

Golden Rule Guide to the Rules

By

Clarence Bischoff

Vasa Gardens 14710 Hwy. 19 Blvd. Welch, MN 55089

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Robert's Rules: An Introduction

Part 1: Values, Rights, and Principles

This introduction to Roberts Rules will emphasize the values underlying the Rules and will further emphasize the ordinary nature of the ideas behind the legal and technical language. It is intended for very small organizations who want to conduct their business in a respectful, productive way based on democratic principles.

The Rules can be seen as the organizational embodiment of the Golden Rule. The connection is somewhat straightforward. Henry Martyn Robert wrote the first edition in 1876 and modeled it after what Thomas Jefferson had written for the U.S. Congress while he was the presiding officer of the Senate (1797-1801). Jefferson along with being a farmer, politician, and advocate of democracy was also a philosopher much interested in ethics. This interest led him to publish what later became known as the Jefferson Bible (The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth). What he saw in these teachings was in his words, "... the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man."

And, of course, central to this was, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you". Jefferson cited much more but this had special importance to him. He also read secular philosophers who said much the same in many more words. No doubt he also read Plato whose ideas on government were the antithesis of this*. The idea expressed predates any existing religion and has been part of the teachings of religion in all cultures.

Both Robert and Jefferson believed in these ideals and wanted to see them implemented in "governing bodies", governmental and non-governmental. At the same time they were not naïve about human behavior. They greatly valued reason and wanted decisions and actions to be based on reason, not passions of the moment. They therefore discussed issues of appropriate behavior and gave the presiding officer the responsibility and authority to enforce the rules of decorum or rules of conduct. This way individuals can present and consider their ideas calmly, free from interpersonal manipulations, such as, in Jefferson's words, "... hissing, spitting,..." and so on. The rules suggest that the speaker address the chair, not any other member and if it is necessary to do so it is in the formal way of polite address. Jefferson, particularly, experienced first hand how difficult people can be since many of his contemporaries did not like his equalitarian ideas and he became the object of very intense ridicule.

If you see something in a meeting that seems in contradiction to the Golden Rule or the democratic values of equality and reason, it is very probable that the rules are being

* For a concise, useful discussion of Plato's ideas on government and their influence on the modern world see Bertrand Russell's book, A History of Western Philosophy, Part 2 and particularly p.105.

misused. It is after all only a tool so if an organization elects an authoritarian they may be disappointed in their use. The same is true if someone is elected who has the democratic ideals but is insecure about using the authority of the office. (The system can be self-correcting so appropriate motions can be considered to resolve these issues.)

Rights and Principles of the Rules

The values discussed above provide the base for the Rights and Principles of the Rules. The democratic value of equality flows from an ethic of reciprocity. Therefore with each right there is an obligation to reciprocate. If we want fair and respectful treatment we have an obligation to do the same by this ethic.

The rights have been summarized in many different but similar ways. The 4-H version is very good:

- All members have equal rights, privileges, and obligations.
- The majority vote decides.
- The rights of the minority must be protected.
- Full and free discussion of every motion is an established right of members.
- Every member has the right to understand the motion before the group and what its effect might be.
- All meetings must be characterized by fairness and good faith.

Then there is one that receives special emphasis in the Rules:

“Only one question can be considered at a time...”

And, to keep the situation one where reason can be the guiding value there are rules of decorum or rules of conduct that include:

- The chair determines who may speak
- One must ask the chair to speak

Votes are to be based on conscience, good information, and reason. They are to be free of the duress that can be caused by inappropriate behavior of other members.

Part 2: The Golden Rule Guide to the Rules

Introduction: Given the values and principles described above, one would hope that the rules would be easy to use. Jefferson and Robert clearly held the values sacred and brought the skills of their respective professions-law and engineering- to create a system that would protect the values, rights and principles. This system has been used with great benefit but with time there are some issues that need to be resolved for many situations. Some of these issues are Rules specific and others have more to do with changes outside of the rules themselves.

With the Rules there are issues of volume, style, and tone.

Volume: Robert had started with the notion of a guide of 16 pages. His version of 1876 (available free through Project Gutenberg) is 169 pages. The current edition of the newly revised (10th) is 643 pages of text, 50 pages of introduction, and 48 pages of charts, tables, and lists. Something does seem to have gone awry.... Even though we are committed to the moral value of equality it need not lead us to be insensitive or indifferent in relation to the inequities of education. Fortunately, English is a resourceful language that lends itself well to brevity and various levels of plain speech and writing.

