



# The Right Way to Run a Meeting

A handy guide for county officials



*Revised 2008*



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## About NACo – The Voice of America’s Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation’s 3,066 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public’s understanding of county government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit [www.naco.org](http://www.naco.org).



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# ■ Introduction

Every county official needs to master the skill of running a meeting. You never know when you might have to run one. Locally, you can be called upon to chair a committee, or to step in for a missing chairperson. Nationally, because of your skills and knowledge of activities in your local county, you may be asked to chair or become a member of a National Association of Counties Steering Committee, Task Force or Special Commission. Would you know how to run a meeting?

The National Association of Counties has prepared this pocket guide that shows the steps and the rules according to Robert's Rules of Order. It is not intended to replace Robert's Rules of Order, but act only as a quick reference guide. We here at NACo hope that it will be helpful.



A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Larry E. Naake".

Larry E. Naake  
Executive Director

# ■ The Right Way to Run a Meeting

People who decide to run for public office come from all walks of life. Some are lawyers, some are doctors, and some are bankers, teachers, nurses or stay at home moms. What they all have in common is a desire to work for the betterment of their communities and this often includes running for public office. Many candidates for office are outstanding in their chosen fields and know the rules of the game to make themselves successful. What happens when they get elected to public office? One of the first things is they usually have to do is attend a meeting. Or maybe conduct one.

How do you run a meeting? Chair a subcommittee? The rules have suddenly changed from those with which you are familiar.

So you have been selected, elected, appointed the Chair. However, it was done, it is now your responsibility to run the committee, commission, or board so that it can properly conduct business. The basic activity any organization uses to conduct business is a meeting. Running an effective meeting, according to the existing rules, is not an easy task, but one every person in a leadership position should master. In order to conduct an effective meeting you also need to have an agenda. An agenda usually contains the following elements:

- Call to Order
- Roll Call
- Reading/Approval of Minutes
- Officer's (and others) Reports
- Committee Reports
- Unfinished Business
- New Business

The bylaws and constitution are used to govern the business of the organization. They also usually designate who will be in leadership positions and how these people are selected. The designated person in the leadership position is in control of the meeting. The “Chair” usually sets the meeting agenda and controls and monitors the discussion at the meeting to make sure that everybody who wants to participate gets a chance to voice their opinions.

It is very important that you as the leader or “Chair” of the meeting maintain order, allow full discussion of all items on the agenda and get through all agenda items in the allotted meeting time. What helps you do that is “*Robert's Rules of Order*.”

According to the Robert's Rules of Order website, Henry Martyn Robert was an engineering officer in the Army. One day, quite unexpectedly, he was asked to

preside over a meeting and he realized that he did not know how. He tried to run the meeting anyway and suffered great embarrassment. As a result of this experience, he decided that he would learn all he could about parliamentary procedure so he would never be in that situation again. What he found as he studied the subject and traveled around the country was chaos. Everywhere he went, he found people with differing ideas of how meetings should be conducted, based largely on what they had become accustomed to. In an attempt to establish one standard procedure and make order out of the procedural nightmare, Robert wrote what became his Rules of Order. The original version, published in 1915, is now free from copyright and therefore public domain and can be found on the Internet at [www.constitution.org/rror/rror--00.htm](http://www.constitution.org/rror/rror--00.htm). The tenth revision is available for purchase at most bookstores.

# ■ The Basics

Robert's Rules contains certain basic rules that are meant to make it easy to run a meeting and move the agenda items along.

## The Chair

All meetings are facilitated by a chairperson who is responsible for making sure that the meeting is conducted smoothly and fairly. The chairperson is impartial during all debate and should have the respect of all meeting participants. The chairperson does not have final decision making authority. The meeting participants have this authority and largely have the responsibility to decide how the meeting will be conducted.

