

Becoming a parliamentarian step-by-step

By Ann G. Macfarlane, Professional Registered Parliamentarian



A reader wrote, saying that he had been running a summer camp for 23 years, and would like a change of occupation. What would it take to become a parliamentarian?

I had to reply that becoming a parliamentarian is not an easy career path. Most parliamentarians I know either have another job, or are retired. If you become a parliamentarian, you will not earn enough money to live on, unless you are exceptional. You will have the satisfaction, though, of contributing to the success of your organizations, and of our society.

WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN BECOMING A PARLIAMENTARIAN?

Some people envision gaining special knowledge so that they can lay down the law and direct people as to what they must do. This is a fallacy. As a parliamentarian, you don't tell people what to do. Rather, you tell them how to do something based on what THEY TELL YOU they want to do. A parliamentarian is a consultant and adviser. It is the chair who issues rulings, subject, of course, to appeal, in which case the group decides.

If you serve as a parliamentarian for an organization to which you belong, you give up some of the privileges of membership. You may not speak in debate, and you may not vote, unless by secret ballot. This is fine if you are an outside professional parliamentarian, of course, but it's a serious limitation for a member of an organization.

BENEFITS OF BECOMING A PARLIAMENTARIAN

The chief benefit, to my mind, is that as a parliamentarian or a member knowledgeable about procedure, you can help your groups to function in a way that is fair, democratic, and inclusive. Unlikely as it may seem, parliamentary procedure and *Robert's Rules of Order* are superb tools to achieve equity and include every voice in our deliberations. In our tumultuous times, they are more important than ever.



PATH TO BECOMING A PARLIAMENTARIAN

If you want to provide this service to your group, here is the path we recommend.

Email course

1. Take Jurassic Parliament's email course, "Quick Introduction to Robert's Rules," [available here](#).

Robert's Rules in Brief

2. Buy a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised in Brief*, 3rd edition, read it through, and mark it up. Read our [article here](#) on this valuable and affordable book. We recommend the spiral-bound edition available from NAP [here](#). Note that this book cannot be adopted as a parliamentary authority on its own. It is only a signpost to the official book, *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 12th edition (RONR).

National Association of Parliamentarians

3. Once you've studied *RONR in Brief*, apply to become a member of the National Association of Parliamentarians (NAP). To fill out the application, [available here](#), you will:
 - a. Choose which examination you will take (we recommend you choose "RONR In Brief, 40 questions").
 - b. Identify a monitor, a trustworthy person who can oversee the exam, and give their contact information.
 - c. List the examination date that you and your monitor have agreed on.
 - d. Decide which state (and unit, if you know) that you would like to join.
 - e. Include payment for the fees.

Local unit meetings

4. Once you have passed the examination and become a member, seek out a unit of NAP and attend its meetings to learn more. In addition to local units, there are several electronic units that meet virtually. Note that as a member of NAP, you are NOT a parliamentarian, but someone who is committed to good procedure.

The official book

5. Buy a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised*, 12th edition, and start studying it and marking it up. We recommend the spiral-bound edition available from NAP [here](#). NAP also offers a set of tabs that are helpful. Remember to use the index, which is much enlarged in the 12th edition.

Observe and serve

6. Observe meetings of your Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, PTA, or condo board to see how they follow—or fail to follow—the principles of parliamentary procedure. Perhaps one of these would welcome your assistance as a parliamentarian. When you can, get practice running meetings too—there's nothing to equal the knowledge acquired in the driver's seat. At this level of knowledge, you should offer your services gratis.

Code of Professional Responsibility

7. Before you start actually providing any services, be sure to become familiar with the *Code of Professional Responsibility for Parliamentarians*, jointly adopted by NAP and the American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIP), [available here](#). The Code applies to all NAP and AIP members who act as parliamentarians, regardless of whether they charge for their services. But don't let that dissuade you; the Code's standards are not burdensome.

Study, study, study

8. Continue to read and study to increase your knowledge. NAP publishes a quarterly magazine packed with great articles and many excellent manuals are available [in its store](#), as well as other tools like gavels.

We recommend our book, *Mastering Council Meetings*. It was written for local governments, but 85% of the content applies to nonprofit organizations as well. You can download a free sample chapter on our [page here](#). We have over 200 blog entries on the Jurassic Parliament site, [live webinars](#), [on-demand webinars](#), [an online course](#) on controlling meetings, and our monthly newsletter to provide you with digestible and user-friendly information.

Note that Jurassic Parliament's mission is to introduce the principles of *Robert's Rules* to those who are not yet familiar with them, and to give people tools for success in their day-to-day meetings. We leave training in the complicated ramifications and minutiae of the rules to the professional associations.

