

Parliamentary Procedure: Rules to Live By

Background Information for the Beginners

Parliamentary Procedure is your key to effective facilitation in large groups. It opens the door to organized meetings and controlled discussion. The majority rules, but the minority is entitled to a full and fair hearing. By following the rules of parliamentary procedure, our group ensures its awareness of what business is at hand and the orderliness of its discussion.

The casual observer may believe that most student council work is done in business meetings. Those who work with student councils know that a large share of the work is done by committees and by the officers. Nonetheless, there is important work accomplished during business meetings.

Business meetings are held for several reasons: to have a limited amount of discussion on an issue or proposed course of action, to decide an official stand on it by using a formal voting procedure, and to communicate, motivate, and educate the council.

The rules of business meetings are usually referred to as "parliamentary procedure," since their historical origins are in procedural rules developed in the British Parliament. A thorough understanding of the rules can be great aid to councils; but applying the haphazardly will result in disastrous meetings.

For most councils, business meetings are not the best place to develop creative ideas or to work out compromises. These jobs are usually handled in committees.

The Different Methods of Using Parliamentary Procedure

The easiest way to use Parliamentary Procedure in meetings is to use Parliamentary Logic. While Parliamentary Wording is always useful for general knowledge, some of the terms may become quite overwhelming and confusing to some members. This is perhaps the reason why Parliamentary Logic is used more often.

The Principles of Parliamentary Logic

A student council should:

- *Consider only one idea at a time*
- *Encourage individuals to introduce ideas, but decide on those ideas only as a group*
- *Decide how to spend its own time in meetings*
- *Be ruled by the majority, but also protect the minority*
- *Realize that some individual rights cannot be violated by the group for any reason*
- *Refuse to take a stand if it might be harmful later*
- *Have the option to change its mind*

These are common terms in Parliamentary Procedure. Using this exact diction is known as using Parliamentary Wording. This can be used as an exercise activity as well. Simply guess the meaning of the word, then click the link to create a pop-up that will define the word in its actual meaning.

Alternatives to Parliamentary Procedure

If your council does not make use of Parliamentary Procedure, then it should attempt to make use of one of the following methods of interactional discussion to provide order and a general understanding of communication for the council.

Information Conferences: A true informational conference is a specifically scheduled meeting, without audience, at which all participants seek to share their personal knowledge or experience with the others present. The goal is the sharing of knowledge that may make both the group and the individuals composing it more efficient in their work. The informational conference differs from the problem-solving conference in that its goal is to produce information only, not to isolate, examine, and solve a problem as a result of sharing information.

Round Table Discussion: "Round table" refers to a closed discussion with a rather informal organization. It is used by groups that trying to achieve a specific goal or solve a problem. Members meet, with or without a chairperson, and start talking. Their discussion may be structured, with an introduction and a conclusion, or may be hit-or-miss. There are no auditors or observers.

Panel Discussion: A panel of from three to eight participants is selected to carry on a discussion in front of, and partially for the benefit of, an audience. Their method is a sort of structured conversation. Usually, though not necessarily, there is a designated chairperson. The audience may be allowed to ask questions or enter into the discussion while it is under way or after the panel has finished.

Symposium: A number of people, often experts in some aspect of the subject under consideration, are each invited to make short speeches. When all have spoken, participants may ask questions or make statements in regard to what another has said; and the audience may be invited to join in.

Buzz Groups: After a general presentation or discussion (or even prior to a program), the large group is divided into units of six or eight persons. Each of these buzz groups is asked to consider a specific question. All the small groups may be answering the same question, or each may have a different question. Each group selects a leader and/or recorder. At the end of the allotted period, the leader of each buzz group presents the group;s report to the whole assembly. In this way, every contribution is filtered through the reporter of the buzz unit. Member satisfaction is increased by this process, and there is usually a noticeable increase in interaction within the large meeting following a buzz session. The success of this method depends largely on the quality of questions assigned to each small unit. The time allowed for the discussion questions in the buzz unit should be as short as possible to create a sense of urgency and importance.

