



# Speak with Authority Using Robert's Words

This article provides 28 essential rules for discussion and debate. Jurassic Parliament has collected them from *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th edition*, the official and current version of Robert's Rules of Order.

For each rule we give our own phrasing, and then provide the exact quote from Robert's Rules of Order. (In some instances words have been deleted.) The word "implicit" means that in our view, the rule stated is assumed by Robert's Rules, or is a logical derivative of the principles on which Robert's Rules are based.

With this article, you have a ready reference guide to the rules you need for fair and efficient discussion. You will be able to speak with authority using the exact words of Robert's Rules of Order. May your meetings be courteous, fair and productive, and produce excellent decisions for your stakeholders!

## Contents

A. Seven Essential Rules for Discussion	3
B. Formal Debate versus Small Board Discussion	4
C. More Essential Rules	7
D. Authority of Chair and Members	9



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Speak with Authority Using Robert's Words  
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## A. SEVEN ESSENTIAL RULES FOR DISCUSSION

**1. All members have an equal right to speak, to make motions, and to vote.**

“A member of an assembly, in the parliamentary sense, is a person entitled to full participation in its proceedings, that is, the right to attend meetings, to make motions, to speak in debate, and to vote.” p. 3

**2. Non-members do not have the right to speak, to make motions, or to vote.**

“Any nonmembers allowed in the hall during a meeting, as guests of the organization, have no rights with reference to the proceedings.” p. 648 (Note that a group may invite anyone it wishes, such as staff or guests, to speak.)

**3. One subject is discussed at a time.**

“One subject at a time [from the year 1581]. When a Motion has been made that Matter must receive a Determination by the Question, or be laid aside by the general Sense of the House, before another be entertain’d.” pp. xxxiii-xxxiv

**4. One person speaks at a time.** implicit

**5. No interrupting (with a few exceptions).**

“When a member has been assigned the floor and has begun to speak—unless he begins to discuss a subject when no motion is pending or speaks longer in debate than the rules of the assembly allow—he cannot be interrupted by another member or by the chair except for one of the following purposes, and then only when the urgency of the situation justifies it...” pp. 383-384

“Although the presiding officer should give close attention to each speaker’s remarks during debate, he cannot interrupt the person who has the floor so long as that person does not violate any of the assembly’s rules and no disorder arises. The presiding officer must never interrupt a speaker simply because he knows more about the matter than the speaker does.” pp. 43-44

**6. Courtesy and respect are required at all times.**

“Speakers must address their remarks to the chair, maintain a courteous tone, and—especially in reference to any divergence of opinion—should avoid injecting a personal note into debate.” p. 43 and implicit

**7. No one may speak a second time until everyone who wishes to do so has spoken once.**

“No one is entitled to the floor a second time in debate on the same motion on the same day as long as any other member who has not spoken on this motion desires the floor.” p. 31; see also p. 379



## B. FORMAL DEBATE VERSUS SMALL BOARD DISCUSSION

The rules given in *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, 11th edition*, are intended for formal debate in large groups (assemblies). Robert also provides special rules for small boards. Robert considers a board of up to about 12 members to be a small board. In this section, we give the rules for formal debate on the left, and the rule for small boards on the right. Below each rule are the relevant quotes for each type of body.

FORMAL DEBATE	SMALL BOARDS
<p><b>8. The presider may not participate in debate nor make motions.</b></p>	<p><b>The presider may participate in debate and make motions</b> (we recommend restraint).</p>
<p>“Except in committees and small boards, the presiding officer should not enter into discussion of the merits of pending questions.” p. 43</p> <p>“Normally, especially in a large body, he [the presider] should have nothing to say on the merits of pending questions.” p. 394</p> <p>[On small boards] “If the chairman is a member, he may, without leaving the chair, speak in informal discussion and in debate, and vote on all questions. Footnote: Informal discussion may be initiated by the chairman himself, which in effect, enables the chairman to submit his own proposals without formally making a motion (although he has the right to make a motion if he wishes).” p. 488</p>	
<p><b>9. A motion must be made before any discussion begins.</b></p>	<p><b>Informal discussion without a motion is allowed.</b> (We recommend requesting a motion as soon as the group is ready for it.)</p>
<p>“Until a matter has been brought before the assembly in the form of a motion proposing a specific action, it cannot be debated.” p. 386</p> <p>[On small boards] “Informal discussion of a subject is permitted while no motion is pending.” p. 488</p>	



<p><b>10. A second is required.</b></p>	<p><b>A second is not needed</b> (unless law or regulation requires it).</p>
<p>“Another member seconds the motion.” p. 32</p> <p>[On small boards] “Motions need not be seconded.” p. 488</p>	
<p><b>11. Members must seek recognition from the presider.</b></p>	<p><b>SAME</b></p>
<p>“Before a member in an assembly can make a motion or speak in debate — the parliamentary name given to any form of discussion of the merits of a motion — he must obtain the floor; that is, he must be recognized by the chair as having the exclusive right to be heard at that time.” p. 29</p> <p>[On small boards] “Members may raise a hand instead of standing when seeking to obtain the floor.” p. 487</p>	
<p><b>12. Members may not speak directly to each other, but must address the presider.</b></p>	<p><b>Members may speak directly to each other.</b> (We recommend that they do not do so, but address all remarks to the presider.)</p>
<p>“Members address only the chair, or address each other through the chair.” p. 23; see also p. 392.</p> <p>[On small boards this permission to speak directly is implicit in references to “informal discussion” on p. 488.]</p>	
<p><b>13. The maker of the motion may speak first.</b></p>	<p><b>SAME</b></p>
<p>“As soon as a member has made a motion, he resumes his seat. He will have the right to speak first in debate, if he wishes, after the chair has stated the question.” p. 34; see also p. 379</p>	



