Robert's Rules of Order: Common Questions and Issues

It is important that chairpersons be familiar and comfortable with the basics of Robert's Rules of Order for running meetings. The questions below are common questions often raised about Robert's Rules:

- How many members does it take to have a **quorum**—which is required before a committee can take action on any items on the agenda?

Answer: A majority of the voting members present—or 50% of the membership plus one----that means a committee of 10 must have 6 present (5=50% plus 1 additional member for a total of 6 for a quorum). Thus a committee of 13 must have 7 present.

- Do **minutes** require a motion for approval?

Answer: No. A chair may ask for a motion to approve the minutes (with a second). After changes are made the minutes are then approved by a voice vote. A quicker way to approve minutes is for the chair to ask "are there any additions or changes to the minutes?" After changes are made or the version as written is agreed upon, the chair then simply states "the minutes are approved as written/with changes."

- Can a chair **allow discussion** on a topic without having a motion on the floor?

Answer: Yes, but it is important to be careful when doing this. Having a motion on the floor directs discussion of the committee and helps to keep people from "wandering" on a variety of topics. Robert's Rules strongly suggest that discussion occur only if a motion is on the floor. However, it also allows chairs discretion in running the meeting. The common advice given this subject is that if a chair allows discussion on an issue informally, it is advisable that the chair set a time limit to the informal discussion so other agenda items are not ignored.

- Can a motion on the floor be **removed**?

Answer: Yes, with approval of the person who made the motion and consent of the body.

- What happens when an action item is on the agenda, with accompanying documents, and someone brings in a **new version of the motion/supporting documents** at the meeting?

Answer: The motion should be postponed until the next meeting, allowing people a chance to read and consider the new material (this is consistent with the 24 hour notice rule). However, the committee could decide to accept the new material with a motion to "suspend the rules" (which requires a 1st/2nd and 2/3 vote of those present).

- Can a motion **to not approve** something be made (i.e., I move to not approve the course).

Answer: No, not normally. While these motions are "legal" they are confusing—resulting in a yes vote meaning members don't want the course approved and a no vote meaning members want the course approved. It is much easier (and strongly encouraged by Robert's Rules) to always have motions in the affirmative for a clear understanding of what is being voted on. This means that a person not in favor of a particular action can make a motion (i.e. approval of the course) to put the subject on the table, even though the person making the motion intends to vote no on the motion.

- Can an **item not on the agenda** be considered and voted on.

Answer: Normally, no, it is not considered good committee practice since "surprise motions" are often made to gain quick approval of controversial issues before committee members have time to consider all sides of an issue. Furthermore, state law requires 24 hour notice of any item to be considered for action, as does the Constitution of the Common Council. This allows for adequate time for people to consider the issue prior to the meeting. However, a motion to suspend the rules can be made and the item considered—but only if 2/3 of the group approves the motion to suspend the rules.

- What is the difference between "**calling the question**" and a motion to "**move the previous question**."

Answer: When a person calls the question, according to Robert's Rules, this phrasing means the statement is a suggestion to the chair to ask for a vote. It is not a motion to end debate. When a person wishes to end debate, that person must make the motion "I move the previous question," which requires a second, requires a 2/3 vote, and is not debatable. Note: If the motion to end debate (move the previous question) is passed regarding an amendment to the main motion, the amendment before the body is then put on the floor for an immediate vote. Once the debate on an amendment is ended, then the main motion then goes back on the floor for discussion (with the option for someone else to "call the previous" question on the main motion—with the same rules of 2/3 vote/no debate applying).

- Other issues to be familiar with include **tabling of motions, referring to committee, taking an item from the table.**

**The above informational document was created by Chris Sadler, 2005-2009 Faculty Senate Chair.*

The Rules

- **Point of Privilege:** Pertains to noise, personal comfort, etc. - may interrupt only if necessary!
- **Parliamentary Inquiry:** Inquire as to the correct motion - to accomplish a desired result, or raise a point of order.
- **Point of Information:** Generally applies to information desired from the speaker: "I should like to ask the (speaker) a question."
- **Orders of the Day** (Agenda): A call to adhere to the agenda (a deviation from the agenda requires Suspending the Rules)
- **Point of Order:** Infraction of the rules, or improper decorum in speaking. Must be raised immediately after the error is made
- **Main Motion:** Brings new business (the next item on the agenda) before the assembly.
- **Divide the Question:** Divides a motion into two or more separate motions (must be able to stand on their own).
- **Consider by Paragraph:** Adoption of paper is held until all paragraphs are debated and amended and entire paper is satisfactory; after all paragraphs are considered, the entire paper is then open to amendment, and paragraphs may be further amended. Any Preamble cannot be considered until debate on the body of the paper has ceased.
- **Amend:** Inserting or striking out words or paragraphs, or substituting whole paragraphs or resolutions.
- **Withdraw/Modify Motion:** Applies only after question is stated; mover can accept an amendment without obtaining the floor.
- **Commit /Refer/Recommit to Committee:** State the committee to receive the question or resolution; if no committee exists include size of committee desired and method of selecting the members (election or appointment).
- **Extend Debate:** Applies only to the immediately pending question; extends until a certain time or for a certain period of time.
- **Limit Debate:** Closing debate at a certain time, or limiting to a certain period of time.
- **Postpone to a Certain Time:** State the time the motion or agenda item will be resumed.
- **Object to Consideration:** Objection must be stated before discussion or another motion is stated.
- **Lay on the Table:** Temporarily suspends further consideration/action on pending question; may be made after motion to close debate has carried or is pending.
- **Take from the Table:** Resumes consideration of item previously "laid on the table" - state the motion to take from the table.

- **Reconsider:** Can be made only by one on the prevailing side who has changed position or view.
- **Postpone Indefinitely:** Kills the question/resolution for this session - exception: the motion to reconsider can be made this session.
- **Previous Question:** Closes debate if successful - may be moved to **"Close Debate"** if preferred.
- **Informal Consideration:** Move that the assembly go into **"Committee of the Whole"** - informal debate as if in committee; this committee may limit number or length of speeches or close debate by other means by a 2/3 vote. All votes, however, are formal.
- **Appeal Decision of the Chair:** Appeal for the assembly to decide - must be made before other business is resumed; NOT debatable if relates to decorum, violation of rules or order of business.
- **Suspend the Rules:** Allows a violation of the assembly's own rules (except Constitution); the object of the suspension must be specified.

"The Rules" information taken from www.robertsrules.org/

If you have questions about Robert's Rules of Order as they apply to your committee, please feel to contact the Chair of the Common Council (x 3360, Common.Council.Office@uwsp.edu).