

SIMPLIFIED RULES FOR ASSEMBLIES AND CHURCH MEETINGS

Scott Stargel (updated 2 February 2014)

This document offers simplified instructions on how to conduct a meeting where members will discuss topics and vote on them. It is based on the English book *Robert's Rules of Order (Newly Revised)*. It does not replace that book, but offers, instead, an easier way to understand the normal way that assemblies conduct themselves.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Every member of an assembly (or meeting) has a right to participate in a discussion before any other member speaks a second time.
- Every member has the right to know what is going on at all times.
- Only urgent matters may interrupt the speaker.
- Only one topic (called "a motion") can be discussed at a time.

THE HEART OF A DISCUSSION: THE MOTION

A motion is the topic under discussion. For example, a motion may be something as simple as "We should add a coffee break to this meeting."

A member starts discussion on a topic by creating a motion. To do this, he or she would say something like "I move that we add a coffee break to this meeting" or "I move that we purchase a new computer."

A member can make a motion only after the president of the assembly recognizes him or her as the speaker. A main motion cannot be introduced if another main motion is already being discussed. This way, only one topic is under discussion at all times.

Before the assembly may discuss a new motion, at least one other member must agree that the topic is worth discussing. This is called a second. The president will say something like "We have a motion to consider. Is there a second?" This does not mean a second motion, rather a second member agrees that the assembly should discuss the motion. Any member may say out loud "I second the motion." After that, the assembly discusses the motion.

The main motion is the only topic considered by the assembly until it is disposed. An assembly may dispose of a motion in one of the following ways.

- **Pass the motion** — the assembly votes in favor of the motion; it approves of it.
- **Defeat the motion** — the assembly votes against the motion; it disapproves of it.
- **Refer the motion** — the assembly refers the motion to a different committee for consideration
- **Suspend the motion** — the assembly stops discussion on the motion without setting a new time or date for discussion.
- **Postpone the motion** — the assembly stops discussion on the motion and sets a new time or date to consider it.

After the assembly disposes of a main motion, a new motion may be considered.

THE KEY TO FAIRNESS: ONLY ONE PERSON SPEAKS AT A TIME

The president of the assembly works to make sure that everything runs smoothly. He or she does not usually vote on the topics being discussed. Instead, he or she guides the members through the agenda or schedule and recognizes individual to speak to the assembly.

Everyone has a right to participate in discussions, but this means that only one person may speak at a time. If it is your turn to speak, we say that "You have the floor." You are the speaker.

The rules often will limit how many people may speak about a topic or how long any one person may speak.

SOMETIMES, THOUGH, IT IS OKAY TO INTERRUPT THE SPEAKER

Everyone should always know whose turn it is to speak (also known as "who has the floor"). When someone is speaking, you should not interrupt them.

However, you may interrupt a speaker for one of these reasons. If you try to interrupt someone any other time, the president will tell you that "You are out of order."

- **You are unsure what the procedure is to do something or you think the rules are not being followed.** You may stand up and say "**President, an inquiry please.**" The president will recognize you, and you will ask your question. The president will give his or her opinion on the question. Then, the assembly will resume.

Examples:

"Mr. President, is it appropriate for me to make a new motion at this time?"

"Madam President, who is allowed to vote on this?"

- **You do not understand what motion is being discussed.** Because motions are often complicated, it is easy to misunderstand. You may stand up any time and say "**President, a point of information, please.**" The president will recognize you, and you will then ask your question. He or she will give the information, and then the assembly will continue.

Examples:

"Madam President, exactly what are we voting on right now?"

"Mr. President, if we vote for this, does that mean the main motion passes?"

- **You cannot hear, you feel unsafe, you feel uncomfortable.** You may stand up and say "**President, a question of privilege.**" After he or she recognizes you, state clearly what is happening and what you wish the president to do.

Examples:

"Mr. President, we cannot hear the speakers. Please ask them to speak more loudly."

"Madam President, this side of the room is too crowded. May we spread out a bit, please?"

"Mr. President, please ask the speaker to wait for the translator to finish before continuing."

- **You feel the rules are being broken.** If you understand the rules and feel someone is breaching them, you may stand and say, "**President, a point of order, please.**" After he or she recognizes you, you should state clearly the breach of rules. The president will then rectify the situation or explain why the rules are not being broken.

Examples:

"Mr. President, the member has already spoken about this motion."

"Madam President, the current discussion is not about the main motion."

- **You disagree with the president's ruling.** If the president makes a ruling and you do not feel it is appropriate, you may stand and say "**President, I appeal the ruling.**" The president will then ask for a second. Then, the president will give his or her opinion before asking for further discussion. The president may speak again at the end before asking the assembly to vote.

THINGS YOU CAN DO DURING AN ASSEMBLY

Members of assemblies make decisions after discussing various topics. It is important to know what you can and cannot do during an assembly.

YOU WANT TO BRING UP A NEW TOPIC FOR THE ASSEMBLY TO DISCUSS

This is called a main motion.

After the president recognizes you, present your motion. Start by saying "I move ..." or "I make a motion..." After you present the motion, wait for the president to ask for a second. If no one seconds the motion, the assembly will not consider it. If someone seconds the motion, you can then talk about the motion. The president will allow others to discuss the motion before voting on it.