Style: The style is abstract, precise, and formal. Some may find the style elegant while others may find it incomprehensible.

Tone: The tone is sometimes that of litigation rather than that of negotiation. This is unfortunate since there has been great progress in the past few decades in the study of group dynamics and conflict resolution. This research can be helpful in getting work done in organizational settings but it is not reflected in the rules.

The issues outside of the rules themselves are largely the result of misuse. For some people their experience with the Rules has been with individuals or organizations where Rules were used mainly as guise for an essentially non-democratic process. The daily papers often describe instances of members of an organization being given false or incomplete information to get approval of proposals of various kinds. The internet now has sites where tips can be obtained in how to use the technical aspects of the rules to essentially thwart debate or voting on proposals. Mass media influences where uncivil behavior is presented as acceptable may also create difficulties in establishing appropriate norms for a business meeting.

However, granted that these issues exist, the Rules are still considered by most people as the best resource available for conducting respectful and productive meetings. In the following sections a version will be described that will meet most of the needs of a small organization and still be consistent with the essential values, rights, and principles found in the Rules. The complete version may still be consulted when necessary.

Using the Golden Rule Guide for Productive Meetings

Chairperson and Agenda: For the Rules to be used productively it requires a chairperson who has democratic values, confidence in use of the authority of the office, and a thorough knowledge of the business of the organization. It will also save a great deal of time if at the outset the chair is clear that rules of conduct will be enforced. Situations where verbal and non-verbal disrespectful behaviors are allowed will eventually bring the business to an end.

The chair in addition to controlling the meeting prepares the agenda based on input from members. The usual format is as follows:

1. Call to Order
2. Adoption of the Agenda
3. Approval of the Minutes
4. Reports of Officers
5. Reports of Committees
6. Unfinished Business
7. New Business
8. Announcements
9. Adjournment

Sometimes small organizations will skip the second step. However, this may lead to conflicts later on so it may be worthwhile to give it formal recognition. It is possible to streamline the reports of officers and committees by getting them ahead of time. The reports can be sent out to the members before the meeting. The chair can ask for changes and if there are none, declare the report approved as printed. Each group can decide on specific practices they see as consistent with the principles outlined above.

Motions: The administrative business of the organization is done by voting on motions (proposals). The main motions are stated, seconded, restated by the chair, discussed, and approved or disapproved by a voting process. Here is an overview (seven steps):

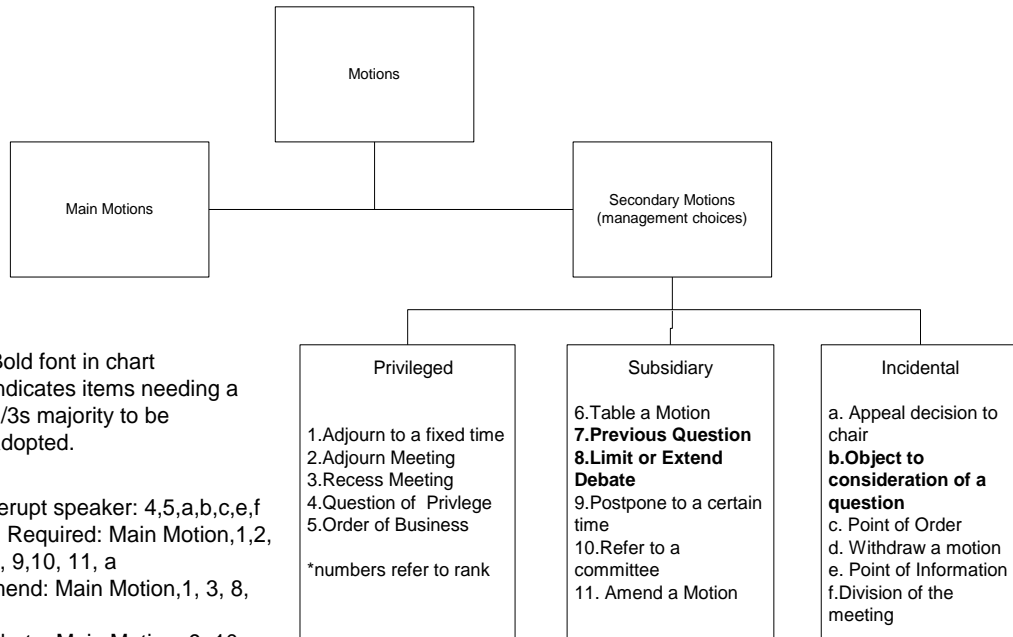
Main Motion Flow Chart



Taking time to carefully check out the meaning of motions before the chair restates the motion will save time. Anything complex is best submitted in writing to the chair before the meeting. This can then be made available to members. This may make it possible to avoid amendments and amendments to the amendments and so on.