## Main Motion

The basis of discussion at a meeting is a *motion*. A motion is announced or put forward by an eligible meeting participant for the purpose of focusing the discussion. Each motion must have a “*mover*” – the person who makes the motion and a “*second*” who shows that there is some support for the motion for the meeting participants. When a motion is “*put on the floor*” for discussion by the participants, that discussion must focus on the substance of the current motion. **All other discussion is out of order and not to be allowed according to the rules.** Another motion cannot be introduced while there is a motion on the floor. A meeting participant making a motion – “the mover”- must state the motion before speaking. In many circumstances, the motions are in writing and shared with the chairperson, to assure that everyone is clear about the discussion.

## Order

It is important that meeting participants are *acknowledged in order*. Once a motion has been introduced, it is the chairperson's responsibility to maintain a list of speakers to manage the discussion in an orderly manner. The participant who seconds the motion is always given an opportunity to speak after the mover. In order to make sure that all participants who wish to speak are heard, the chairperson will allow speakers who have not yet spoken to speak ahead of those who have already spoken.

## Amendments

A person who legally has the floor can amend the main motion currently being debated. An *amendment* is another motion that is used to change, by adding, subtracting or completely changing the main motion under discussion. When the amendment has been moved and seconded, all subsequent discussion must be on the substance of the current amendment. An amendment can be amended once. An amendment can be passed by a simple majority meeting participants. If an amendment is passed, defeated or withdrawn, the discussion goes back to the main motion on the floor with comments based on whether the amendment passed or not. Long amendments are usually presented in writing to the chairperson so that they can be read back to the meeting participants.

## Point of Order

If a meeting participant believes that the meeting is progressing outside of the rules of order, the person can raise a “*point of order.*” When raising a “point of order,” the person states what rule or order has been violated or not enforced by the chairperson. A point of order can be used to interrupt a speaker. The chairperson has the responsibility of determining if the point is valid or not. A point of order cannot be used to abridge the speakers’ list or comment on a motion out of turn.

## Point of Privilege

A point of privilege can be used to interrupt a speaker. Any meeting participant who feels that his or her rights have been infringed upon or violated may bring this point by simply stating their problem. *Privilege* involves the comfort or accessibility of the meeting participant and can include such things as can’t hear, too noisy, unclear copies, etc., or more personal actions such as misquotes, misinterpretations or insults. The chair has the responsibility of determining if the point is valid.

## Challenge the Chair

If a meeting participant feels that his/her *point of order* or *point of privilege* was ruled on unfairly by the chairperson, a challenge can be made to the chairperson. The chairperson then can ask for a motion to uphold the chair’s decision and a vote is taken. The vote by all meeting participants will decide whether the chairperson’s action on the point was valid or not.

## Point of Information

A point of information is a *question* raised by a meeting participant while another has the floor. The question can be raised but the person who has the floor may refuse the question. The chairperson asks the speaker if he or she wants to entertain the question when asked. The speaker can refuse. A point of information is only a question and cannot be used to speak out of turn or harass a speaker or disrupt the flow of the meeting.

## Table

Normal discussion or debate at a meeting may end in one of several ways. If a meeting participant feels that the decision and vote on a motion needs to be delayed for whatever reason, that person can move to “*table*” the motion. A meeting participant must be recognized by the chairperson in order to table a motion and cannot request this action at the end of a speech. Generally a specific time limit is mentioned when tabling the motion so as not to leave the motion dangling. A motion to table requires a simple majority vote. The discussion allowed after a vote to table is only about the length of the tabling.

## Calling the Question

If a meeting participant thinks that additional debate will be unproductive, he

or she may “*call the question*” which can end the debate. If no other participants object, the meeting proceeds to the motion. If there is an objection, the participants vote on whether to end the debate. A 2/3rds majority vote is required and no debate is allowed. If the “calling the question” is passed, a vote on the main motion is taken with no additional debate.

## **Rescind**

A meeting participant can make a *motion to rescind* only if the motion it refers to was passed at another meeting or on another day. This motion requires a 2/3rds majority to pass.

## **Reconsider**

A meeting participant can make a *motion to reconsider* if the motion under reconsideration was passed at that same meeting. The motion can only be made by a participant who voted with the prevailing majority on the earlier vote on the motion. A 2/3rds majority is required.