ADDITIONAL STEPS TO BECOMING A PARLIAMENTARIAN

Once you've taken these steps, you are well on your way to becoming an informed and valuable member of any organization you choose to join. At that point, you can consider the following suggestions.

Registered parliamentarian

9. Review the new program developed by NAP to become a Registered Parliamentarian on their website [here](#). This program requires an in-depth commitment of time and energy, but it has been carefully crafted to take you through three stages in manageable bites. NAP is also offering excellent free videos to study, available to all NAP members. Once you have obtained this credential, it is reasonable for you to charge for your services.

Finding work and earning

10. In our experience, it is hard to find paid work. Most nonprofit organizations are not interested in procedure. They prefer to work "by consensus," until they are in trouble. (See our article, [Dangers of consensus decision making](#).) Attorneys, who seldom receive training in *Robert's Rules*, sometimes need a parliamentarian to assist with contentious homeowner meetings, for example. Sometimes inexperienced chairs are happy to turn the gavel over to the parliamentarian, which can be done with the consent of the body. Local governments may need help from parliamentarians. Over the last 20 years, I have paid between \$60 and \$150 hour for professional parliamentarian services. Parliamentarians in high-stakes jobs, serving political parties or as expert witnesses, can earn much more.

American Institute of Parliamentarians

11. Join the AIP, [website here](#). This national organization does not require any examination to join. It is dedicated to the study of multiple parliamentary authorities. See if AIP has a local chapter near you whose meetings you can attend. AIP also offers credentials, but the course of study is more demanding because the aspiring parliamentarian must master several authorities.

Dr. Bierbaum's book

12. Purchase *How to Be a Parliamentarian, A Guide for All Aspiring Parliamentarians*, by Dr. Eugene Bierbaum, [here](#). This book, published by AIP, teaches nothing about parliamentary procedure, but is dedicated to your career development. It is an excellent guide, starting off with “Can you be a parliamentarian?”, “Do you want to be a parliamentarian?”, “Care and feeding of the novice,” and so on.

Question and Answer Forums

13. Read the Questions and Answers posted on the official RONR Q&A Forums [here](#). These discussions go into fascinating—and sometimes exhaustive—detail. CAVEAT: Anyone may post a response on the forum, so don't take the first response as necessarily being correct. After participating in the forum for a while, you will have a sense for whose responses are likely to be reliable.

University of Wisconsin Correspondence Course

14. Take the correspondence course offered by the University of Wisconsin and NAP in partnership. I am told that it's comprehensive, but rather dry. [This is the website](#).

Conventions and training courses

15. Attend some of the fabulous conventions and training courses offered by NAP and AIP. I always enjoy these events, which are now sometimes offered online or in a hybrid format. The quality of the educational sessions is outstanding. AIP offers twice yearly Practicums that provide ample opportunity to strengthen your skills.

Dahms Memorial Foundation workshop

16. The Dahms Memorial Foundation offers an annual workshop in the Midwest in late fall, taught by very distinguished parliamentarians. Their website is [here](#).

Professional Registered Parliamentarian

17. If you continue to serve and enjoy it, consider becoming a Professional Registered Parliamentarian. You can learn more about this NAP credential [here](#). Once you have earned it, you will qualify to be listed in the NAP directory of professional parliamentarians.

Our current social climate presents real challenges to fair and democratic governance. By becoming a parliamentarian, you join a small but mighty group of dedicated individuals. The two associations have roughly 5,000 members in total, of whom about 900 are actively practicing with a professional credential. They are good comrades committed to respect for each and every person, fair process for all, and democracy.

Thank you for your interest in this topic and your commitment to the democratic process! [Contact us](#) if you have further questions about becoming a parliamentarian.

Websites

(current as of press time)

Jurassic Parliament	https://jurassicparliament.com/
Jurassic Parliament online courses	https://www.robertsrulesonlinecourses.com/
National Association of Parliamentarians	https://www.parliamentarians.org/
American Institute of Parliamentarians	https://aipparl.org/
Code of Professional Responsibility	https://www.parliamentarians.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-8Code_of_Professional_Responsibility.pdf
Lester L. Dahms Memorial Foundation	https://www.dahmsfoundation.org/
The Official RONR Q&A Forums	https://robertsrules.forumflash.com/
University of Wisconsin and NAP correspondence course	https://il.wisconsin.edu/course-catalog/introduction-to-parliamentary-procedure-dynamics-of-leadership/c216-m28-140/

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