

**ROBERT'S RULES IN SHORT:  
A GUIDE TO RUNNING AN EFFECTIVE MEETING**

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"Where there is no law, but every man does what is right in his own eyes,  
there is the least of real liberty." Henry M. Robert.

## **Importance of Rules to an Effective Meeting:**

While groups sometimes proceed informally or by consensus, it is generally accepted that deliberative bodies operate much more effectively when they follow known rules of procedure.

In most instances and except as changed by the deliberative body, the rules to be followed are **Robert's Rules of Order** (hereinafter referred to as RR). These rules were first established by General Henry M. Robert in 1876. The latest edition of RR is the 10th edition.

A complete copy of RR runs nearly 700 pages. Even abridged versions, which are quite useful, often run 200 pages. This manual will be much shorter.

RR defines the role of the chair, of members of the body, and establishes rules of procedure. These rules have been crafted and adjusted over the years to assist in effective meetings, and to balance carefully the rights of the majority to act and the rights of the minority to be heard, and in some cases, prevent action.

## **Proper Notice and Agenda For a Meeting:**

While RR require that there be an order of business for a meeting, the major law governing notice and agenda for meetings is the Wisconsin Open Meetings Law, Sec. 19.81, et seq. and Sec. 3.44, MGO. This manual is not a complete analysis of the Open Meetings Law, but those conducting a meeting should know some of the basic rules. They are:

1. All meetings must be preceded by adequate notice. This is generally 24 hours, although it may be two hours in the case of an emergency. The giving of the notice should be coordinated through the City Clerk's Office.
2. The notice must include all items to be taken up at the meeting in such a manner as to apprise the public of the nature of the public business. Broad items such as "Report of the Chair" should be avoided.
3. Except for meetings that provide for public comment, there can be no discussion of any item not on the agenda. Nor can there be action on any item not on the agenda. A "Public Comment" section allows the public to talk about anything, and the board may question them, but no further action or discussion is allowed.

4. There may be action on any item on the agenda, unless the agenda explicitly states something to the effect of "for information only - no action."
5. Special rules govern when a body may go into closed session. Consult the Office of the City Attorney for procedures.

## **Special Procedures, Chapter 2, MGO:**

The Madison Common Council has a body of standing rules set out in Chapter 2, MGO. In addition, every board or commission has the right to adopt its own rules of procedure. Sec. 3.27(4)(b), MGO. To the extent there are not specific rules, Robert's Rules of Order are to be applied.

This manual will not review all of the provisions in Chapter 2 of the Standing Rules of the Common Council. In a number of instances, those rules simply adopt a provision of RR. However, some key rules are:

Sec. 2.04, Order of Business. This sets out the normal order of business for the council, which may be modified by a suspension of the rules on a two-thirds vote. It often is modified.

Sec. 2.05, Introduction of Business. Generally, any item to be taken up by the Council must first be introduced at a prior Council meeting, referred to an appropriate committee, board, or commission, and taken up no earlier than the next succeeding Council meeting. There are a number of exceptions to this and the Council may suspend these rules in order to act immediately.

Sec. 2.18, Majority Vote of All Members Required. The Council operates on a "Rule of 11." It takes 11 votes to pass a measure, regardless of how many members vote or are attending the meeting. This is not the same rule as applies to boards or commissions, see Sec. 3.27(3), MGO.

It should be noted that under the Council's operations, a report of a board or commission will contain recommendations. In almost all instances, this report and the recommendations contained therein become the main motion on the floor when an alder moves the adoption of the report.

## **Robert's Rules of Order / Common Motions**

This section will summarize some of the provisions of RR.

- A. Proceed by Motion. The most basic element of RR is that matters come before the body by motion. An alder makes a motion simply by saying "I move that \_\_\_\_\_" or "Move adoption of \_\_\_\_\_," or "Move referral of \_\_\_\_\_," or "I move to amend \_\_\_\_\_." It is not the form of the motion, but the substance of it which governs.
- B. Role of the Chair. It is the obligation of the Chair to run an orderly meeting. Members of the body are not to speak until they have been recognized by the Chair. Except for a limited class of motions, a member may not interrupt another member when they have the floor. The Chair also rules on any votes and rules on any questions of proper procedure. In the event of a disruption in the meeting, the Chair may call on the sergeant at arms or others to return the

meeting to order. Generally, the Chair does not participate in debate or vote unless there is a tie.

