Some Basics on Robert’s Rules of Order

The most important part of Robert’s Rules is not the list of motions and their quaint names, it’s the instruction on how members of a body should speak:

Debate must be confined to the merits of the pending question. Speakers must address their remarks to the chair, maintain a courteous tone, and—especially in reference to any divergence of opinion—should avoid injecting a personal note into debate. To this end, they must never attack or make any allusion to the motives of the members. (RR 10th ed. 2000. p. 41-42)


Participants should not say things like. “You’re wrong,” or “you’re correct,” nor even, “I agree with what she said.” Instead, we should say things like, “The point about the expense is especially important because of the following reasons.” Most of us are unaccustomed to this style and find it artificial. The important goal is to remove attention from speakers and our connections to them, and focus entirely on issues.

The conventions of Robert’s Rules can seem overly formal or even stilted, but learning and adhering to them provides an environment in which reasoned, evidence based deliberations can take place in a short amount of time and with a maximum of mutual respect. Keep in mind that Robert’s Rules were designed for large bodies. For small groups, some of Robert’s Rules are overly formal and will actually waste time. The Rules themselves suggest that smaller groups scale down and dispense with aspects of the Rules that are unnecessary.

Some basic actions – most require a simple majority

Main motion - a proposed resolution on a topic listed on the agenda.

Amendment - a motion to change the wording of a resolution. When an amendment has been proposed, the amendment is discussed and voted on before discussion can return to the main motion.

Friendly amendment – an amendment that is accepted by members who made and seconded the main motion. Use to improve the language of a resolution. Not actually in Robert’s Rules, this is a local variant that saves time. No debate or vote.

Motion to postpone (table) to time certain – a debatable motion to stop discussion for now and come back to the issue at another time (usually the next meeting).

Motion to postpone indefinitely (table to time uncertain) - a debatable motion to stop discussion on the main motion indefinitely. Usually never to be discussed again.

Divide the question – motion to divide a resolution in parts in order to discuss and vote on the parts separately. Not debatable.

Call for the question – motion to stop discussion (because it has become repetitive) and vote. Not debatable. Requires two-thirds majority. RR names this motion “Previous question.”

Call for quorum – if a member calls for quorum, a count of the members still in attendance is made immediately. If that number has fallen below quorum, no further votes may be taken.