

# Putting the Business in Your Business Meetings

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*“It is difficult to find another branch of knowledge where a small amount of study produces such great results in increased efficiency in a country where the people rule, as in parliamentary law.”*

– General Henry M. Robert  
Author, *Robert’s Rules of Order*

Participating in business meetings is an important part of belonging to a productive organization. The ability to effectively participate in business meetings using parliamentary procedure is an important component of group leadership. This topic highlights key aspects of parliamentary procedure and participation in the group decision-making process.



## Develop an Agenda for Every Meeting

A well-developed agenda can help ensure that meetings stay on track. By adopting an agenda for every meeting, members can be made aware of when a topic will come up in the meeting or if it will come up at all. A group can choose to follow any order of business that meets its needs, or use the standard order of business found in *Robert’s Rules of Order, Newly Revised* (RONR), which is as follows:

- Reading and Approval of Minutes
- Reports of Officers and Standing Committees (permanent committees the group has created)
- Reports of Special Committees (committees appointed for a special task)
- Special Orders (business the group has decided to make very important and devote all the time needed)
- General Orders and Unfinished Business (“old” business) New Business

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## Use Motions to Make Decisions

Any time a group makes a decision, the question should be presented as a motion. By forcing members to address the presiding officer and say, “I move that . . .”, a group gains a clear understanding of what it is being asked to decide. This practice helps expedite the transaction of business by allowing the presiding officer to divide debate between those on both sides of the issue. When members no longer wish to speak for or against a motion, the group should move directly to voting. In extreme cases, a motion can sometimes be made that has virtually unanimous support or practically no support at all. In these cases, time can be saved by allowing the majority to know they will be successful and that there is no need to spend time in unnecessary debate.

## Follow the Rules of Debate

Endless discussion and unnecessary commentary are two frequently cited reasons why people do not enjoy participating in business meetings. Guaranteeing that a person’s time will not be wasted is an important technique for increasing meeting participation. Under ordinary circumstances, RONR allows a member to debate a motion twice for up to 10 minutes each time. However, a group can limit debate on a motion by adopting an order to Limit Debate. Examples include the following:

“I move that we limit debate on this motion to 10 minutes total.”

“I move that we limit debate to three speakers each for and against the motion.”

“I move that we limit debate to 10 total speakers or a total of 20 minutes.”

A group can also bring debate to an immediate close by adopting an order for the Previous Question. This motion brings an immediate end to debate, prohibits additional amendments, and brings the motion to an immediate vote. This motion is made by stating, “I move the previous question.”

## Know How to Delay Action

The fact that a motion is made does not mean that a decision must be reached immediately. RONR gives members tools for temporarily delaying a decision. Two frequently encountered options are the motions Refer to Committee and Postpone to a Certain Time.

A group may refer something to committee by adopting a motion such as, “I move we refer this motion to a committee of three to study the issue and recommend action at our next meeting.” Committees can be created to study an issue or take specific action for the group. Referring a motion to committee does not kill the issue; it can simply give the group an opportunity to secure needed information before reaching a decision.

The motion to postpone to a certain time can be used to set a specific time for considering an issue. For example, a group could adopt the motion, “I move we postpone this question until our next monthly meeting.” This will delay action on the question until the group takes it up again at the next meeting.

## Consistency Is Key!

By making an effort to follow the rules of procedure at every meeting, a group can make members familiar with proper procedures during times of harmony. Then, when contentious times arise, no member will feel intimidated or unable to participate when parliamentary procedure is used to make tough decisions.

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