C. Types of Motions. Under RR, motions generally fall into one of four classes. These are:

1. The Main Motion: This is the matter that is before the body at that moment. Nearly all other motions bear some relation to the main motion.
2. Subsidiary Motions: These are a series of motions which propose to do something to or with the main motion. Examples include amendment, referral, laying on the table, calling the question. These motions are all subject to an order of precedence which will be discussed below.

Note that what is the "main motion" for application of the rules of precedence may change during the course of consideration of a matter. For example, if the main motion is to adopt a resolution, and a member offers a subsidiary motion to amend the resolution, the proposal for amendment becomes the main motion for purposes of consideration of the order of precedence of other motions. That is, the motion to amend is subject to further amendment, referral, laying on the table, etc. It is only when that motion has been disposed of that the motion to adopt is then back before the body for consideration.

3. Incidental Motions: Incidental motions relate to the pending matter, but generally relate to it in a procedural way such that the incidental motion must be dealt with before the body may return to either the main or subsidiary motion before it. Incidental motions take precedence over whatever motion is before the body, and in some instances, may be made when the mover does not have the floor. Examples of incidental motions are a point of order or procedure, appeal of a ruling on a point of order or procedure, a point of information, call for a roll call (division of the assembly), or a suspension of the rules.
4. Privileged Motions: These are very few motions that take precedence over all other motions. They include motion to recess, question of privilege, and a motion to adjourn.

D. Common Motions. An almost limitless number of motions may be made. RR lists at least 84 potential motions. This section will discuss some common motions; the reader is also referred to the accompanying "cheat sheet" attached as an appendix to this manual.

1. Adjourn: To end the meeting. Not debatable.
2. Adoption: This is to adopt the matter before the body.
3. Amendment: To modify the main motion before the body.
4. Division of Assembly / Roll Call: A call for division is the same as calling for a roll call vote. Any member may do this and the motion need not be seconded; it is simply granted when asked for. It is not debatable.

5. Division of the Question / Separation: This is a request to have separate votes on different paragraphs or portions of the proposal before the body. It is not debatable, but does require a second.
6. Lay on the Table / Take off the Table: This is a motion to temporarily defer consideration of a matter and then to ask that the matter be taken up again. It is often used, when, for some reason, a member of the assembly or some information necessary for consideration is temporarily unavailable. Motions to lay on the table or take off the table are not debatable. The motion is often made simply as a motion to "table." The motion should not be used if the intent is essentially to kill a proposal.
7. Place on File: This is a common motion used in proceedings of the Madison Common Council and is the equivalent of a motion to defer indefinitely. This is the motion to be used if the intent is to not adopt the matter before the Council, without explicitly voting it down.
8. Point of Information: This is an incidental motion in which a member of the assembly desires some information prior to proceeding to a vote on the matter before the body. It does not require a second and no vote is actually taken on the point of information. A member simply says "I rise to a point of information" or "Point of Information?" It is proper when another has the floor.
9. Point of Order or Procedure: This is another incidental motion and again is not subject to a second or a debate. It raises a question about the procedure being followed by the body. The ruling on the Point of Procedure is committed to the Chair of the body. If a member of the body disagrees with the ruling, they may appeal the ruling of the Chair to the full body. An appeal does require a second, and a majority of the body must disagree with the Chair's ruling for it to be reversed.
10. Point of Privilege: This is one of the privileged motions, and again does not require a second, nor is it debatable. This normally relates to some personal matter or something relating to the operation of the body, such as a room that is too hot, too cold, too loud, some confidential information which should not be discussed before the body, etc.
11. Previous Question: This is a motion requesting that the body immediately vote on whatever matter is otherwise before it; it cuts off debate and proceeds to an immediate vote. The motion can be made either by "calling the question", "moving the previous question," or simply stating "Question." The motion requires a second and is non-debatable and requires a two-thirds vote.
12. Recess. The motion asks that the body take a short break. The length of time of the recess should be established. This is a privileged motion, in that it takes precedence over almost all other pending motions. It requires a second, it is not debatable, and requires a majority vote.
13. Reconsideration: A motion for reconsideration asks that the body reconsider something it has already acted upon. It must be made either at the same meeting at which the matter was considered, or at the next succeeding meeting. If it is to be made at the next succeeding meeting, it must be on the official agenda of the meeting.

