

Essential Parliamentary Procedure for Schools



► INTRODUCTION

In order to run good meetings, order is necessary.

Rules create order as long as everyone knows them and is willing to follow them.

There are some simple rules that will let any group run good meetings. They are easy to understand but sometimes hard to do.

These rules are called “parliamentary procedure.” Some of them are over 500 years old.

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A “parliament” is a group of people chosen to make decisions, and “parliamentary procedure” means the rules they should follow in making those decisions. The word comes from the French word “parler,” to speak.

Many organizations run their meetings according to Robert’s Rules of Order, which is the most common book giving the rules of parliamentary procedure. The book is long and complicated. This paper gives you the essentials.

These principles are fair to everyone. They are essential to our democracy.

▶ **STARTING THE MEETING**

The group must choose a leader.

This person is like an orchestra conductor. He or she helps the group to have good discussions and make good decisions.

The leader announces the beginning and the end of the meeting.

The leader suggests an agenda (list of things to discuss in order). The group can change the agenda at the beginning of the meeting by majority vote. Later in the meeting, the group can change the agenda by a two-thirds vote.

The group discusses each item on the agenda in order.

▶ **WHAT THE LEADER CAN DO**

The leader has the right to tell people what to do so that everyone follows the procedure that the group has agreed upon.

The leader does not have the right to make decisions about the items himself or herself. The leader is the servant of the group, and the group is the final decider.

▶ **SPEAKING**

When one item is being discussed, everyone has to talk about just that item. If other subjects come up, they must be discussed later, unless the group decides to amend (change) the agenda.

During discussion, each person gets a chance to speak in turn. No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.

One good way to follow this rule is to use a “talking stick” that is passed from one person to the next. Whoever holds the stick has the right to speak.

Another way is for each person to raise their hand when they want to speak. The leader calls their name or nods at them to recognize them (give them permission to speak).

The leader has to enforce this rule. It is hard to do, but necessary! If someone starts to speak when it is not their turn, the leader should interrupt them to make sure that the rules are followed.

People must talk about the proposals on the agenda, and not about other people.

There are six kinds of things that no one may say during a meeting:

1. Personal remarks (remarks about another person’s appearance, background, personality, etc.)
2. Insulting remarks, personal attacks, or vulgar language
3. Inflammatory language (emotional and negative language)
4. Talking about why another member wants to do something (their motives)
5. Criticizing past actions of the group (except that if the group is discussing a past action, it is OK to criticize it).
6. Subjects that don’t relate to what is being discussed (that are not germane)

Interrupting is never allowed (except for a point of order if necessary).

► **DECIDING**

In order to make decisions, someone in the group should propose an action. For example:

I move that we ask permission of the principal to hold a bake sale and send the profits to the victims of the hurricane.

“I move” means that you want the group to do something. The “motion” is the proposal that you suggest. The person who suggests it is the “maker” of the motion.

There have to be at least two people who want to talk about the idea for the group to spend time on it. Another person shows that she wants to talk about the idea by calling out “second” loudly once the motion has been made.

Once a motion has been made and seconded, the leader should say out loud what it is. This makes sure that everyone understands the idea.

If a motion is complicated, it should be written down. This helps everyone know exactly what is being discussed.

Here are the eight steps to process a motion:

1. A member makes a motion
2. Another member seconds the motion
3. The leader states the motion
4. Members discuss the motion and amend (change) it if they wish to.
5. When everyone has had a chance to speak once or twice, the leader states the motion again and calls for the vote.
6. Members vote.
7. The leader states what the result of the vote is, whether the motion passes or fails, and what will happen next as a result.
8. The leader states the next item of business.

► **WHEN RULES ARE BROKEN**

If someone is breaking the rules and the leader does not stop them, another member can say “point of order.”

If this happens, all business stops while the person explains what rule has been broken. The leader makes a ruling (says whether the “point of order” is correct or not). Once the point of order has been dealt with, discussion continues.

People may also make a point of order about something the leader has done, if it breaks the rules. The leader makes a ruling about his own actions, which seems strange, but is the way this system works.

If the leader makes a ruling and a person disagrees with it, the person can say “appeal.” If another person says “second,” then the group must decide whether to sustain (agree with) the leader’s ruling, or not.

► **VOTING**

The leader has the job of taking each vote and announcing the results.

To take the vote, the leader says, “All those in favor say ‘aye.’ [Everyone who is in favor says “aye.”] All those opposed say ‘no.’” [Everyone who is against says “no.”] The leader then announces the result:

The ayes have it, the motion passes, and we will request permission to hold a bake sale.

OR

The noes have it, the motion fails, and we will not request permission to do this project.

A majority vote means that more than half of the people who vote, vote “yes.” Those people form the majority. The people who make up less than half of the voters form the minority.

It is a basic principle of democracy that the decision of the majority of the members voting at a meeting is the decision of the group as a whole. The minority must go along with it.

A two-thirds vote means that at least two-thirds of the people who vote, vote yes.

If there are the same number of votes in favor of the motion and against the motion, the vote is tied. A tied vote fails.

If someone doesn’t want to vote, they can abstain. This means that they are doing nothing. Their voice is not included in the result of the vote.

► **ENDING THE MEETING**

The meeting ends when all business is finished, or when members vote to adjourn (end) the meeting. The leader cannot adjourn the meeting on her own.

► CONCLUSION

There is much more to parliamentary procedure. Here are some core democratic principles:

- Order is necessary for good meetings.
- Everyone must receive notice (be told about) the meeting ahead of time, so everyone can come if they wish to.
- In order to be fair to everyone, at least a minimum number of members must attend the meeting. This number is called the “quorum,” usually a majority (more than half) of the members.
- A group must hear from all its members and respect all its members to make good decisions.
- The leader is the servant of the group, and the group is the final authority.
- If a majority vote in favor, that is the decision of the group and the minority must go along with it.
- Courtesy and respect are essential.

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