

Ten Motion Mistakes to Avoid

Robert's Rules for Dummies

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Robert's Rules are rules designed to facilitate the transaction of business by your group, not to hinder it. Nitpicking on minor technicalities is against the rules. Robert's Rules warns that calling attention to purely technical errors when no one's rights are being violated is a mistake.

If you're going to be effective in meetings, you need to know the right -- and wrong -- ways to use parliamentary motions.

The list in this chapter is from being exhaustive. Details for using all the basic motions are found in Part II of this book. The purpose of this list is to clue you in to the more frequent and obvious places where some members reveal their ignorance by trying to prove that they know so much.

Speaking without Recognition

First, and most importantly, just shouting out a motion is a mistake. Indeed, it's a mistake to make just about any motion without first being recognized by the chair.

You're probably hear folks shout out motions at meetings. The world would be a calmer place if they would only learn a little meeting etiquette and refrain from calling out their motions (except for points of order) until they have the recognition of the chair. Don't make them mistake of being the one of those rude people. Rise and address the chair (Mr. President": or "madam Chairman"), and seek recognition in proper form. You don't always get the first shot, but you're entitled to preference in recognition way ahead of all those others who just shout out their motions. Take a look at Chapter 7 for more information on getting the floor in meetings.

Moving to "Table!"

In just about every meeting I've attended lately, when anything controversial comes to the floor, somebody calls from their place, "I move to table!" In addition to the offense of speaking without recognition, the member misusing one motion in an attempt to accomplish the object of a completely different motion.

You and I know that the offending member is opposed to the pending main motion and wants to kill it. But (if you've read Chapter 9) you also know that a member doesn't kill a motion by moving to table it -- at least not if the group follows Robert's Rules. The motion to table is actually the motion to Lay on the Table, and you use it to set a pending motion aside temporarily in order to take up something else more pressing or urgent. If you want to kill a motion, you move to Postpone Indefinitely.

Calling the Question

When members get tired of hearing the same arguments go back and forth on a pending motion, they get impatient. Inevitably someone calls out, "Question!" or "I call the Question!" Like the call to table (jump back

to the previous section), the member adds to his misuse by not seeking recognition of the chair before speaking.

Sometimes the fact that no one else wishes to speak is obvious, and the chair can simply say, "If there's no one else who wishes to speak, then, without objection, we'll vote on the motion." But your presiding officer may prefer to take the opportunity to tell the members that calling the question actually requires a formal motion from a member after being recognized by the chair.

A presiding officer needs to help members understand that it's his job to offer the members the opportunity to vote when it's clear that no one else wishes to speak: calling out "Question" without first obtaining the floor is just plain rude.

Tabling It until Next Month

This attempt at a motion is yet another misuse of the word table. What the member who makes this proposal really wants to do is to Postpone to a Certain Time, not Lay on the Table.

About now, you may be thinking, "Why all this emphasis on the correct words if you know what the member is trying to accomplish?" The reason has a lot to do with the order of precedence of these motions and the rules covering whether the motion is debatable, amendable, and so forth.

A motion to lay on the table outranks the motion to postpone to a certain time. Lay on the table is neither debatable nor amendable (a motion's either going to be laid on the table or it's not.). Postpone to a certain time is both amendable as to time and debatable as to whether to postpone. All these factors influence the decision to be made, and one of the chair's many duties is to make sure the question sought by the members is one put before the members.

"Reconsidering" a Vote

The motion to Reconsider often a problem not because of the complexity of the motion itself, but because the word reconsider finds broad use outside its parliamentary context. Under Robert's Rules, however, reconsider is a specific parliamentary motion with a specific and limited application.

Frequently, someone moves to reconsider a vote that was taken at a prior meeting. However, the correct motion in this case is either Rescind or Amend Something Previously Adopted, or simply renewing a motion that failed in an earlier meeting. The choice depends only on whether the motion you're trying (incorrectly) to reconsider passed or failed, respectively.

The problem is compounded when a presiding officer allows a motion to reconsider a vote from a prior meeting and applies the rule that only a person who voted on a prevailing side is entitled to offer the motion. On the contrary, any member can move to rescind or amend something previously adopted, or renew a motion that failed (in a prior meeting) at a new meeting.

When it comes to parliamentary usage, reconsider is something you can do only with respect to a decision made in the current meeting (or on the next day, if the session lasts more than one day).

Requesting a Point of Information

The big problem with this motion is that some people think it means they can get the floor to give information. Sorry, wrong number! When the chair doesn't know any better, misuse of this motion is often a sneaky way for a member to inject himself into the debate even after he has exhausted his right to speak.