Common Council members are referred to the "Point of Order" memorandum from the Office of City Attorney, dated July 13, 2004.

A motion to reconsider may only be made by a member who voted on the winning side of the prior question. This normally will be a member in the majority, but if a matter fails because it does not reach the required majority, it may be that the motion for reconsideration may be made by a member who actually is less than a majority. For example, if a matter needing a 2/3 vote falls one vote short of 2/3, reconsideration may only be moved by a member of the minority. If the motion to reconsider is approved, the prior proposal is then again before the body.

14. Motion to Refer: This is a subsidiary motion which asks that a matter be referred to another body, or to another meeting of the same body.
  15. Suspension of the Rules: This is an incidental motion because it relates to the manner in which the body will take up an issue. It requires a two-thirds majority, but is not debatable.
- E. Debate. Once a debatable motion is before the body, members of the body proceed to debate. In both the making of motions and in debating the motions, members should wait to be recognized by the Chair. The standing rules of the Common Council limit the number of times and length of time that a member of the body may participate in debate.
- F. Unanimous Consent. Asking for unanimous consent is a quick way to dispose of non-controversial items. The Common Council does this by proposing a "consent agenda" near the beginning of every meeting. Items that no member of the body objects to are disposed of by unanimous approval. The Chair may ask for unanimous consent, or a member may ask for it on any pending matter. The Chair may do this by asking: "Is there any objection to recording a unanimous vote on item \_\_\_\_\_?"

## **Precedence of Motions**

Some common motions are listed in descending order of precedence, that is, a motion is not in order if it has a higher number than the pending matter.

### Undeatable Motions

1. Adjourn
2. Recess
3. Question of Privilege
4. Lay on the Table
5. Previous Question
6. Limit or Extend Debate

### Debatable Motions

7. Postpone to a Definite Time
8. Refer or Commit
9. Amend
10. Postpone Indefinitely / Place on File
11. Main Motion

Incidental Motions (e.g., Point of Order, Point of Information, Suspend the Rules, Division of the Assembly or of the Question) take precedence over whatever matter is pending.

## "Cheat Sheet" for Robert's Rules

<b>Motion</b>	In Order When Another has the Floor?	Second Required?	Debatable?	Amendable?	Vote Required for Adoption	Can be reconsidered?
<b>Main Motion</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Majority unless other spec'd by Bylaws	Y
<b>Adjournment</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Majority	N
<b>Recess</b> (no question before the body)	N	Y	N	Y	Majority	N
<b>Recess</b> (question before the body)	N	Y	Y	Y	Majority	N
<b>Accept Report</b>	N	Y	Y	Y	Majority	Y
<b>Amend Pending Motion</b>	N	Y	If motion to be amended is debatable	Y	Majority	Y
<b>Amend an Amendment of Pending Motion</b>	N	Y	See above	N	Majority	Y
<b>Change from Agenda</b> to Take a Matter out of Order	N	Y	N	N	Two-thirds	N
<b>Limit Debate Previous Question / Question</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Two-thirds	Yes, but not if vote taken on pending motion.
<b>Limit Debate</b> or extend limits for duration of meeting	N	Y	Y	Y	Two-thirds	Y
<b>Division of Assembly (Roll Call)</b>	Y	N	N	N	Demand by a single member compels division	N
<b>Division of Ques/ Motion</b>	N	Y	N	Y	Majority	N
<b>Point of Information</b>	Y	N	N	N	Vote is not taken	N
<b>Point of Order / Procedure</b>	Y	N	N	N	Vote is not taken	N
<b>Lay on Table</b>	N	Y	N	N	Majority	N
<b>Take from Table</b>	N	Y	N	N	Majority	N
<b>Suspend the Rules</b> as applied to rules of order or, take motion out of order	N	Y	N	N	Two-thirds	N
<b>Refer (Recommit)</b>	N	Y	Y	N	Majority	Neg. vote only

