US House of Representatives or of debate on legislation in the House or Senate. What specialized terms or forms of address did you hear which fit with your understanding of *Robert's Rules of Order*? What function did those terms or forms of address fulfill?
2. Locate a meeting agenda for a student group or employee committee on your campus. To what degree do its contents differ from the simplified standard order of business described in this section? Why do you think the organizers of the meeting modified the standard order as they did?
3. Draft an agenda for a meeting of an imaginary student group and share it with 2–3 fellow students. Explain why you structured your agenda the way you did.

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