Robert's Rules of Order – FAQ

Overview

1. **What is the purpose of Robert's Rules of Order?**
   Robert's Rules of Order was first created in 1876 by a U.S. Army Major to create order during church meeting discussions. It has since been adapted to provide a structured, fair, and democratic framework for running meetings and making group decisions. Local and state governments, nonprofit and school boards, labor unions, and student organizations implement the rules into their meetings.

   It is often used to keep discussions focused on one topic to minimize distractions or chaos while establishing a record of actions or votes through formal motions. Robert's Rules ensure each member has an equal right to voice their opinions and allows the minority a fair chance to be heard and considered.

Making a Motion

1. **Who gets to make a motion?**
   Any official member who is present at the meeting (aside from the Presiding Officer) can make a motion. This includes other officers and official members of the organization. Nonmembers can only make a motion if the rules are suspended (see more below) and otherwise do not have floor rights (make motions, speak in debate, or vote).

2. **How do I properly make a motion?**
   At any time during the meeting, a motion may be made once the member or officer is recognized by the presiding officer. This can be done by speaking the words "I move that..." followed by the motion that is to be made.

   Occasionally, the presiding officer may ask for or to entertain a specific motion. At this point, any member may make the motion by saying "I so move."

3. **What happens after someone makes a motion?**
   Once a motion is made, it requires a second to move on in the process of discussion. Any member, aside from the Presiding Officer or the person who initially made the motion, may provide a second by simply speaking the words "second."

   Once a motion has achieved a second, the Presiding Officer will state the question, or officially present the motion, by repeating its exact wording. This is generally indicated

when the Chair says the words "It is moved and seconded that..." After, the Chair will ask the group if there is any discussion or debate.

4. **Who gets to speak during debate? How many times can I speak on the same motion?**
   During discussion, the Presiding Officer assigns the floor but cannot participate in debate. Any member has equal right to participate but must be formally recognized by the Chair. This may be easily done through raising your hand. Priority is given to the member who introduced the motion provided they claim the floor properly.

   Members who have not yet spoken on the pending motion are given priority over those who have already spoken. No member shall speak more than twice on the same motion in the same day.

5. **Can I withdraw my motion after making it?**
   After receiving recognition by the Chair, you may withdraw your motion by saying "I move to withdraw the motion." This is only allowed if the Presiding Officer has not stated the question to the assembly. At this point, the Presiding Officer will check for objections, and if no one objects, the motion is officially withdrawn. If any member objects, the Chair begins the vote to withdraw, which requires a majority.

   If the Presiding Officer has already stated the question to the assembly, the motion now belongs to the group and can no longer be withdrawn. The debate will continue as normal.

6. **Can I change my motion after someone seconds it?**
   If you wish to change a motion after it has been accepted for discussion, you may make an amendment. This may be done by saying "I move to amend the motion by..." and stating how you would like to change the motion. This may be used to separate a motion into two separate debates, clarify language, add details, or remove unwanted parts.

   The motion to amend requires a second and a majority vote. If the amendment is to be debated, it must be done prior to returning to the original motion. For example, Motion 1 is debated, then motioned to amend the wording as Motion 2. Motion 2 must obtain a second, be discussed, and either accepted or rejected prior to returning to the original debate of Motion 1 (with any changes if accepted).

7. **What's the difference between amending a motion and making a new motion?**
   Amending a motion changes the wording or details of an existing motion currently on the floor. It must directly relate to and stay on the same subject as the original motion.

Making a new motion introduces a separate and independent proposal. It does not need to relate to any current discussion because no other main motion shall be on the floor for debate.

Discussion and Voting

1. **What is a quorum?**
   A quorum is the minimum number of voting members who must be present at a meeting to conduct business, hold votes, or make official business. It is often used to prevent minority rule within a group and guarantee that the actions taken represent a fair portion of the organization.

   Many organizations and boards define their quorum requirements within their bylaws. If no official number is specified, the general guideline states that a quorum is a simple majority of all members.

2. **Can we still have discussions without a quorum?**
   If a quorum is not present, the group is still able to hold discussions and share updates. However, they cannot vote on budgets, pass motions, or make official choices on behalf of the organization.

