

Making Meetings Work

Robert's Rules of Order at MRU

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Monday, September 28, 2020

I've written these notes to give me¹ some structure while talking with you about Robert's Rules. There are a couple of handouts that have been formatted so as to have a whole bunch of information on a few pages that are useful summaries. There are web resources that are useful detailed reference materials.

1 The Purposes of Parliamentary Rules of Order

We adopt rules of order so that:

- Decisions are made. Robert's Rules of Order are designed for the purposes of moving decision making bodies toward decisions.² To that end, the rules require that only one thing be discussed at a time and interrupting is only allowed for urgent matters.
- Decisions are made transparently. That is, Robert's Rules of Order are designed so that when a decision has been made, all members of the decision making body understand what decision was made and how that decision was made.
- Decisions are made democratically. There's more to this statement than saying *majority rules*. Subgroups of the entire decision making body are all granted some rights and these rights are protected by the rules. In particular, the following groups all have specific sets of rights:
 - super-majorities (greater than two thirds of the body),
 - majorities (greater than half of the body),
 - large minorities (greater than one third of the body),
 - individuals (in attendance at meetings), and

¹I really do mean that these are primarily for me. I'm happy to provide them to you after this session. But, they're for me. I'm not bothering with a well formatted bibliography. I'm not proofreading them carefully for typographical errors. I'm not proofreading for clarity or to eliminate stylistic oddities.

²It isn't appropriate for groups of people assembled for purposes other than making decisions to follow Robert's Rules.

– absentees.

Unfortunately, sometimes people take advantage of our imperfect knowledge of the details of the rules – the book is over 700 pages long. I believe that improving our knowledge and our confidence to use our knowledge is the best way to protect our rights. That does not mean that we all need to learn all 700 pages of the book. We can become more effective in meetings by understanding a few principles and having a summary handy during meetings.

That said, I want to reiterate that the rules do not have to be rigorously applied in all meetings. The rules themselves are quite clear on that. Meetings of small groups can be less formal than meetings of large groups.

2 Robert’s Rules of Order

The system of parliamentary rules that have been adopted at MRU is Robert’s Rules of Order. A twelfth edition of Robert’s Rules [2] came out at the beginning of this month. I don’t yet have a copy of the newest edition so I don’t really know what has changed. I did search online and found a page that summarized the changes. The changes do not appear to be large. I am interested to see the changes to section 51 on “Reports of Boards and Committees” and I rather wish I had a copy of the book for the purposes of presenting the content of the new appendix entitled “Sample Rules for Electronic Meetings.” For more details on the changes see this link.³

The MRFA had and may still have a number of copies of the eleventh edition of the book. For the most part, the terminology has not changed and thus the eleventh edition (or pretty much any earlier edition) will still be useful for those of us who like to have hard copies of things.

2.1 Valid Meetings, Meeting Preparation, and Quorum

For large groups, it is unreasonable to expect that everyone is present all of the time. Robert’s Rules and bylaws set a threshold for how many members of a group must be present for decisions to be authorized. This threshold is called quorum. For General Faculties Council (GFC), the number is 50% (rounded up) of the members (where vacant positions aren’t counted toward the number of members).

For complicated motions, it is unreasonable to expect members to understand them on short notice. Thus, Robert’s Rules and bylaws specify the manner in which meetings can be called and when meeting materials must be made available for members. For GFC, meeting materials must be distributed at least four business days before the meetings.

In many cases, the bylaws for GFC also hold for other MRU committees. Thus, members of standing committees of GFC, Faculty Councils and Department Councils should all be aware of the GFC bylaws.

³Sorry to not include a visible link here. The link is too long to fit on one line and thus becomes quite ugly when typeset.

That said, it is permissible to consider items that have not been brought forward in a timely fashion. Doing so requires that a super-majority (i.e. 2/3 of the members) are willing to suspend their rights to advanced notice.

2.2 Precedence Rules

Robert's Rules provide detailed precedence rules. These rules specify what kinds of interruptions are allowed. You can find a version of the precedence rules at:

<http://www.rulesonline.com/rror--01.htm>

A simpler version is as follows:

Type of Motion	Specific Motions
Main Motions	Main Motion Accept a Report Adopt a Recommendation
Subsidiary Motions	Lay on Table Previous Question Limit Debate Postpone Commit Refer back Amend
Incidental Motions	Question of Order Suspension of Rules Voting
Privileged Motions	Adjourn Recess Question of Privilege Orders of the day

The basic idea of the table above is that while a motion of one type is being entertained, one cannot make a motion of a type listed above it. For example, while a question of privilege is being considered (i.e. someone has said that they can't hear what's going on), one can't amend a motion (because someone can't hear what's going on).