Once the chair restates the motion no other topics may be introduced except as given under secondary motions in the chart below. With careful management by the chair and thoughtful cooperation of the members, the use of secondary motions may be kept to a minimum. The general notion is “first things first” and “finish with one thing before starting another”. The exceptions are given in the secondary motions that are explained below (next page):

Motions: Classification, Rank, and Use



Bold font in chart indicates items needing a 2/3s majority to be adopted.

May interrupt speaker: 4,5,a,b,c,e,f
 Second Required: Main Motion, 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, a
 Can Amend: Main Motion, 1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 11
 Can Debate: Main Motion, 9, 10, 11, a
 Adopted by Majority Vote: Main Motion, 1, 2, 3, 6, 9, 10, 11, a, d,
Adopted by Two-Thirds Vote: 7, 8, b
 Enforced by Chair: 5, c
 No Action Required: e

If after the vote, you think the group should reconsider the matter you may make a motion to reconsider the matter if you were for it. And then it needs to get a second and a majority in favor of it for the reconsideration to proceed. (See the Rules for more detail.)

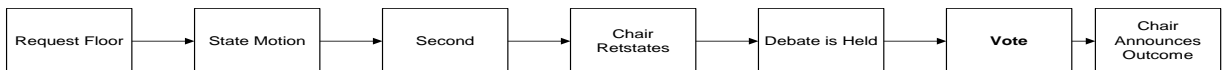
In general, one topic at a time and one speaker at a time. When necessary use the following:

Privileged Motions: These are used to stop the work (adjourn), take a break (recess), change the room environment (noise, temperature, etc.), or get back on track (stay with the agenda).

Subsidiary Motions: These are used to change the process being used and to amend the main motion (proposal). The request may be to end the debate (discussion), limit the debate, postpone the discussion, or refer the matter to a committee.

Incidental Motions: Use these if you think the chair or group is making a mistake in considering the topic or in the process being used or if you need relevant information.

Main Motion Flow Chart
(repeated on chart of motions)



Main Motion Characteristics

Main Motion	May interrupt speaker	Second Required	Can Amend	Can Debate	Vote/Action
Main Motion	no	yes	yes	yes	Majority Vote

Secondary Motion Characteristics

(Management Choices)

Privileged Motions	May interrupt speaker	Second Required	Can Amend	Can Debate	Vote/Action
1. Adjourn to a fixed time	no	yes	yes	no	Majority Vote
2. Adjourn Meeting	no	yes	no	no	Majority Vote
3. Recess Meeting	no	yes	yes	no	Majority Vote
4. Question of Privilege	yes	no	no	no	Chair Decides
5. Order of Business	yes	no	no	no	Chair Decides*
Subsidiary Motions					
6. Table a Motion	no	yes	no	no	Majority Vote
7. Previous Question	no	yes	no	no	Two-Thirds Vote
8. Limit or Extend Debate	no	yes	yes	no	Two –Thirds Vote
9. Postpone to a Certain Time	no	yes	yes	yes	Majority Vote
10. Refer to a Committee	no	yes	yes	yes	Majority Vote
11. Amend a Motion	no	yes	yes	yes	Majority Vote
Incidental Motions					
a. Appeal Decision of Chair	yes	yes	no	yes	Majority Vote
b. Object to Consideration of a Question	yes	no	no	no	Two –Thirds Vote
c. Point of Order	yes	no	no	no	Chair Enforces
d. Withdraw a Motion	no	no	no	no	Majority Vote**
e. Point of Information	yes	no	no	no	Chair Provides ***
f. Division of the Meeting	yes	no	no	no	Granted

no = no or not applicable

* See Rules if Chair does not return to agenda. ** No voted needed if withdrawn by maker and the person who seconded the motion. *** Chair may request another to provide the needed information.