YOU WANT TO CHANGE SOME OF THE WORDING IN A MOTION UNDER DISCUSSION***This is called an amendment to the motion.***

A motion may be modified by the assembly before everyone votes. This is called amending the motion. An amendment is usually something simple, such as adding or deleting words or phrases.

YOU LIKE THE MOTION BEING DISCUSSED, BUT YOU WANT TO MAKE MAJOR CHANGES AND NOT JUST ADD OR DELETE A FEW WORDS***This is called a substitute motion.***

You may ask that the assembly substitutes your new wording for the main motion. If it is seconded, the assembly will discuss whether or not they want to consider your wording or the original motion. The assembly may amend your substitute motion or it may amend the original motion. If it decides to accept your wording, then the substitute motion becomes the main motion.

YOU WANT THE MOTION TO BE STUDIED OR INVESTIGATED FURTHER***This is called a referral.***

You may ask the assembly to refer the main motion to a committee. You should be specific as to what you want the committee to do about the motion. For example, you might say "I move we refer the motion to the finance committee to study whether or not we can afford it."

YOU WANT MORE TIME TO STUDY THE TOPIC***This is called a postponement.***

You may ask the assembly to postpone consideration of the main motion until a definite time or date. If the assembly agrees, the current motion will be closed, and the assembly may consider a completely new motion.

YOU ARE TIRED OF THE CURRENT DISCUSSION***This is called limiting the debate.***

You may ask the assembly to limit the amount of time to discuss the main motion. You should ask for a specific time limit or a specific number of speakers. At least two-thirds of the members must agree before limiting the debate.

YOU HAVE HEARD ENOUGH DISCUSSION***This is called closing the debate.***

You may ask the assembly to stop discussing the main motion. At least two-thirds of the members must agree. If the assembly votes to close the debate, no more discussion is allowed. The assembly immediately votes on the motion.

YOU WANT TO POSTPONE A MOTION UNTIL A LATER TIME

This is called *suspending the motion*. It is different from a postponement, because you will not set a definite time or date to reconsider the motion.

You may ask the assembly to stop discussion of the current motion so that it may consider something else, usually an urgent matter. If the assembly approves then the current motion is set aside. If no one makes a motion to resume discussion of the motion by the end of the next assembly, it is dead.

YOU WANT TO TAKE A SHORT BREAK

This is called a *recess*. Normally, you will indicate an exact amount of time for the break or a specific time to resume.

After the president recognizes you, say something like "I move that we recess for 15 minutes" or "I move we recess until 10:30."

YOU WANT TO END THE ASSEMBLY

This is called the *adjournment*. Usually this happens at a specific time in the agenda or schedule.

After the president recognizes you, you may say "I move that we adjourn" or "I move that we adjourn until tomorrow morning."

YOU ARE UNSURE THAT THE PRESIDENT CORRECTLY ANNOUNCED THE RESULTS OF A VOTE

This is called a "*division of the assembly*" or simply "*the division*." This is not appropriate after a ballot (a written vote). It is only used if member are asked to vote by raising their hands or by saying "Yes" or "No."

After a vote is taken, you may stand up and say "Division." The president will then ask everyone to vote by ballot (written) or by a roll-call.

YOU HAVE CHANGED YOUR MIND ABOUT SOMETHING THAT WAS VOTED ON EARLIER

This is called a "*motion to reconsider*." IMPORTANT: you may only make this motion if you voted with the winning side earlier.

After the president recognizes you, say "I move that we reconsider an earlier motion," and then you describe the motion. Someone must second your motion. If the majority of the assembly agrees with you, then the motion is immediately brought back for discussion as if the vote had not occurred.

YOU WANT TO CANCEL AN ACTION VOTED ON EARLIER

This is called a *motion to rescind*.

After the president recognizes you, you should say "I move that we rescind an earlier motion," and then you describe the motion. Someone must second your motion. After discussion, if two-thirds of the members agree with you, your motion passes, and the earlier motion is cancelled.

NOTES

The basic structure of this document is derived from a document used by their University Faculty Senate Meetings. The original publication may be found here:

<http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/assemblies/RobertsRulesSimplified.pdf>

VOCABULARY

assembly — An assembly is a meeting where members come together to discuss topics and make decisions on behalf of their organization.

member — A member is an individual who is elected or appointed to serve on a committee or to be an official voice in a meeting or an assembly. Some people are automatically members of an assembly.

main motion / Motion — A motion is a special term to describe the topic under discussion. There can be just one main motion at a time. However, while a main motion is being discussed, members may offer secondary motions that offer different ways to approach the discussion of the main motion, such as amend. The assembly must vote on a secondary motion before voting on the main motion.

second — When a member creates a motion, at least one other member must agree that it is worthwhile. This is called "a second" (because the person proposing the motion is "the first"). If no one agrees to be a second, then the motion fails, and the assembly does not consider it.

speaker — The speaker is the person who currently has the privilege of speaking to the assembly. Usually, the speaker should be standing and speaking clearly, loudly, and concisely. The president recognizes speakers one at a time. Sometimes, the rules of the assembly may limit how long a speaker may speak or how many speakers may debate a motion.