

A Few Robert's Rules for the George Mason University Faculty Senate

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When Faculty Senate meets as a full body (as opposed to committees), it relies on formal parliamentary procedure encoded the current edition of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, with some tweaks in the form of bylaws and standing rules.

This formality is intended to balance the competing values of fairness and efficiency. As Robert's Rules explains, "The application of parliamentary law is the best method yet devised to enable assemblies of any size, with due regard for every member's opinion, to arrive at the general will on the maximum number of questions of varying complexity in a minimum amount of time and under all kinds of internal climate ranging from total harmony to hardened or impassioned division of opinion." If you keep that intent in mind, many of the rules begin to make sense.

The 12th edition of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised runs nearly 800 pages in print, and its Appendix III provides sample language for making ninety-eight different types of motions. This level of detail can be intimidating, but most of it will never affect a Faculty Senate debate. While it may be useful to get a copy of the rules—on paper or as an ebook—the trick is understanding the basic principles, common practices, and the less common practices that do from time to time shape Faculty Senate actions.

This document is designed to familiarize members of the Faculty Senate with the handful of motions that they are likely to encounter, with references to section numbers in the full 12th edition of Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised. It is intended to be a living document, to be updated as needed by the Faculty Senate parliamentarian with advice from the president, secretary, and the Faculty Senate as a whole.

Obtaining and Assigning the Floor

The basic rules for speaking are the same as in Kindergarten: raise your hand and wait your turn. In the case of the Faculty Senate, raising your hand is usually done with a Zoom button, and your turn will be determined by the presiding officer, usually the Faculty Senate president. *Please do not speak until recognized.*

In general, the presiding officer will recognize members in the order in which they raise their hands, but Robert's (3:33) notes three exceptions:

1) If the member who made the motion claims the floor and has not already spoken on the question, he is entitled to be recognized in preference to other members. 2) No one is entitled to the floor a second time in debate on the same motion on the same day as long as any other member who has not spoken on this motion desires the floor. 3) In cases where the chair knows that persons seeking the floor have opposite opinions on the question (and the member to be recognized is not determined by (1) or (2) above), the chair lets the floor alternate, as far as possible, between those favoring and those opposing the measure.

Robert's (4:28) states that "A member who has spoken twice on a particular question on the same day has exhausted his right to debate that question for that day."

Robert's (4:29) limits speeches to ten minutes. In practice, faculty senators are expected to keep their remarks as brief as possible and certainly well below that time.

As noted below, for matters that we expect to elicit an unusual amount of controversy, we may vote to limit debate.

Beginning and ending a meeting

Approve the minutes

The first agenda item for a typical meeting is to approve any minutes from previous meetings that have been prepared since the last time minutes were approved. (41:9) The presiding officer calls for a motion to approve, but also gives members a chance to suggest any needed corrections. This goes quickly, so read the minutes in advance of the meeting in order to have any needed corrections ready to go.

If you note something that needs fixing, such as a misspelling, a missing document, or a misrepresentation of what someone said, move to amend the minutes. Typically, such amendments are accepted by acclamation, and the senate approves the minutes as corrected.

Extend the time (postpone the time for adjournment)

If the Faculty Senate is approaching its scheduled adjournment—typically 4:15 pm—but still has a small amount of unfinished business, the presiding officer or any member may ask for a motion to extend the meeting, and such motions are usually passed by acclamation. If the agenda includes more unfinished business than can be

completed with a fifteen minute extension, the presiding officer may prefer to schedule an additional meeting before the next regularly scheduled meeting.

Robert's Rules (41:56) note that extending a meeting requires a two-thirds vote. In practice, an extension of fifteen minutes typically passes by acclamation.

Adjourn

When the Faculty Senate has completed its agenda for the meeting, the presiding officer will ask for a motion to adjourn. Any senator can make such a motion by saying "so moved," or "I move to adjourn," and ordinarily such a motion will be seconded and adopted by acclamation. Rarely if ever is such a motion made without a request by the presiding officer.

Technically, a meeting can also adjourn without a motion. As Robert's (21:14) explains, "If an hour for adjourning a meeting within a convention or other session of more than one meeting has been scheduled—either in an agenda or program or by the adoption of a motion setting a time—no motion to adjourn is necessary when that hour arrives. The chair simply announces the fact and declares the meeting adjourned . . ." Faculty Senate practice has been for the presiding officer to ask for a motion even when the hour for adjournment has arrived.

Debating a motion

Once a motion has been introduced and—if needed—seconded, the presiding officer opens discussion. Senators can speak in favor of the motion, oppose it, pose questions, or offer amendments.

According to Robert's Rules (4:28), a member can only speak twice on the same question on a single day, and can't make the second speech until everyone else has had a chance to speak once.

Robert's Rules (4:29) limits speeches to ten minutes. In practice, we don't have time for senators to go that long, and most are able to say what they need to say in less time. For complex or contentious issues, the senate may vote to impose shorter limits.

Amendments

If an amendment is offered and seconded, the senate stops debating the main motion and begins debating the amendment. During this debate, senators can offer amendments to the amendment, in which case the senate needs to decide on those amendments, and then the main amendment, before going back to the main

motion. This is where it can be hard to keep track of what is being debated, and the senate has experimented with prohibiting amendments to amendments.