2.3 Properties of Motions

The rules of order specify properties for each of the kinds of motions. In my opinion, it is best to keep handy a sheet with a table of motion types including a listing these properties when one is attending a meeting where Robert's Rules are quite strictly adhered to. These properties are "on-off" properties.

- Must be seconded,
- Open for discussion,

- Can be amended, and
- May be reconsidered.

Also, for motions that are put to a vote, the requirements for a motion to pass may be either a simple majority or a super-majority. Super-majorities are required when the motion restricts the rights of some members of the assembly. Requests to reconsider results of motions is only allowed by the winning side.

2.4 Main Motions and Amendments

If everything was perfectly well thought out and everybody agreed on everything, we would only have main motions (and motions to adjourn). A main motion introduces a piece of business. In particular, it introduces a decision item. In the simplest case, the motion is made, the motion is seconded, the motion is discussed⁴, and then a vote is taken.

The next simplest case is the case where somebody wants to change the motion in some way. This can be because the person overall likes the motion but has realized that an important special case is not covered by the original language. Or it can be because a person doesn't like the main motion and wants to limit it in some way. In any event, when an amendment is moved, it needs to be seconded. At that point, the subject matter of the discussion shifts. The amendment is discussed and then the amendment is voted on. If the amendment passes, the original motion has been modified. Discussion continues on the modified motion. If the amendment does not pass, the original motion is unchanged and discussion continues on the unmodified motion.

Just as main motions can be amended, amendments can be amended. However, Robert's rules specify that amendments to amendments cannot be amended. You can see from the fact that I just described it that this is a logical possibility. However, three levels of amendments is deemed to be confusing enough that it is forbidden.

I'm going to leave a bit of blank space here for me to draw on this PDF to illustrate this through two analogies: a small stack of plates and bracket matching.

⁴I'll leave aside rules for discussion for the time being.

2.4.1 Moving and Seconding

The meaning of making a motion is that you want the motion to go be approved. In particular, you are not allowed to speak against a motion that you have moved.

The meaning of seconding a motion is that you want the motion to be discussed. You do not have to want the motion to be approved. You must think that it is worthy of debate.

2.5 Rules of Discussion

There are four main rules for how discussion of motions and amendments is to be conducted.

The first rule is that interruptions are only allowed under certain special circumstances:

- To complain about an inability to access information (because of noise, etc.). This is done by calling out “point of privilege.”
- To object to a procedure (or a personal affront). This is done by calling out “point of order.” Among other things, this can happen when the chair of a meeting forgets to call a vote and moves on in the agenda. Another version of this is to call for “orders of the day”. The meaning of this is that you feel that the agenda is not being followed.
- To request information. This is done by calling out “point of information”. While you can interrupt the speaker, you don’t have to. If there’s something that you want to do and can’t remember the right phrasing or can’t remember the rules around it, you can ask the chair for help.
- Appeal a ruling by the chair. In the event that the chair of the meeting makes a ruling on something (such as deciding that something is not germane to the discussion), you may appeal the ruling. This must be seconded and may be debated.

The list above isn’t quite exhaustive. But, if you don’t find yourself on the complete list (or have something that is obviously pressing such as a need to call out “fire”), you must wait until the meeting chair “recognizes” you. That is, you have to take your turn. In a large meeting, the chair (or an assistant to the chair) will keep a list of people who want to speak.

The second rule is the length of time that a member is allowed to speak. Under normal circumstances a member may speak about a motion for up to ten minutes. This can be changed. Changing it requires a 2/3 majority.

The third rule is that members are allowed to speak about a motion twice. Again, this can be changed. Changing it requires a 2/3 majority.

The fourth rule is that when members speak, what they say must be germane to the motion. That is, it has to be on topic.

Since I'm running this session, I will add a bit of personal taste. I prefer it if people start their comments with something very much like either of the following two phrases:

1. "I would like to speak in favour of the motion."
2. "I would like to speak against the motion."