3. **What happens if someone wasn't present when the discussion happened?**
   If someone wasn't present when the discussion happened, they no longer have a vote for that particular motion that was discussed. This is to protect the vote of the assembly and include only those who have all the information rather than those who might vote based on previous beliefs. As such, members who are not present during discussion are not included in quorum for that motion as they are a non-voting member at that point.

4. **Can someone interrupt another person during a meeting?**
   Generally, a member may not interrupt another once they have the floor. If you need to call attention to an issue, the member must address the Presiding Officer. A few examples where an interruption may occur include:

   Point of order
   Point of information
   Point of clarification
   Call for division
   Point of personal privilege
   Request to withdraw a motion

5. **What does it mean to be “out of order”? Who decides that?**
   Being out of order means that a remark, action, or proposed motion violates an organization's house rules, bylaws, or Robert's Rules. This may include speaking without recognition by the Chair, interrupting a speaker, or personal attacks on a member's character. Improper parliamentary procedures, such as bringing up a motion prior to completing discussion on another, can also yield a point of order.

   Any official member can call "point of order", though it may be most utilized by the Chair or keeper of the bylaws and policies of the organization. If order is called with the specific rule that has been broken, the Presiding Officer must immediately make a ruling on whether it is correct (well taken) or incorrect (not well taken).

6. **Does the president/chair get to vote?**
   To maintain impartiality and fairness as the leader of the organization, the Chair does not typically vote. However, it is customary that they have the same vote as any other official member when it changes the outcome, such as in the event of a tie. Additionally, the chair can always vote if the vote is conducted via secret ballot as their impartiality cannot be questioned.

7. **What is an abstention?**
   If a member abstains from a vote, they are making the formal decision to decline voting on the motion. As such, the vote does not count towards an "aye" or a "nay." A member may abstain due to a conflict of interest, any lack of information where the member feels they cannot make an informed decision, or simply personal preference.

   Abstaining members remain in the room during discussion. If a member were to ask for a recusal, they would step away from discussion and leave the room; this member would no longer have the vote or be included in quorum for the motion(s) that were discussed while outside the room.

   It is important to note that abstaining members still count towards a quorum. If an abstention is made on a motion that requires a majority or a certain proportion of votes (such as two-thirds), it may affect the outcome by acting as a "no" vote due to lowering the proportion.

8. **When should you use a voice vote versus a rising vote?**
   Voice voting is the standard and fastest method of voting. It is often used for routine decisions where there are non-controversial motions, such as approving meeting minutes. This method can be imprecise as it is up to the Chair's discretion on which side prevails

during the vote. If a member feels that a vocal vote is too close to call, they may request verification of the vote by saying "I call for a division." This statement immediately moves the vote into a ballot or a rising vote.

A rising vote, or standing up, may be used where a voice vote is too close or where members want a visible tally. It tends to be more precise and ensures each vote receives equal weight. This form is still a public vote and therefore subject to peer pressure. A show of hands is an accepted alternative to standing up in this type of vote.

9. **When should you use a secret ballot?**
   A secret ballot is only required when stated in an organization's bylaws, the assembly votes for it, or for disciplinary actions carried out through formal trial process. Many organizations' bylaws require a secret ballot for the election of officers. If the secret ballot is bylaw-mandated, a member may not vote to suspend the rules to utilize a voting method previously described.

   If a voice or rising vote is typically used for a motion, but a member feels the outcome may be impacted by peer pressure, they may "move to vote by secret ballot," which requires a majority vote before it can proceed. Finally, it is customary to vote by secret ballot for the final vote on the expulsion of a member or removal of an officer in a formal trial to limit bias and ensure accuracy.

Common Motions

1. **What is a motion to table?**
   A motion to table would be used to suspend debate and any further consideration of the motion until a later time. This may be used if there is an unexpected or time-sensitive issue that arises, such as a guest speaker's arrival or essential report that must be heard. It can also be utilized to pause debate to handle an administrative issue. The motion may be made by stating "I move to table." This motion requires a second and a majority vote.

   If a member wishes to resume the debate, they may "move to take from the table." A second and a majority vote is required, but debate is not allowed.