<p><b>14. Speakers should alternate “for” and “against.”</b> p. 379-380</p>	<p><b>There is no need to alternate speakers “for” and “against.”</b></p>
<p>“In cases where the chair knows that persons seeking the floor have opposite opinions on the question, the chair should let the floor alternate, as far as possible, between those favoring and those opposing the measure.” pp. 379-380</p> <p>[On small boards this permission is implicit in references to “informal discussion” on p. 488.]</p>	
<p><b>15. Members are limited to two speeches on each subject per day.</b></p>	<p><b>There is no limit to the number of speeches.</b></p>
<p>“Unless the assembly has a special rule providing otherwise, no member can speak more than twice to the same question on the same day.” pp. 388-389</p> <p>[On small boards] “There is no limit to the number of times a member can speak to a debatable question.” p. 488</p>	
<p><b>16. There is a limit of ten minutes per speech.</b> (We recommend establishing a shorter limit.)</p>	<p><b>SAME</b></p>
<p>“In a non-legislative body or organization that has no special rule relating to the length of speeches, a member, having obtained the floor while a debatable motion is immediately pending, can speak no longer than ten minutes unless he obtains the consent of the assembly.” p. 387</p>	
<p><b>17. Members may “call the question” or move to limit debate.</b></p>	<p><b>Members may do this, but see footnote below.</b></p>
<p>While a debatable question is immediately pending, the allowed length or number of speeches can be reduced or increased, for that question only, by means of the subsidiary motion to <i>Limit or Extend Limits of Debate</i>, adopted by a two-thirds vote. p. 390</p> <p>“If two-thirds of those voting wish to close debate immediately, they can do so by adopting the motion for the <i>Previous Question</i>.” p. 391</p> <p>“Footnote: Motions to close or limit debate, including motions to limit the number of times a member can speak to a question, are in order even in meetings of a small board, although occasions where they are necessary or appropriate may be rarer than in large assemblies.” p. 488</p>	



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## C. MORE ESSENTIAL RULES

**18. Remarks must be relevant to the topic at hand (“germane”).**

“In debate a member’s remarks must be germane to the question before the assembly—that is, his statements must have bearing on whether the immediately pending motion should be adopted.” p. 392; see also pp. xxxiv, 43

**19. Members may not speak about the motives of other members.**

“When a question is pending, a member can condemn the nature or likely consequences of the proposed measure in strong terms, but he must avoid personalities, and under no circumstances can he attack or question the motives of another member.” p. 392; see also p. 43

**20. No arguing.** Implicit. (Note that this rule is fully compatible with forceful debate.)

**21. No inflammatory language.**

“If a member disagrees with a statement by another in regard to an event that both witnessed, he cannot state in debate that the other’s statement ‘is false.’ But he might say, ‘I believe there is strong evidence that the member is mistaken.’ The moment the chair hears such words as ‘fraud,’ ‘liar,’ or ‘lie’ used about a member in debate, he must act immediately and decisively to correct the matter and prevent its repetition.” p. 392, also implicit

**22. Courtesy and respect means:**

- **No personal attacks**
- **No insults, epithets or profanity**
- **No disrespectful body language**
- **No innuendo**
- **No booing, hissing or clapping**

pp. 43 and 392, quoted above, and implicit



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**23. A member may not speak against her own motion.**

“In debate, the maker of a motion, while he can vote against it, is not allowed to speak against his own motion. He need not speak at all, but if he does he is obliged to take a favorable position. If he changes his mind while the motion he made is pending, he can, in effect, advise the assembly of this by asking permission to withdraw the motion.” p. 393

**24. A member may not explain his vote while voting.**

“A member has no right to ‘explain his vote’ during voting, which would be the same as debate at such a time.” p. 408

**25. A member may not comment adversely on (criticize) a prior action of the group unless**  
**(a) the action is being considered for amendment or cancellation, or**  
**(b) she plans to introduce a motion to change or cancel the action at the end of her speech.**

“In debate, a member cannot reflect adversely on any prior act of the society that is not then pending, unless a motion to reconsider, rescind, or amend it is pending, or unless he intends to conclude his remarks by making or giving notice of one of these motions.” p. 393

**26. A member may not make statements which tend to injure the good name of the organization, disturb its well-being, or hamper it in its work.**

“If there is an article on discipline in the bylaws, it may specify a number of offenses outside meetings for which these penalties can be imposed on a member of the organization. Frequently, such an article provides for their imposition on any member found guilty of conduct described, for example, as “tending to injure the good name of the organization, disturb its well-being, or hamper it in its work.” In any society, behavior of this nature is a serious offense properly subject to disciplinary action, whether the bylaws make mention of it or not.” pp. 643-644





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## D. AUTHORITY OF CHAIR AND MEMBERS

**27. The chair is in charge.**

“All persons present at a meeting have an obligation to obey the legitimate orders of the presiding officer.” p. 645

**28. The group is the final authority.**

“If the chair at a meeting acts improperly, a *Point of Order* may be raised, and from the chair’s decision an *Appeal* may be taken. This procedure enables the majority to ensure enforcement of the rules.” p. 650

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Mastering meetings using Robert’s Rules

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