There's another rule that I don't consider to be a main rule. Robert's Rules state that people are not allowed to read their discussion from notes. At MRU, there have been a number of occasions where a member of an assembly has asked the chair if they can use notes while speaking and the chair has allowed it. In my opinion, the purpose of the rule is to make filibustering more difficult. The cases where a member has asked to use notes is not to filibuster but to aid them in presenting complex arguments.

2.6 Enforcing the Rules of Order

It is the job of the chair of the meeting to enforce the rules of order.⁵ However, meeting chairs are not perfect at this and so there are rules that allow members to help enforce the rules of order.

2.7 Other Kinds of Motions

As you saw in the discussion of motion precedence, there are a bunch of other kinds of motions. I will discuss some of them here. I wish I could say that I've rank ordered them in terms of importance but all of them are important in some circumstances. I feel more like I've selected some at random and that I'm forced to avoid completeness because of time constraints.

2.7.1 Adjourn

According to the rules, a motion to adjourn requires a second and a vote. In practise, the chair of a meeting often ask for a motion to adjourn when the agenda for the meeting has been completed. Quite often a chair may only ask for a mover and not a second and may jokingly tell people to vote with their feet.

2.7.2 Point of Privilege

In in person settings, this can be quite important. If you can't hear someone who is speaking, you may interrupt the proceedings with the statement "point of privilege" and then explain the problem.⁶ The chair may call for a vote to

⁵Robert's Rules allow for a bailiff to help with the enforcement. We have never had to resort to calling security at MRU.

⁶Typically, these involve statements like, "Could you repeat that? I couldn't hear because of noise coming from the hallway."

decide how to deal with the problem. In practise at MRU, raising the issue has always been enough to resolve the issue.

I'm not sure how this will work in an electronic setting since the problem may be related to your own connectivity in which case you may not be able to state that you have a problem.

2.7.3 Ending Debate

There are two commonly used phrases to do this:

1. I move the previous question.
2. I call the question.

In my view, this is an extremely serious motion and should only be used when one is under the impression that the points being raised are repetitious. It requires a seconder and it requires a super-majority (2/3) to pass. This motion is not open for discussion. A vote is held immediately.

2.7.4 Send Something to a Committee for Further Study

This allows one to put off a motion. In my opinion, this motion has not been used as often as it should have been. Such a motion may include a time frame for when the motion will come back. Note that if an appropriate committee does not exist, a motion of this type may include creating a committee to examine the content of the motion.

2.7.5 Table a Motion

This allows one to put off a motion until a later specified time.

2.7.6 Postpone Indefinitely

This allows one to put off a motion for an unspecified period. The motion may not be brought back during the current meeting.

3 Idiosyncrasies at MRU

Both MRU and the MRFA have formally adopted Robert's Rules of Order as the system that we use to conduct meetings. However, these rules can be overridden by higher authorities. I'm not aware of anything in the Post-Secondary Learning Act or any other laws of the land that contradict Robert's Rules.

The old GFC bylaws allowed for "friendly amendments". These are *not* part of Robert's Rules and are not part of the new GFC bylaws. You may encounter people using "friendly amendments". The idea is that the when a motion was moved, the mover mis-spoke or made a glaring oversight and a friendly amendment fixes the problem without the annoyance of having a vote.

While such changes are intended in a friendly manner (hence the name), they can *and have* lead to confusion at MRU and thus are no longer permitted.

4 Online Meetings

As I mentioned earlier, I haven't yet read the new appendix in Robert's Rules devoted to electronic meetings. Also, I have limited experience with electronic meetings – probably no more experience than any of you have. So, my comments on this are brief and are to be taken with a grain of salt.

The amount of time that it takes for people to start talking in an electronic meeting is longer than the amount that it takes in person. A person may need to remember to un-mute themselves. After remembering, the act of un-muting may include finding their mouse and then finding the un-mute button. I recommend waiting the amount of time that one would normally wait for someone to speak and then silently counting slowly to eight before jumping to the conclusion that nobody wants to speak.

References

- [1] *What's New in the 12th Edition of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised.*
- [2] H.M. Robert, D.H. Honemann, T.J. Balch, D.E. Seabold, and S. Gerber. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, Deluxe 12th edition.* PublicAffairs, 2020.