2. **What's the difference between "table" and "postpone"?**
   A motion to table simply stops debate temporarily for urgent business and requires a motion to take from the table to resume discussion. However, a motion to postpone is used to delay discussion until a specific time, meeting, or date due to needing more information or time. The discussion is automatically added to the agenda on the date to which it was postponed.

A member may make the motion to postpone by stating "I move to postpone the discussion until..." and stating a specified time. This motion requires a second and may be debated. If needed, the motion can be amended to change the time to which it is postponed. This action requires a majority vote. If a member wishes to specify a group in charge of obtaining more information, they may state, "I move to refer the matter to the ____ committee." All rules for postponement also apply to committee referrals. Often, the motion to approve a budget is postponed until the next regular meeting to allow adequate time for any changes that may be requested.

3. **How do I end the debate?**
   The Presiding Officer may move into a vote following a natural lull in discussion. If a member wishes to move into a vote themselves, they must be recognized by the Chair and may state one of the following:

   Informal: "I call the question"
   Formal: "I move to the previous question"

   Both forms are accepted and may be guided by the level of formality during the meeting. This motion requires a second and a two-thirds vote to pass. It is unable to be debated or discussed. If the motion passes, the group moves into a vote right away on the active motion. If it fails, discussion continues.

4. **What's the difference between recessing and adjourning?**
   A recess is a short intermission for meals, counting ballots, or resting that suspends the meeting temporarily. When recess ends, the assembly immediately resumes at the point where it was interrupted. If a member wishes to call an intermission, they may say, "I move that we recess for..." and include the time period. This motion requires a second and majority vote, but it shall not be debated.

   An adjournment is the official closing and termination of the meeting. At this time, any unfinished business must wait until the next regular meeting unless a special conference is called. To call for adjournment, a member states, "I move that we adjourn." Similarly, this requires a second and majority vote with no discussion.

5. **How do I bring something back up that we already voted on?**
   If a member wishes to enter into discussion on a motion that was already voted upon for that day, they may "move to reconsider the vote on..." such motion. This is traditionally utilized if new information or changed circumstances arise after the vote has been completed. Such a motion can only be made by someone who voted on the prevailing or

winning side and must be on the same day as the original vote. The member may interrupt the speaker with this motion. It requires a second, discussion, and majority vote. If the motion to reconsider passes, the original question returns to the floor as if it was never voted on. If it fails, the original decision remains.

6. **Can we make a motion while another motion is being discussed?**
   A separate and unrelated motion cannot be made while another motion is being discussed. The only motions that can be made are those directly relating to the one in debate, including amendments, motion to table, motion to postpone, or call to question.

7. **How can I request information during discussion?**
   To formally request information or ask a factual question during discussion, a member would state "point of information" followed by their question. This may interrupt the speaker and is not a debatable action. So long as the question is factual in nature, it does not count against a member's speaking rights.

8. **How can I correct something that was said in the debate?**
   If something was mentioned during debate that is factually incorrect, a member may make a "point of clarification" by stating as much. The member would then explain or fix a misunderstood or poorly worded statement made during the discussion. So long as it is not used to gather new facts or include an opinion, this action does not count against a member's speaking rights.

9. **What happens if I want to do something that is against Robert's Rules?**
   If a member wanted to perform an action that traditionally is not included in Robert's Rules, they may request "I move to suspend the rules." This request may interrupt the speaker and does require a second. While it requires a two-thirds majority, it cannot be debated.

   Common examples of why a member may motion to suspend the rules include changing the order of the agenda, allowing a non-member to speak, extending debate time or voting on multiple closely related motions together.

10. **What is a "personal privilege"?**
    This motion can be used to make a formal request or interruption during a meeting for a personal comfort issue, urgent need, or if there is an attack on an individual's reputation. The member may interrupt the speaker in a respective manner to make such a motion, and it cannot be debated.

Common examples of when a member may use a point of personal privilege include requesting a bathroom break, stating the speaker is unable to be heard clearly, or requesting to leave the room due to an illness or urgent emergency. Other examples may include addressing the group for a personal matter, formally introducing a guest, or as a form of objection when another person makes a false statement regarding a member's character or integrity.