Cooperative Investigations: The procedure for this type of group is more formal, as its purpose is more sharply focused it is designed for situations in which group members have little information on the topic, and no expert is available to lecture on what they need to know. There are usually eight steps to this "do it yourself" exercise.

1. *The group meets in advance to elect a leader and to divide the subject into a number of subtopics.*
2. *So that members can know what each has accomplished, the leader calls one or more*

- advance meetings to review assignments and make final plans.*
3. *At the beginning of the discussion meeting, the leader analyzes and defines the problem.*
 4. *Each member then presents his or her information in a brief report. The report contains only information, no argument.*
 5. *When the reports are finished, the leader calls for any additional information*
 6. *The leader concludes the first portion of the meeting by summarizing the fresh pool of information, and then opens the second half by inviting discussion in light of the facts presented.*
 7. *Finally, if the nature of the problem permits, ways and means for putting an agreed-upon solution into operation are discussed.*
 8. *At the conclusion of the discussion, the leader may want to summarize the points of agreement, identify any problems that still need attention, and evaluate the process by which group reached its understanding.*

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHAIRPERSON

In a business meeting, the chairperson's responsibility is to keep the meeting orderly, understandable, and democratic. This requires not only a good knowledge of parliamentary procedure, but also practical skill in conducting meetings.

The following suggestions will help the chairperson to be a more effective leader:

Realize that each chairperson has his or her own style. Some go "by the book" and are very formal; others conduct meetings in a relaxed manner. Both styles can work; it depends upon the nature of the chairperson, the particular issues, and the mood of the meeting. Each chairperson should realize the strength of his or her style and work to develop it.

1. Protect individuals rights
2. Call motions or actions out of order. For example, "The motion is out of order because...," not "You are out of order because ..."
3. When ruling a motion or action out of order, try to offer a suggestion to help the the person accomplish the proposal.
4. Require that all main motions and complicated amendments immediately be given in writing to the recording secretary. This will save much confusion later.
5. Always state clearly what is before the assembly.
6. Rule a motion "out of order" if it clearly attempts to hinder the assembly's ability to discuss business.
7. Use a gavel-it is great for getting people quiet.
8. If the meeting is noisy, never try shout over it. The confusion will just increase.
9. Explain what is happening to those people who are "lost" in the discussion.
10. Refrain from from debate with individuals.
11. Take all 2/3 votes by counting raised hands, not by voice.
12. Follow a precise format when voting. a. Announce that debate had ended. b. Reread the motion. This is important! c. Say "All of those in favor of the motion, please say (aye) or (yes)." Pause. Then, " Those opposed, please say (nay) or (no)." d. State which side of the vote won, and by what margin. (Example: "The no's won by least a majority vote.") e. State whether the motion was passed or defeated. f. Inform the assembly what motion (if any) comes next. (Example: "Is there any more new business?")

13. Call on people of differing opinions throughout debate.
14. Call on a person a second time for debate only after everyone who wants to has spoken a first time.
15. Use a microphone if necessary.
16. Arrange a signal with a friend in the meeting who can be "cued" to move to end debate if discussion starts going in circles.
17. Follow an agenda.
18. Keep a readable chart in parliamentary procedure handy to quick reference.
19. Before the first official council meeting, conduct a workshop on parliamentary procedures to educate them on how it works. Give students a copy of the terms.

Do Student Councils Need Parliamentary Procedure?

Parliamentary procedure is an effective decision-making method for people who understand it, but is complicated and bothersome for those who don't.

Some councils are small and friendly enough that they do not need the formal wording and rules of parliamentary procedure. However, all councils need respect for those common sense and common courtesy principles upon which parliamentary procedure is based. While it is possible to follow those general principals without using a complicated system of rules and motions, councils neglect a very valuable area of formal citizenship training by neglecting parliamentary procedure. In a heated controversy, it may be an effective tool for cooling tempers.