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# Meetings Parliamentary Style

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## What is Parliamentary Procedure?

It is a set of rules for conduct at meetings that allows everyone to be heard and to make decisions without confusion. It is typically used for formal meetings (i.e. City Councils, Planning Commissions or a Board of Supervisors).

## Why is Parliamentary Procedure Important?

It is a time-tested method for conducting business at meetings and public gatherings. It can be adapted to fit the needs of any organization. Today, Robert's Rules of Order, newly revised, is the basic handbook of operation for most clubs, organizations and groups. Below is a typical example:

1. Call to order.
2. Role call of members present.
3. Reading of minutes of last meeting.
4. Officers' reports.
5. Committee reports.
6. Special orders- Important business previously designated for consideration at this meeting.
7. Unfinished business.
8. New business.
9. Announcements.
10. Adjournment.

The method used by members to express themselves is in the form of "moving motions." A motion is a proposal that the entire membership takes action or stands on an issue. Individual members can:

1. Call to order.
2. Second motions.
3. Debate motions.
4. Vote on motions.

## **Parliamentary Procedure: Rules to Run a Meeting**

Here's an example of a meeting using Parliamentary Procedure, and then some tips on how to use it. NOTE: Your group may not need to be so formal – we recommend adapting it to your needs and desired level of formality.

### **ROLES AND POSITIONS**

**Quorum:** Number of people needed to hold a formal group meeting under law and to make decisions.

*Why this is important:* Only the group as a whole has the power to decide things for the group. No individual or small group can make decisions on behalf of the whole commission, so at least a certain percentage of the total group (this percentage is set ahead of time) needs to be there to make decisions. If a quorum is present, the group can make decisions by its usual decision-making rule (majority rule, consensus, etc.).

**The Chairperson:** This person is the facilitator of the meeting (or s/he assigns someone else to be facilitator). S/he keeps the meeting moving along through the agenda, recognizes people to speak, and enforces the bylaws and rules of the meeting.

*Why this is important:* Having the Chair recognize people to speak (usually when s/he raises his or her hand or something) prevents different people from trying to talk at the same time, which can make a meeting really chaotic.

**The Secretary:** This person takes notes of the meeting, and sometimes distributes them.

*Why this is important:* It's good to keep track of what is discussed and decided at meetings.

**Other Officers:** Sometimes there are other officers like a Treasurer, who keeps track of the money, or Vice-Chair, who takes over if the Chair is not there. Also, sometimes different committees (smaller working groups within the commission) also have a chair or contact person.

*Why this is important:* All the officers together are sometimes called the Executive Committee, and they might meet together to help guide the governing body, but remember that only the full group (a meeting with quorum) has the power to make a decision.

### **MOTIONS**

What is a motion, and when do I use it?

Basically, when you make a motion, you are just *proposing an idea or suggestion for the group to take action on*. In regular speech, you would probably just say “I think that...” or “We should...” or “I feel that...” However, when you use Parliamentary Procedure, you say, “I move that we...” or “I make a motion to...” because you want to make it clear that you are proposing something you want the group to *do*.

For example, you might say, “I move that we buy a coffee maker for the office” or “I make a motion that we support ‘Increase the Peace’ day in San Francisco schools.”

*Why this is important:* “I move” makes it clear to everyone that you are proposing something that the group should *do* (take action) and not just your thoughts on something. For example, you might say, just to express your opinion, “I think that using Parliamentary Procedure is annoying”; but if you want to make it clear that you want the group to take action and change its policy, you would say, “I move that we do not use Parliamentary Procedure any more.”

Seconding a motion

In order to have a motion discussed (“put on the table”), a second person needs to second the motion after it has been made *by someone else*. By seconding a motion you are basically saying you agree. So, for example, the first person would say “I move that we buy a coffeemaker” and s/he would wait for a second person to say “I second the motion.” If no one seconds the motion, it “dies” (it isn’t discussed by the group).

*Why this is important:* Requiring a second for motions ensures that the group won’t spend time talking about something that only one person cares about.

General consent motion

If the proposal being decided is not controversial (something like approving the minutes or ending the meeting), and the Chair thinks everyone will agree, s/he can say “If there are no objections...” [The Chair then *pauses for a few seconds to allow for any objections*. If there are none, s/he continues:] “The minutes are approved.” If someone objects, then the group has a discussion and votes in the regular way. Often all these types of items are grouped under a *consent calendar* at a specific place on the meeting agenda.

*Why this is important:* It saves a lot of time not to have to vote on every little thing, especially when it’s something that everyone probably agrees on.

You cannot introduce a new motion while another motion is being discussed.

Basically, this means that if you’re talking about one person’s proposal, you can’t start talking about another proposal unless you finish talking about the first one.

If someone makes a motion (gives an idea about what we should do), all comments need to be about that particular motion until the group votes on it, or until the person who made the motion withdraws the motion (s/he says “forget about it, I changed my mind and I take back my proposal”). *However, there is one exception to this rule (see Amendments below).*

*Why this is important:* This is useful because it is confusing to talk about several different ideas at the same time.