Remember: A Point of Information is made to enable the member to request information, not to give him an opportunity to speak again!

Offering Friendly Amendments

Most everybody has encountered a well-intended member who offers, "I want to make a friendly amendment." As if! General Robert never even used the term friendly amendment. It finally showed up in the current edition of Robert's Rules only to explain that it's not what everybody thinks it is.

The term is often used as a means of asking permission of the motion's original maker to add the amendment. Ol' Schmedley doesn't want people to think that he doesn't like Ernestine's idea. He's just trying to help! But the fact is, when a motion is on the floor, the maker of the motion no longer owns it. Whether or not Ernestine accepts Schmedley's amendment is of no consequence. Any motion to amend a main motion depends on the acceptance of the assembly, not the person who made the original motion.

Exception: If Schmedley offers his friendly amendment before the chair states Ernestine's motion and Ernestine accepts Schmedley's change, the chair states the motion as changed and there's no need for the member to vote on the so-called friendly amendment. It's part of Ernestine's motion from the start.

Tip: Offering a friendly amendment is really patronizing. The best thing to do is to simply get recognition of the chair, move your amendment, and tell the members why you're offering the amendment. Believe me, Ernestine's feelings won't be hurt. She'll probably be pleased that you cared enough to help perfect her idea.

Making Motions to Accept or Receive Reports

The belief that you need to do something official with a report presented to your group is pretty widespread. But, except in some specific situations, which I list below, motions to accept or receive reports after they're presented shouldn't be entertained. Instead, the chair should simply thank the reporting member and go on to the next item of business. If anything besides "Thank you" need to be said, stick to something like, "The report requires no action. The next item of business is..." A written report can be acknowledged by the chair simply saying, "The report will be placed on file."

Sometimes, a report contains recommendations or suggests that need for the group to take some specific action. In those cases, the president officer states the question on the motion that arises from the report, not on whether to adopt the recommendation contained in the report, and not on whether to receive, adopt, or accept the report.

Remember: The only situations in which it's proper to accept or adopt a report are when a particular body wishes to make a report its own and in the following situations.

▼ When a board or committee wants to adopt a draft of its own report, which is prepared by members of the board or committee for the purpose of reporting to the general membership.

▼ When the assembly wishes to endorse every word of a report, such as with:

? An auditor's annual report of the financial records of the treasurer. Endorsement relieves the treasurer of further liability except in the case of fraud.

? And a few others.

Warning: Two situations when adopting or accepting a report is never proper are in the case of a Nominations Committee report, which is always followed by nominations from the floor, and a treasurer's report, which is always simply filed for audit.

Remember: Reports are received when they're presented. A motion to receive them after the fact is superfluous.

Dispensing with the Minutes

You don't want to dispense with the minutes; you want to dispense with the reading of the minutes. For now, at least!

In parliamentary terms, you make the correct version of this motion in order to enable your group to handle the approval of the minute at a later time, out of the regular order of things. It absolutely does not equate to approval of the minutes.

I've attended many meetings where moving to dispense with the minutes has become quite the custom. For example, Approval of Minutes is on the agenda. Fonquetta J. Figaro famously does her duty and offers, "Madam President, I move we dispense with the minutes." Madam President dutifully responds with, "If there is no objection, we will dispense with the reading of the minutes. [Pausing in case someone objects] Hearing none, the reading of the minutes is dispensed with. The next item of business is ..."

Do you think the minutes are approved? Maybe Fonquetta does, and maybe Madam President does. But unless the question is on the approval of the minutes, they haven't been approved. Instead, they've just been formally ignored.

Remember: Minutes must be approved in order to become the official record of the assembly's action. Dispense with their reading if you must, but ask for corrections and approve them at some point in order to have a complete and official record of your meetings.

Wasting Breath on "I so Move"

Oh, come on now, Hildegard! What is your motion? State it! When the presiding officer says, "The chair will entertain a motion to take a recess," say, "I move we take a recess for 10 minutes." If you just say, "I so move," then you haven't actually made a motion. You've only confused half of the members and bumbuzzled the rest. Whatever possessed you to think that it's okay to make a motion that doesn't propose any action?

Think of it like this: The chair says, "Ms. Portulaca moves 'so.' All those in favor of 'so' say 'aye.' Opposed, 'no.' The ayes have it, and we will 'so.'" Obviously, this doesn't make any sense because you need to know what "so" stands for, but this is what happens when you say, "I so move."

Remember: When you make a motion, propose your action as exactly and specifically as you can. Leave no doubt as to what it is you're asking the membership to agree.