

# How to be objective about subjective comments



What can you do when your colleagues on a board or council say things that you find offensive? What if they are making subjective statements that hurt your feelings? We are living in tough times for civility. People feel free to say things during meetings that can be offensive and challenging.

Robert's Rules of Order offers a simple solution to the problem of subjective, offensive or hurtful remarks during a meeting. It works like this:

- 1) Meetings are held to discuss issues, not personalities.
- 2) Members may not make inappropriate remarks.
- 3) The group decides what remarks are inappropriate.

So the objective answer to “what can I say?” is that the group, by majority vote, decides. (Note that this applies to discussion by the members, within the group, and not to any comments made by the public at a local government meeting.)

Sometimes this feels unsatisfactory! We wish for an outside authority who will settle the matter on our behalf. But it is fundamental to parliamentary procedure, as part of our common law heritage, that the group is the final authority (under the aegis of the law, of course). When there is a majority vote taken at a properly called meeting of your board or council, that is the decision of the body.

Note that the majority has the right to make poor decisions! The vote could be wrong from your perspective. But this method has the advantage of providing an objective answer to subjective questions such as “can he or she say that?”



---

## HERE IS HOW IT ALL WORKS

To start with, the group adopts bylaws or rules of procedure. Sometimes these bylaws or rules state explicitly what may or may not be said.

It is desirable for the group, in those bylaws or rules of procedure, to adopt a parliamentary authority. This is a specific set of rules that governs your meetings. The most common parliamentary authority is *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, just published in its 12th edition. If you have adopted Robert's Rules in your bylaws, then you are governed by its rules, which go into careful detail about what may and may not be said. Read [Inappropriate remarks on nonprofit boards](#) and [Inappropriate remarks on local government councils](#).

When an issue arises, the chair may “call the member to order” to remind them not to use such a term. If the chair fails to act, a member may make a Point of Order. The chair then issues a ruling as to whether the Point of Order is well-taken (correct) or not. If any two members disagree with the chair, they can appeal the ruling. One member makes the appeal and another seconds it. The group then votes on the appeal to decide the outcome.

The chair can also turn immediately to the group to decide. Say a member uses the term “mugwump,” and another member believes that this word is an insult. The member may raise a Point of Order. In this case, the chair might turn immediately to the group to decide the question. (Note that when a question arises about decorum or correct language, it cannot be debated—a very wise rule, in our opinion!)

### SAMPLE SCRIPT FOR TURNING TO THE GROUP

**Chair:** *A Point of Order has been raised that the term “mugwump” is an insult. The chair is in doubt, so will ask the group to decide. All those who believe that the term “mugwump” is an insult, please say “aye.”*

**Members who agree that it is an insult:** *Aye.*

**Chair:** *All those who believe that the term “mugwump” is not an insult, please say “no.”*

**Members who do not agree that it is an insult:** *No.*

**Chair [if the ayes win the vote]:** *The ayes have it and the term “mugwump” is an insult. It may not be used in our meetings.*

**Chair [if the noes win the vote]:** *The noes have it, the term “mugwump” is not an insult, and it may be used at our meetings.*

The results of this vote, and of Points of Order and Appeals, should be recorded in the minutes as precedent for the future.

Finally, even if you haven't adopted a specific parliamentary authority, the courts have found that the principles of common parliamentary law are applicable to boards of directors and local government bodies.

In some ways this system fails to answer our emotional need to be right, and to have our righteousness confirmed. However, it is a powerful and simple way to settle difficult questions. And if you lose such a vote, you have the comfort of knowing that you are following the best practices that have ever been established to govern the way that human beings of equal status relate to each other.

---

*Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised 12th edition* was published in September 2020. Our previously published materials refer to the 11th edition. In substance the two editions are the same. We will be updating our articles to take account of the minor differences, textual changes, and the change in reference method. The new edition gives references by section number, not by pages.

#### **How to be objective about subjective comments**

© Jurassic Parliament 2020. All rights reserved.

#### **TERMS OF USE**

This article is provided for personal use. The user may not modify, publish, license, create derivative works from, transfer or sell any information or services contained in this publication or obtained from our website, or use the content of our website for public or commercial purposes, including any text, images, audio or video, without the written permission of Jurassic Parliament. Jurassic Parliament reserves the right to update our website at any time without notice to you. If you would like to use or quote this material for any purpose other than expressly as authorized herein, contact the Jurassic Parliament office.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

This material is provided for general educational purposes. Jurassic Parliament makes no representation about the suitability of the information contained in the documents and related graphics published as part of these services for any purpose. All such documents and related graphics are provided "as is" without warranty of any kind. Jurassic Parliament hereby disclaims all warranties and conditions with regard to this information, including all warranties and conditions of merchantability, whether express, implied or statutory, fitness for a particular purpose, title and non-infringement. Nothing written here constitutes legal or business advice. Readers with specific questions are advised to seek an appropriate credentialed authority to address their issues.

---

P.O. Box 77553, Seattle, WA 98177

TEL 206.542.8422 | EMAIL [info@jurassicparliament.com](mailto:info@jurassicparliament.com)

[www.jurassicparliament.com](http://www.jurassicparliament.com)