Amendments: You can make amendments to someone’s motion. For example, if someone makes a motion to buy a coffee maker, you can suggest that you also buy coffee beans. Then, the person who suggested the coffee maker has to decide whether to agree to accept the *amendment* (amendment = a change to an original idea). If s/he does accept it, then the group talks about the amended motion (coffee maker and coffee beans) and if s/he doesn’t accept the change, the group needs to vote whether to accept the amendment (coffee beans) before they vote on the original motion (coffee). So in the above example, if the person who motioned to buy a coffee maker accepts changing to buy coffee beans too, then the group would discuss and vote on the coffee maker and coffee beans idea. If s/he doesn’t agree, then the group would vote first on the coffee beans idea (the amendment). If the vote fails, they go back to talking about just the coffee maker (without beans).

*But what would you ever do with a coffee maker without coffee beans anyway?!*

## **GENERIC AGENDA FOR A MEETING USING PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE**

An *agenda* is a plan or a schedule for how a meeting will run. It lets people know in advance what will be talked about and in what order, and during the meeting it gives the facilitator (the person who runs the meeting) a way to keep the meeting moving along. Sometimes agendas even have time limits next to each item (topic) to keep things on track. If you want something to be on the agenda, you usually have to request it at the previous meeting or talk to the chair or secretary in advance.

### **Call to Order (Starting the Meeting)**

The Chairperson starts the meeting.

*Why this is important:* One person is responsible for getting everyone’s attention and making sure the meeting starts on time.

### **Roll Call**

Not all groups do roll call at the beginning of the meeting. If they do, the secretary will usually call each person’s name to see if he or she is present.

*Why this is important:* Monitoring attendance is a way to see who's absent or late, and to make sure you have a quorum. Also, you can use the roll call time to have each person give a brief check-in.

### **Approval of the Agenda/Minutes**

The members of the group vote or agree that the meeting's agenda is okay. They can take things off the agenda – for example, if someone who was going to present information is not ready – and they can change the order around. However, they generally can't add things because people may not be prepared to discuss that item. The Chairperson asks everyone to look over the agenda and make sure it's correct.

If s/he is more formal, s/he might ask for a motion to approve the agenda, and then someone will second the motion, and the Chair will say "If there are no objections, the agenda is approved." If s/he is less formal, s/he will skip the asking for the motion and seconding, and just say "If there are no objections, the agenda is approved." If there are no corrections, the agenda is approved. The same process can be done for the minutes.

*Why this is important:* To make sure there are no mistakes in the agenda and minutes.

### **Reports from Staff, Committees and Working Groups**

The Chair asks for reports from these groups in the order listed on the agenda. Usually this time is used for the staff/committees to update the larger group on what they've been working on, answer questions they were sent to research, make recommendations, etc.

*Why this is important:* In a large group a lot of the work is often done in smaller committees, but it is important that the whole group knows what's going on since only the whole group can take official action on any issues. For example, a committee could research an issue, then *recommend* a decision on the issue to the full group. Only the full group can make that decision, but it's okay for a committee to look into the issue for it.

### **Business**

This section is where group discussion and decision-making happens. In order to prepare members to decide (or in the case of a commission, to make the public aware that the issue is on the table), any item that could lead to a decision has to be listed on the agenda under "Discussion and possible action re:..." ("re" is short for regarding). Then there follows a brief but clear description of the item. Sometimes the agenda will also list the person who asked for the item to be put on the agenda. This section is usually divided into two parts, old business and new business.

### **Old (Unfinished) Business**

In this section, the Chair introduces any unfinished agenda items from the last meeting. This business is handled in the same way as new business.

### New Business

New business, as the name says, is anything that's being discussed for the first time at the meeting. Even though it's called *new business*, it still has to be on the agenda before the meeting, since the group can only discuss items that are on the agenda.

When discussing action items, there is an outline that the discussion usually follows:

- The Chair introduces the item (topic), and then asks the person that put the item on the agenda to speak. That person presents the item. After discussion, someone makes a motion regarding the item. Usually, the person who put the item on the agenda wants the group to take some sort of action, so often this person makes a motion, explaining their idea. For example, s/he put "Upcoming 'Increase the Peace Day' in San Francisco public schools" on the agenda. At the meeting, s/he would describe the event, background information, etc., and then make a motion, "I move that we support the event."
- If someone agrees, s/he seconds the motion.
- The Chair repeats the motion so everyone clearly understands it, and asks for comments. At this point, the chair can propose that the discussion be limited to five minutes, or each speaker limited to 30 seconds, etc., if the group agrees.
- Group members discuss the motion, its pros and cons, etc.
- Someone can propose to amend the motion.
- After time is up, if the debate is winding down, or it's obvious the group needs to move on, the Chair asks if the group is ready for a vote.
- The Chair then needs to restate the motion with any added amendments, so everyone clearly knows what they are voting on. The chair asks for any final public comment at this time. The Chair also needs to explain how the group will vote (roll call vote is usually not necessary and is very time-consuming, so the group can use raising hands or saying "aye" (yes) and "no"; roll call vote means calling everyone's name out and polling their vote).
- The group votes, and the Chair announces the results.

Usually, the last item in the new business section is setting the *next meeting's agenda*. Anyone can propose items to be on the next meeting's agenda.

### **Announcements**

At this time, the staff or any group members can make announcements to everyone.

### **Adjournment**

This is the end of the meeting. If the meeting is more formal, the Chair might ask for a motion to adjourn the meeting, and then a second. If less formal, the Chair will probably just say, “If there is no further business (pause) the meeting is adjourned.”