

Bare bones introduction to Robert's Rules

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Instead of memorizing rules, here are some underlying principles.¹

(0) The body (senate) must be able to act as it pleases

A senate exists to allow a group with different views to act/speak with one voice. This happens by deciding a series of questions (substantive motions) about what to do/say supplemented with questions (procedural motions) about how to decide. The rules exist solely to facilitate senate action; never to impede it. This is why they specify how to waive the rules. Similarly, they have provisions to help manage the psychosocial environment.²

(1) One question at a time

There is only ever one question being debated, amended, and voted upon at a time. Once a motion has been made, it must be disposed of before doing anything else. However, many motions may be amended. Procedural decisions may be needed. Hence disposing of a motion may require several other motions. Thus we start with a main motion (often a resolution) and stack other motions on top of it. We always deal with the topmost item and cannot skip around (it's a FILO stack). The rules govern which motions can be added to the stack based on what is on top.

(2) Decisions get made exactly once

The body must be able to act (0). Therefore, each question is decided exactly once. Some implications are obvious. If a motion to call the question is defeated, something must happen (debate or another motion) before it can be raised again. Some implications are subtle. This is the wellspring of the eldritch horrors which govern amendments. Let us speak of these dark matters no further here.

(3) Every member has an equal right and responsibility to contribute

Diversity of opinion is a senate's lifeblood. Members must contribute their views, especially when unpopular. Every member has the right to make motions and speak up to twice on any debatable motion. With very few exceptions, no one may interrupt a member who has the floor. Required formality helps everyone feel able to contribute, e.g., members always address their remarks to the chair and never directly to one another.

(4) Opponents must get their say; the majority must (eventually) get their way

Opponents of a proposal must have the chance to convince others to join them. They must be able to propose modifications to make what passes more palatable. They may not prevent the body from ultimately acting in accordance with the will of the majority (0).

(5) Interfering with rights requires more votes

A senate's will is what a majority approves. Hence most motions require a majority —greater than 50% of votes cast.³ Procedural motions which restrict members' rights require a higher threshold, usually 2/3. Calling the question —stopping debate and moving directly to a vote on the pending motion— prevents those wishing to speak from having their turn, thus it requires 2/3.⁴ Tabling a motion only requires a majority because it is easily taken back up at any future time, thus no one loses their right to speak.⁵

(6) The chair is a mere steward

The chair has no power to impose their will; they may not ignore members who have not exhausted their right to speak. Every ruling of the chair can be appealed and overruled by a majority. Indeed, when the procedural situation is unclear, it is good practice for the chair to make a ruling and immediately solicit an appeal. This allows the body to act as it pleases (0).

(7) It takes 2

No member alone may cause the body to act. But if 2 members think a question is worth considering, the body must consider it. Hence every motion requires a second.⁶ Seconding a motion does not imply endorsement; only that it is worth consideration. Resolutions⁷ coming from standing committees are implicitly seconded because at least 2 committee members thought it was worth considering. Mutatis mutandis for resolutions placed on the agenda by the executive committee; no agenda item requires a second.

(8) Once made, motions belong to the body

After a motion has been seconded and stated by the chair, its maker has no claim to it. They may not unilaterally withdraw the motion.⁸ Therefore, there are no ‘friendly amendments’ where the maker unilaterally agrees to suggested changes after the motion has been stated by the chair. The use of the phrase ‘friendly amendment’ must be confined to annoying pedants while making an ordinary amendment.

(9) A proposed amendment can be amended; an amendment to an amendment cannot be amended

That way lies madness.

(10) Only the majority the first time can ask to change its mind

It is possible to reconsider a decision by voting to do so. This respects (2) by making it a new question. But the body must not be trapped in endlessly retaking the same vote (0). Therefore, only someone who originally voted with the majority the first time can move to reconsider, rescind, et cetera.

¹ This and other explainer documents are available at <https://github.com/AdamSwenson/parliamentary-procedure-explainers>. Comments and suggestions will be very much appreciated.

² For example, debate must be depersonalized. We argue against ideas not those who hold them. Policing this is the role of the oft abused point of personal privilege. Contrary to popular imagination, the mere mention of your name does not give you the right to speak. However, if

your name (or a clear definite description) is mentioned in the course of criticism, you gain the right to respond. Thus when criticizing, use phrases like “I respectfully disagree with the idea that” to avoid giving an opponent the chance to respond.

³ A tied vote defeats the motion. NB, the denominator is always votes cast. Just as holes are absences of dirt, abstentions are absences of votes; they do not count in the denominator. To abstain from a voice vote, simply close your mouth when ‘aye’ votes are called for and keep it closed when ‘nay’ votes are called for. To abstain from a show of hands, simply place your hands beneath your buttocks for the duration of the vote.

⁴ Similarly, changing an approved agenda requires 2/3 because members may lose their right to contribute if they’ve arranged their schedules around it. Reconsidering something without prior notice requires 2/3 because it takes away opponents’ rights to prepare in advance.

⁵ When you hear ‘table’, think ‘pause discussion’. The motion to table exists to allow the body to attend to something else —e.g., an invited guest or an urgent matter. A tabled motion can be taken up again at almost any time by a simple majority. Never try to kill a motion by tabling it; it could be brought back up in your absence. To kill a motion without directly voting on it, move to postpone indefinitely (majority)

⁶ But what of division? Doesn’t one member cause a voice-vote to be retaken via a counted method simply by calling out ‘division’? Excellent question! Technically, this isn’t a motion. It’s a request to the chair. If the chair refuses to retake the vote (e.g., if it seems dilatory), there must be a motion to order a counted vote. That requires a second and majority approval.

⁷ Resolutions —the things with a bunch of ‘WHEREAS’ and ‘RESOLVED’ clauses or a proposed policy— are motions. Think of a resolution as the motion “That the senate says/ requests/etc x”

⁸ They may request to withdraw (majority). Usually the chair can avoid taking the vote by first asking if there is any objection.