Robert's Rules (12:16) states that "an amendment must be germane to be in order. To be germane, an amendment must in some way involve the same question that is raised by the motion to which it is applied. When a secondary amendment proposes a change in the primary amendment, it must be germane to that primary amendment—not just to the motion the primary amendment would change. When a secondary amendment proposes a change in a paragraph that a primary amendment proposes to strike out, either by a motion to strike out a paragraph or by a motion to substitute, it must be germane to that paragraph. An amendment cannot introduce an independent question; but an amendment can be hostile to, or even defeat, the spirit of the original motion and still be germane."

Substitutes

Robert's Rules (12:69) explains that "A motion to Amend by striking out an entire paragraph, section, or article—or a complete main motion or resolution—and inserting a different paragraph or other unit in its place is called a motion to substitute, and the paragraph or resolution to be inserted is said to be offered (or proposed) as 'a substitute.'"

In practice, senators have offered substitutes when they want to offer a substantially different approach to a problem than one offered by a motion that has been circulated in advance of the meeting. If you wish to offer a substitute, it can be helpful but not required to inform the Executive Committee in advance, so that your substitute can be circulated to senators before or during the meeting.

Votes

Much of the time, the senate achieves sufficient consensus on an issue that a voice vote suffices. But any senator may call for a more precise count or a secret ballot, in which case the secretary or sergeants-at-arms will prepare instructions. For Zoom meetings, this typically requires clicking a link in the chat to open a voting form.

Less common motions

Some motions are less common, but useful for discussing contentious issues. This section briefly describes some motions that have been used (albeit sometimes without the precise language) in the George Mason University Faculty Senate since 2025. It should be updated as more such cases arise.

Motions are listed in the order they appear in Robert's Rules.

§13 Commit or Refer

This motion can be used to hand work on a question from the full Faculty Senate to a committee, whether that is a Faculty Senate committee, a university committee, or some other body. It can be useful if the Faculty Senate wants more information about a topic before voting.

The motion must be seconded, is debatable, and requires a majority vote. More details are provided in Robert's §13.

§14 Postpone to a Certain Time

Sometimes the Faculty Senate will wish to pause discussion of a motion in order to get other business done first. In this case, a member should move to postpone the motion. Robert's provides various triggers for resuming debate. For example, the body can postpone a motion until a specific time of day. More probably, the Faculty Senate will want to postpone a motion until a) an invited speaker has finished speaking, b) another item of business has been completed, or c) the next meeting, whether a regular meeting or a special meeting.

A motion to postpone "is debatable; but debate is limited in that it must not go into the merits of the main question any more than is necessary to enable the assembly to decide whether the main question should be postponed and to what time." (14:4) It requires a majority vote.

Robert's (14:6) prohibits postponements beyond a quarter of a year. In practice, that means that a question cannot be postponed beyond the last meeting of the spring semester.

The motion to postpone is often confused with the motion to Lay on the Table. A key difference is that the motion to Lay on the Table is not debatable, and parliamentary authorities discourage that motion lest it be used to squelch debate.¹

§15 Limit debate

Robert's Rules §15 provides several examples of motions to limit debate, such as limiting the total time that can be spent on a question, limit the number of speeches each senator can make, or limit time given for each speech. The senate president or another member of the executive committee may suggest these at the start of a

¹ Jim Slaughter, *Notes and Comments on Robert's Rules*, 4th ed., with Gaut Ragsdale and Jon L. Ericson (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 60.

meeting or debate to help give everyone a chance to be heard on an important issue. It is less likely that a member would offer such a motion spontaneously.

Any motion to limit debate requires a two-thirds vote.

\$16 Previous question (close debate)

Robert's Rules §16 allows a member to "move the previous question," an archaic way of asking to close debate on a question. The motion must be seconded and is not amendable, and it takes a two-thirds vote.

The motion is useful when time is limited and senators are repeating points already made. But because it deprives other senators from expressing their views, senators should use this motion carefully, if at all. It is considered bad form to make a speech and then immediately move to close debate, before other senators have a chance to respond.²

\$25 Suspend the rules

Robert's Rules §25 allows the senate to suspend some of its rules, subject to a number of restrictions. (For example, it cannot suspend anything in the bylaws.) The Faculty Senate rarely uses this option, but we have done it to permit only first-order amendments, preventing amendments to amendments. Like a motion to limit debate, it is more likely to come from senate leadership than from the floor.

Any motion to suspend the rules requires a two-thirds vote.

\$27 Divide the question

Robert's Rules §27 allows the senate to divide a motion into smaller parts. This can be useful if, for example, a committee has recommended a package of changes, one of which turns out to spark more discussion than the others. A senator could move to divide the question, so that the Faculty Senate would focus on either just the controversial or the less controversial proposal.

A motion to divide the question requires a second and a majority vote. It is not debatable, but the senator making the motion may offer "a few words of explanation, which must not become a speech." (43:31)

² Ray E. Keeseey, *Modern Parliamentary Procedure, Second edition* (American Psychological Association, 2018), 13; Jim Slaughter, *Notes and Comments on Robert's Rules*, 4th ed., with Gaut Ragsdale and Jon L. Ericson (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 55.

Motions to avoid

§17. Lay on the Table (Table)

As Robert's (17:1) notes, "This motion is commonly misused in ordinary assemblies."³ If you want to defeat a motion, speak against it. If you want to postpone discussion, move to postpone. If you want to refer the matter to a committee, move that.

³ See also Jim Slaughter, *Notes and Comments on Robert's Rules*, 4th ed., with Gaut Ragsdale and Jon L. Ericson (Southern Illinois University Press, 2012), 59ff.