

Introduction

Hi. I'm Tyler Silvestri, the Secretary for Academic Governance at Michigan State University, and I'm here to discuss the basics of this book, *Robert's Rules of Order*, as well as MSU's *Bylaws for Academic Governance*. The *Bylaws* say that on any procedural question not answered in the *Bylaws* themselves, we have to turn to *Robert's Rules* for answers.

Before we jump in, it's worth asking why we should bother with rules at all. Who in their right mind would want to be a professional parliamentarian, and why on earth is one even necessary?! Couldn't we just take turns talking, making our points, and reach the best decision without things like "motions" and "chairs"? The short answer is "probably not." People in deliberative groups are prone to going on tangents, talking for too long, and monopolizing debate to the exclusion of other members. While some view rules of order as stodgy, old-fashioned things that get in the way of decision-making, the purpose of parliamentary procedure is to keep meetings on-track and fair. When everyone knows the rules, everyone can play by them, and everyone knows what to expect.

Of course, no one knows all of the rules in this 649-page monster. At least 80% of them are used less than 20% of the time. But there are a few fundamentals that we can all learn quickly to make meetings faster and fairer.

With that, let's get started.

Before the Meeting

Before your first meeting even starts, there are two things to understand.

First, you should know what the role of the chairperson is. The chair's job is to enforce the rules, designate whose turn it is to talk, and to keep the meeting running on track. The chair of Faculty Senate this year is Jennifer Johnson, and the chair of University Council is President Sam Stanley. The chair does not generally make motions or vote, except in a couple circumstances, like when a vote is by secret ballot or when the chair's vote would affect the outcome. Only on rare occasions should the chair appear anything but neutral on any issue.

The other concept you should understand is quorum. 100% attendance is rare in almost every organization. But it would be seriously problematic if a small portion of the body—whether it's Faculty Senate, University Council, or something else—made decisions that bind the everyone. To stop that from happening, the *Bylaws* and *Robert's Rules* require that there be a quorum—that is, half of the voting membership plus one—present for any actions to be taken. This is why it's crucial that you attend meetings or send a qualified designee in your place.

Now, *Robert's Rules of Order* allows bodies to adopt rules that conflict with *Robert's Rules* as long as they don't violate the organization's bylaws. In March 1976, Professor Jack Bass proposed such a rule, and it's held on ever since. The rule, which is called the "Bass Quorum Rule," is that if a quorum hasn't been reached ten minutes after the meeting was supposed to start, 40% of the members will be enough to approve the agenda and the minutes, as well as to have discussions—but not take action—about agenda items.

You might be wondering how things get on the agenda. There are two ways. The ordinary way is to email suggestions to acadgov@msu.edu for consideration by The Steering Committee, which is made up of four students, the chairs of each of the seven Standing Committees, five faculty members elected at-large, and the Provost. The other way is to move to add something to the agenda before it is adopted. There's been some confusion about this in the past, but you are absolutely allowed to add things to the agenda from the floor. However, note that it will often be easiest for everyone involved if you send notice of your intention to do so to my office at acadgov@msu.edu beforehand.

Preliminary Matters at the Meeting

Once the chair calls the meeting to order, everyone is expected to quiet down and begin conducting themselves according to the rules of order. After that, the agenda is presented, potentially amended, and then approved. The draft minutes—which are prepared by me and sent out a week before the meeting—are discussed and voted on. Then key figures like the President, Provost, and chairperson give remarks and take questions. We then move to any unfinished business from the last meeting.

Making a Motion

After that, we move to “New Business.” This is what it's all about. Here is where we deal with the things people put on the agenda for action or discussion by the body. For these purposes, I'm going to use Faculty Senate as the body in question.