Discussion: Words and Script

The charts above give a brief overview of a carefully arranged system. The words are formal and not of the usual day-to-day usage. Therefore, it may be helpful to have informal discussion of some of them:

- Motion: The more usual term may be “proposal”. The etymology is from the Latin, “to move”. So an informal interpretation might be to move a proposal along. Young people when they use the expression, “move it” might have the essence of it.
- Adjourn: Here it may be useful to note that a portion of word, “journ” is also shared with the word journey. “ad” is a function word and can have many meanings but here it may be interpreted to signify “at” and the word “adjourn” used in the sense of “at the end of the day’s journey”.

The terms “Point of Order” and “Point of Information” may raise questions about the usage of the term, “point”. Perhaps the most relevant would simply be to “point to” or indicate a matter of procedure or a matter of a need for information on the topic.

Other terms are closer to common usage:

- Question: ask, request
- Rank: to make an orderly arrangement
- Order: to put in group or classes-classification
- Debate: formal discussion (the etymology is partly from “to beat” and therefore it may be an unfortunate choice of words since it may conjure up visions of battle etc. rather than negotiation.)

The terms for classes of Secondary Motions, Privileged, Subsidiary, and Incidental may be given informal interpretation:

- Privileged: “not subject to the usual rules”
- Subsidiary: “of, relating to...”
- Incidental: “... not planned...”

The term “Previous Question”, as in “I move the previous question”, is used to close debate probably is derived from a figure of speech similar to our “its history” or “let’s make history of this”. Even with its venerable history it may be a good one to change someday but for now we can accept it for what it is, simply, a customary form.

The Rules also provide a “script” or formal terminology for doing routine tasks to meet one’s own needs and to help with the process and, therefore, the productivity of the group. Here we can give a sampling in accord with the motion classification of the chart:

Main Motion:

To introduce a proposal or main motion: “I move that.....” (it is recommended that when possible have this in writing and give to the Chair before the meeting or at the beginning of the meeting).

The Chair requests or acknowledges a member to second the motion. After it is seconded, the chair states: “It is moved and seconded....”

The Chair then restates the motion with, “The question is on the adoption of the motion that....” (here it is recommended, if not done previously, that the Secretary put the motion in written form and check it for accuracy).

The debate or discussion begins. The members are in turn recognized by the Chair. It helps greatly if members exercise self-discipline. Interruptions and not staying on topic can greatly slow the process and therefore must be addressed by the Chair as inappropriate. The same is true of attacks on the person of any member. Inflammatory language is to be avoided. The object is to have one topic at a time and one speaker at a time while maintaining high standards of appropriate behavior. The Rules provide an adequate means for any member to address any issue or need in a civil straightforward manner. The object is to have decisions made in accord with the democratic values of equality and reason, not on manipulation-verbal or non-verbal.

Once the discussion is done, the vote is usually introduced with, “Those in favor of the motion, say “aye” and then, “Those opposed, say, “no”. The chair announces the vote with, “The “ayes” have it and the motion is adopted” or “The “noes” have it and the motion is lost”.

The chair then continues with, “The next item of business....” or “Is there further new business?”

Privileged Motions:

1. To propose adjourning the meeting to a fixed time: “I move that we adjourn the meeting to....” (*requires second, can be amended, cannot be debated, and majority vote*)
2. To propose adjourning the meeting: I move that we adjourn....” (*second required, cannot amend or debate, majority vote*)
3. To request a break or recess: “I move that we recess until....” (*second required, can be amended, not debated, majority vote*)

4. To request a change in the room or environment etc.: “ Question of Privilege”
(*may interrupt speaker, no second, no amendments, no debate, chair decides*)
5. To request that the agenda be followed: “I request a return to the agenda...” (*may interrupt speaker, no second, amendment, or debate, chair decides*[†])

Subsidiary Motions:

6. To request that the motion be temporarily put aside: “I move that we table the motion....” (*second required, no amendments or debate, majority vote*)
7. **To request an end to the debate: “I move that we vote on the previous question....”** (*may not interrupt speaker, second required, no amendments or debate, two-thirds vote*)
8. **To request a limit or extension of time of debate: “I move that debate on this motion be limited to “x” minutes per member.... or I move that we extend the debate....”** (*may not interrupt speaker, second required, can amend, no debate, two-thirds vote*)
9. To postpone to a specific time: “I move that we postpone debate until....” (*may not interrupt speaker, second required, can amend, can debate, majority vote*)
10. To request that the motion be referred to a committee: “I move that the question be referred to” (*may not interrupt speaker, second required, can amend, can debate, majority vote*)
11. To request an amendment to the motion: “I move to amend (by striking out, by inserting, by substituting) for the pending motion the following: ...” (*may not interrupt speaker, second required, can amend, can debate, majority vote*)

Incidental Motions:

- a. To appeal a decision of the chair: “I appeal the decision of the chair...” (*may interrupt speaker, second required, cannot amend, can debate, majority vote*)
- b. To object to the consideration of a motion: “I object to the consideration of this item....”** (*may interrupt speaker, no second required, cannot amend, cannot debate, two-thirds vote*)
- c. To object to a procedure or personal affront: “Point of Order” (*may interrupt speaker, no second required, cannot amend, cannot debate, chair enforces*)
- d. To withdraw a motion: “I move to withdraw the motion....”(*may not interrupt speaker, no second required, cannot amend, cannot debate, no vote necessary if done by the person making the motion and agreed to by the person who has seconded the motion*)
- e. To request information relevant to the discussion: “Point of Information” (*may interrupt speaker, no second required, cannot amend or debate, chair provides*)
- f. To request a more accurate count of votes than the one used: “I call for a division of the house....” (*may interrupt speaker, no second required, cannot amend or debate, chair grants*)

[†] See Rules for more detail.

The numbering system above corresponds with the motion rank which is a way of defining “first things first”. The motions requiring a two-thirds majority are in bold. These signify some departure from the principles so require special care.

Two Privileged motions and five Incidental motions allow for the interruption of the speaker. This is something to be avoided but under these special conditions it is considered appropriate.

A second is required for Main Motions, the first three Privileged Motions, all of the Subsidiary Motions, and the first Incidental Motion.

Amendments are allowed for the Main Motion, two Incidental Motions, all of the Subsidiary Motions, and none of the Incidental Motions.

Debate is allowed for the Main Motion, three Subsidiary Motions, and one Incidental Motion.

A majority vote is required for the Main Motion, three of the Privileged Motions, four Subsidiary Motions, and two Incidental Motions.

The chair decides on two Privileged Motions (Question of Privilege and Order of Business) and one Incidental Motion (Point of Order).

As one looks at the classification and ranking of motions it is apparent there is common sense logic to the characteristics given the underlying values and principles. Interruption is allowed where it would be counter productive to proceed without addressing the request e.g. when there is so much noise that the speaker cannot be heard.

Debate is largely limited to the main motion and Subsidiary Motions related to amendments and decisions to defer action by postponing or referring to a committee.

Other motions (largely requests) are either decided by the chair or brought to a vote in a straight-forward manner. A second is required when it is a matter affecting the group as a whole. Motions that may appear to compromise rights of a minority are required to have a two-thirds majority.

Overall the motions provide a means to expedite the business of an organization. The motions and script provide a means for members to advance their ideas, protect their rights, and participate in the management of the meeting.

And, finally, great simplification can be achieved by remembering another common rule of thumb: “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”. Simple things such as adequate, comfortable space and starting and ending on time may eliminate the need for half of the Secondary Motions. Leaving unfortunate communication habits, such as, inflammatory language, unpleasant facial grimacing, temper tantrums, speaking in a

whiney tone of voice, at the door, frees up a lot of energy. When information is sent out before the meeting it is helpful if all members are responsible in reading it before the meeting. It takes considerable effort on the part of each person to make a productive meeting.

Summary:

When considering the Rules, remember the underlying values and principles for it is these that give the system coherence and meaning. It may be worth remembering too that it flows from those who put all they had on the line for these values of equality and reason. Jefferson came from the time of Madison, Washington, and Franklin. Robert came from the time of Grant, Sherman, and Lincoln. This is a precious legacy.

One must recognize that the Rules are not everything that is needed for effective meetings. Here recent research on group dynamics and conflict resolution are invaluable. This research indicates that there appears to be a propensity for groups to divide and dispute even to the point of violence. Central to prevention of this is to have a shared mission and goals. When people remember they are part of the same team, they also remember the Golden Rule.

Clarence Bischoff
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