

FAQ: The Complexity of Parliamentary Procedure
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Why does parliamentary procedure have to be so complex?

Efficiency: Having a comprehensive set of previously agreed upon rules in the Faculty Handbook, Special Rules of Order, and *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (RONR) enables the faculty to conduct substantive business instead of debating rules.

Objectivity: Rules should be codified in advance to cover every situation that may require them rather than in the heat of debate, when various parties have a vested interest in the outcome.

Authority: Settled rules provide the only definitive grounds for the chair's ruling on a point of order and, more importantly, for the protections afforded by the appeals process.

How hard can it be to write a simpler set of rules?

No harder than revising or eliminating selected rules, which any faculty member may propose (with proper notice) at any time. The formidable challenge is to simplify while balancing the competing interests of fairness and efficiency—and to outdo the professionals who have compiled RONR, persons who share these very same goals. Eliminating rules is like deleting words from a dictionary and thereby making it impossible to look them up if they're ever needed.

What's so complicated about commonly used motions?

Consider just the matter of amendments: When and by whom may they be proposed? Which ones are debatable or themselves amendable? May debate on an amendment be limited or cut off? Who determines whether an amendment, or debate on it, is germane? How are "substitute motions" handled? Do amendments always require a majority vote? Are Handbook amendments like other amendments? The list of questions on just the topic of amendments could go on.

Wouldn't it be simpler to let a majority of the faculty decide procedural questions as they arise?

Simpler perhaps, but with significant costs in efficiency, objectivity, and authority (see above), as well as stability and the protection of rights.

Stability: As with almost any body of law, some rules (such as those in the Handbook) are protected from temporary majorities by being intentionally difficult to amend.

Protection of Rights: Rules protecting absentees and the basic rights of individual members are similarly insulated from violation by a temporary majority. It wouldn't make sense for a majority of those present at a meeting to be able to override the rights of absentees (e.g., by waiving the requirement of previous notice for a Handbook

amendment) or to tyrannize an individual member (e.g., by voting to prevent someone from speaking in debate or from casting a vote).

Why do friendly colleagues need complicated rules governing their discussions?

The size of the group, not its collegiality or lack thereof, is what matters. Whereas a degree of informality works for small boards and committees, in assemblies of more than about a dozen persons, there may be multiple persons legitimately seeking the floor, offering amendments, referring matters to committees, and wanting to postpone discussion or limit debate. The common objective—to crystalize a large number of competing opinions in an efficient and orderly manner into a majority view that binds the group—requires logically complex procedural rules.

What's wrong with simply following the faculty's customs?

Vagueness: People's memories of "what we've always done" differ (e.g., whether Handbook amendments must be referred to the Faculty Affairs Committee).

Instability: Customs change through the years (e.g., how calls for the previous question have been handled).

Bad Precedents: Objectionable past practices could be cited as precedents (e.g., "unelecting" a committee member, shouting down a speaker, revoking a nomination through ridicule, and refusing to recognize a speaker who disagrees with the chair).

Any faculty member with a stake in a particular custom can propose that it become an official rule—after free and open debate of its desirability *as a rule* (as we have done with the requirement that motions include effective dates and with the prohibition of write-in votes).

Is there an easy way to learn the basics of parliamentary law?

Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised In Brief (Bortz Library: JF515 .R65 2011)