The basic tool we use to do things at meetings is the motion. A motion is a formal proposal by a member that Faculty Senate do something. Obviously there will be times—such as when the agenda item is “Discussion of [a major societal issue]”—when structured discussion led by the chair is more appropriate than the motion process. But as soon as a member wants action to be taken, they should make a motion. A person who wants to make a motion waits until the previous person is done speaking, raises their hand—in the world of Zoom, otherwise indicates to the chair that they want to speak—and waits until the chair recognizes them, which the chair may do by saying their name, nodding at them, or—if it's clear who is being addressed—simply saying, “Go ahead.”

Once a person is recognized, they should state their motion clearly and succinctly. Whenever possible, motions should be submitted in writing (including in the chat on Zoom), and the chair has the power to require that they be. The motion should begin with the words “I move that,” never “I *motion* that.” After the motion is made, the mover should stop talking. This is not the time to explain why something is a good idea. That comes later.

Motions that bring some new business before Faculty Senate, which are called *main motions*, require a second. Any voting member can second a motion, and they do not have to be recognized before doing so. Just raise your hand and call out, “Second!” The chair will sometimes ask if there's a second, but it's okay if you beat her to it. Seconding a motion doesn't necessarily mean that the person seconding it agrees with the motion—it just means they want it discussed. If a motion fails to get a seconder (which almost never happens), that indicates that Faculty Senate doesn't think considering the subject of the motion is a good use of time, and the motion is dead and cannot be reintroduced at the same meeting.

If there's a second, the chair then *states the question*. This means the chair reads the exact language of the motion aloud. This is done so that there is no question about exactly what is being voted on. This is also the chance for the chair to announce her ruling that, for some procedural reason, the motion is not *in order*, or appropriate for consideration at this time; this rarely happens.

That motion was made incorrectly because the mover gave his reasons for making the motion before the motion was seconded. This can lead to people tuning out and not hearing what the actual motion being made is. It's also important that at least two members support discussing a subject before it is discussed. If you're worried about your motion not getting a second, team up with another Faculty Senator before the meeting to make sure you'll have support. Having said that, motions are almost always seconded as a courtesy. In my four years in academic governance, I've never seen a motion fail to be seconded.

Debate

Once a motion has been made, seconded, and stated by the chair, it's time for debate—that is, discussion about the merits of the motion. The person who made the motion has a one-time preference for speaking first. The default rule is that each person can speak twice on any given motion for no more than ten minutes each time. However, this rule can be changed, either permanently or just for a certain issue, by a two-thirds vote. You could also move to suspend the rules, which requires a two-thirds vote, to give a specific speaker an extra two minutes or something if their time elapsed but they were just getting to the good part. Note that you cannot yield your time to someone else the way they do in Congress, except that you can choose to let others ask you questions on your time.

Only members of Faculty Senate have the right to participate in debate. If it would be helpful for a non-member to weigh in, there must be a motion to give that person *voice* before they can do so. Similarly, only voting members of Faculty Senate can make motions at all.

To be given the floor to speak, simply raise your hand the way you would if you were making a motion and wait to be recognized by the chair.

There are a couple important principles about debate to remember. First, remember that the chair doesn't have to call on people in the order they seek to be recognized, although she generally should. If, for example, six people who have already spoken once raise their hands and a seventh person who hasn't spoken on the issue raises their hand, that seventh person has preference. Relatedly, in the interest of encouraging debate, if the chair knows how certain members seeking recognition feel about an issue, she can alternate between supporters and opponents as she sees fits.

Next, keep in mind that all debate has to be *germane* to the motion at hand. If your comments don't address whether the motion on the floor should be adopted, the chair can rule you are out of order and require you to stop speaking.

It's also critical to remember that Faculty Senate debates issues, not personalities. Attacking someone's reasoning is encouraged, but attacking someone themselves is forbidden. For example, *Robert's Rules* says that you can say that you believe there is evidence that the previous speaker was mistaken, but you cannot say that their statement was false, nor can you call them a liar or anything similar. There are a

number of rules that seem weirdly formal that are designed to keep debates centered on issues rather than people. For example, everything said in debate should be addressed to the chair, not the person speaking. It's also best to refer to officers by their titles and members by something like "the previous speaker" rather than their names, even when asking questions.