## **Suspension of the Rules**

Any *motion for suspension of the rules* of order (usually used so that meeting participants can do something in violation of the rules) must have a 2/3rds vote to succeed. There is no debate allowed. This motion cannot be amended and cannot be reconsidered at the same meeting.

## **Adjourn**

A *motion to adjourn* takes precedence over all other motions, except a motion to fix the time to adjourn. This motion cannot be debated or amended, nor can a vote to adjourn be reconsidered. A motion to adjourn cannot be made when a speaker has the floor, or when a vote is being conducted.

## **Refer or Commit**

A *motion to refer or commit* is used to send a question before the meeting to a committee to have further investigation of questions raised. The motion requires a second and debate can occur, but only on the topic of committing the motion, not on the content of the motion.

## **Committee of the Whole**

Occasionally, meeting participants, especially in committee, may wish to consider a motion or group of motions before they are addressed individually for debate. Committees can vote but their votes are not binding on all meeting participants unless the vote is ratified when the meeting resumes its regular session. Motions are required to move from the committee of the whole and back to the committee of the whole.

# ■ Summary of the Types of Motions

Privileged Motions	Interrupt Speaker	Second Required	Debatable	Amendable	Vote Required	Purpose
Fix time to adjourn	No	Yes	No	Yes	Majority	Sets definite continuation time
To adjourn	No	Yes	No	No	Majority	To end meeting
To take a recess	No	Yes	No	Yes	Majority	To briefly interrupt meeting
Question of privilege	Yes	No	No	No	Chair rules	To obtain urgent action immediately
Call for orders of day	Yes	No	No	No	None	To secure adherence to business

Subsidiary Motions	Interrupt Speaker	Second Required	Debatable	Amendable	Vote Required	Purpose
Lay on the table	No	Yes	No	No	Majority	To temporarily set aside an item of business
Previous question	No	Yes	No	No	2/3	To close debate immediately
Limit or extend debate	No	Yes	No	Yes	2/3	To provide more or less time for debate
Postpone indefinitely	No	Yes	Yes	No	Majority	To keep motion from coming to a vote
Postpone definitely	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	To delay action
Refer to committee	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	To place business in hands of a committee
Amend	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	To modify a motion

Main Motion	Interrupt Speaker	Second Required	Debatable	Amendable	Vote Required	Purpose
General	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	To introduce new business
Specific Take from the Table	No	Yes	No	No	Majority	To continue consideration of question
Reconsider	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Majority	To allow another vote on the question
Rescind	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	2/3	To repeal previous action
Adopt report or resolution	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	To declare facts, opinions or purposes as an assembly
Adjourn (qualified)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Majority	To end meeting
Create orders of day (special)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	2/3	To set future time to discuss a special matter
Amend (constitution, etc.)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	2/3	To modify or alter

Incidental Motions	Interrupt Speaker	Second Required	Debatable	Amendable	Vote Required	Purpose
Suspend rules	No	Yes	No	No	2/3	To permit action not possible under rules
Withdraw motion	Yes	Yes	No	No	Majority	To withdraw motion before voted on
Read papers	Yes	Yes	No	No	Majority	To prevent wasting time on unimportant business
Object to consideration	Yes	No	No	No	2/3	To prevent wasting time on unimportant business
Point of Order	Yes	No	No	No	Chair rules or majority	To enforce rules of organization
Parliamentary inquiry	Yes	No	No	No	None	To determine correct parliamentary procedure
Appeal from decision	Yes	Yes	Limited	No	Majority	To insure majority of meeting participants support ruling of chair
Division of house	Yes	No	No	No	1 member	To secure a counted vote
Division of question	No	Yes	No	Yes	Majority	To secure more careful consideration of parts

So there you have it. Mastering these rules can help you be a better leader and also allow you to chair any meeting you may be called to. Good Luck!

This guide for county officials is not designed to replace Robert's Rules of Order, but can be used as a quick reference.





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