Once no one else wants to contribute to debate, the chair *puts the question* to the body by saying, "Is there any further debate?" or "Are you ready for the question?" This is essentially saying, "Last call for speaking on this issue." If no one wants to speak, the chair ordinarily states the motion again and asks for all those supporting the motion to say "aye." She'll then ask all those opposed to say "no." Then the chair will use her judgment to determine which side had more support. In the COVID-19 era, the chair may also ask for members to raise their hands or use a previously distributed online tool to vote. Then, the chair announces the result of the vote by saying either, "The ayes have it and the motion is adopted" or "The noes have it and the motion is lost," and then saying, "The next item of business is" and moving on.

The chair should not call for abstentions, and abstentions are not counted. An "abstention vote" is an oxymoron, as abstaining is literally refusing to vote. They are therefore not considered in determining whether a given vote succeeds or fails.

Calling the Question

Sometimes debate drags on and on and on. There's a common misconception that any member can shout, "Call the question!" in the middle of debate and force the vote to be taken immediately. This is simply not true. In fact, the tool to close debate is the "motion for the previous question." If someone wants to close debate, they should raise their hand and seek to be recognized like anyone else. Once recognized, they should say, "I move the previous question." The motion requires a second, like other motions. However, it is not debatable. The chair will then immediately call for a vote on whether to close debate. If passed by a two-thirds vote, debate is closed and the chair will move to voting on the issue itself.

Amendments

Sometimes, members might feel that the motion would be better if it were worded differently, or if it did something else entirely. Amendments to a motion are made via *subsidiary motions*. Amendments must be germane, and cannot fundamentally be about something else. For example, if the original motion was to make yellow the official color of Faculty Senate, an amendment adding the words "and endorse the idea of a Fall Break" would be out of order. But otherwise, there's a lot of room for amendments.

Amendments are made by the same process as ordinary motions. The period of debate that accompanies an amendment is limited to the question of whether the amendment should be adopted, not the original motion itself.

Many of you have probably heard the term "friendly amendment" used before. From this moment on, pretend you have not. The idea is that a member offers a so-called "friendly amendment" that is in the

spirit of the original motion, which the person who made the motion can accept without debate. This is wrong. There is absolutely no such thing as a friendly amendment in *Robert's Rules of Order*. Once a motion has been made and seconded, it is no longer the property of the mover, but of Faculty Senate as a whole. Any amendment, friendly or hostile, therefore requires a majority vote. Before a motion is seconded, however, the mover can withdraw their motion and make a different one.

Unanimous Consent

Obviously, following this process for every single item on the agenda would be time-consuming. Fortunately, the chair can ask that uncontroversial items, such as approving draft minutes, be passed by unanimous consent. Once a motion is made—or even before a motion is made—the chair can say, “Is there any objection to approving the draft minutes?”, wait a few seconds, and, if there is no objection, say, “Without objection, the draft minutes are approved.” If even a single member objects, however, the regular motion-second-debate process must be followed.

Points of Order

Hopefully you learned a lot about rules of order and how meetings should be run. If, during a meeting, you feel that the rules aren't being followed, you may raise a *point of order*. In urgent circumstances, you can even do this when someone else is speaking.

To raise a point of order, simply call out, “Point of order!” The chair will recognize you and say, “The member will state their point of order,” at which point you explain what rule you think is being violated. The chair will either rule that your point of order is “well-taken” if she agrees or “not well-taken” if she disagrees. If a majority of the body disagrees with the chair, a member can appeal the chair's decision and overturn it by a majority vote.

There's much more to learn about the *Bylaws* and *Robert's Rules of Order*, but you've sat through too much of me talking already. Please always feel free to contact me at acadgov@msu.edu with any questions about academic governance, procedural or otherwise.

I'll leave you with this example of a motion going through the process of being adopted, complete with an amendment, a point of order, and a motion to end debate.