

How To Hold A Good Meeting + Rusty's Rules of Order

Adapted from “How to Hold a Good Meeting and Rusty's Rules of Order” collated by the Portland General Membership Branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). This text is condensed and strives for gender-neutral language.

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How to Hold A Good Meeting

Good meeting procedure is a basic building block in any form of collective action. With it, people can accomplish a more than they could alone. Without it, time's wasted and people burn themselves out. Aimless or endless meetings hold back organizing

The purpose of a meeting is decision-making. Decision-making has several parts. The methods used must take care of each part.

Decision-Making Dissected

First, there's a great idea. This comes from discussion of somebody's ideas. We need to encourage the formation of great ideas to abolish exploitation and create a better world. Find time for unstructured discussion and brainstorming. Ideas are vulnerable when first born, so don't be tough on them. The time to challenge, criticize, amend, argue against, examine feasibility—all these things come later. If every idea in a group is crushed out of the gate, ideas will eventually dry up.

Next comes discussion, clarification. You've got a cool idea. Will it work? How would we make it work? This friendly discussion should occur outside of a meeting. Flesh it out then propose it. Think it through and be able to summarize it clearly before taking it into a meeting to be proposed.

Next, a refined idea is proposed in the meeting, discussed, amended, and perhaps passed by the group. We're halfway there.

Implementation is next. Who will do it? How? With what money, equipment, support? When? Maybe this is a committee matter. The committee is instructed by the group to perform a task, by a given time, with certain supplies, and to report back by a specific date. Or somebody volunteers to do it. Or a special committee is called for, if it doesn't fit into a standing committee.

Accountability is next. The committee or individual has agreed to a project by a specific date. The larger group needs to hear that the job is completed, or, if not, why not and when it will be done or what needs to happen to get it done. This is the easiest part to let slip. If you slack on this we're all flakes in the eyes of the world, and in actual fact,

we can't do diddly. We're screwed.

The last part will, in some cases, be review and drawing conclusions or lessons. The project didn't really accomplish what we wanted it to, and we think that's because of this and this. We'll do this differently next time. Or, this thing worked really well, because of this, so let's remember to try to repeat these good procedures. This is how we learn and advance.

It's good to have a record of the action and the review and conclusions written down so we don't forget, and for the sake of those brave comrades that come after us, so that they can learn from our successes and mistakes. It's good to share this stuff with the rest of the union in other locals, so we can learn and advance together.

OK, that's what the meeting is for. Here's how to do it. Yahoo! Now we're having some fun!

What Makes A Good Meeting

There are a couple of general characteristics that all good meetings share. One is that they are short. After about two hours people become stupefied and quit retaining information. A diminishing rate of return is reached that is easy to spot if you watch for it. People get a glassy look in their eyes. Time to adjourn.

If the meetings frequently reach that point you start losing membership, or at least the active participation of members. Restructure your meetings, tighten up procedures, strengthen the chair, schedule more frequent meetings, use more committees, whatever you need to do, but don't carry on with long meetings. You'll lose your best people, leaving the decision-making and implementation to the dull-witted few who can stand to be bored and have their time wasted. See the CP or SWP for examples of what that will get you in the long run.

Good meetings are fairly civil. They are interesting. They have relatively lively participation from most people present. They get a lot of work done. They are efficient and move along quickly. They are well-organized. They don't wander off into subjects that don't concern the organization at that time.

The basic tools or parts of a good meeting include an agenda, a chair, often a co-chair, a recording secretary, and most importantly a rank & file that knows how to take part in a good meeting. That's the real key. If the R&F is passive

and sheep-like then you're just out of luck. You'll never do diddly squat and you may as well go home. If the people in the meeting don't really care about the business at hand, there's nothing you can do short of thinking up some business they do care about, or finding out what they care about and doing that instead. This falls under the heading of agenda. More on this soon.

If they just don't know how to do it, but are willing, you're OK. A strong chair can take the helm for a while, and institute a part of the meeting that teaches the meeters how to meet. This is important and needs to take a high priority.

Teaching Meeters to Meet

There are two parts to teaching people how to hold a meeting. One is to set aside a part of each meeting, and the end, to briefly discuss the meeting itself. People can speak up about how they felt and what they wanted to have happen, what didn't happen, how it was too long and boring, and criticize the chair and each other. This is touchy, but some form of criticism is necessary to collective action, unless you are willing to have a boss who does it all for you. Keep it impersonal, be gentle, understand each other as best you can, and it can be a really good thing for the group. Figure out how the meeting could run smoother.

The second part of teaching the meeters how to meet is to rotate the chair. You do this for the obvious reason—that you need to have more than one good chair in the group, and also for the purpose of teaching the membership how to be in a meeting, how it really works, how to be chaired.

What you want is a whole room full of good chairs, all just chairing the crap out of themselves and each other and all keeping an eye on the process and the big picture as well as taking part as members. Then you've really got something. Then you really make the chips fly. It's a bit like the way waiters love to wait on other waiters, because they know what's going on, are sympathetic and appreciative and help the process along. Ditto with the chair. It's a real joy to chair people who know how to chair.

If you've got an experienced chair, get them to chair a few meetings to show how it's done. Then start putting one brave soul at a time in the hot seat with the experienced chair as co-chair to step in as needed and guide the trainee. Keep the same trainee in the chair for several

consecutive meetings, until they actually getting the hang of it.

Keep it rotating slowly in this manner and eventually you'll have a group that's a breeze to chair, and who can go out and do the same thing elsewhere. We're all leaders, right?

If nobody in the group really knows how to do it, then you all have to learn together. Do this as a group project and give it the priority it deserves. Train yourselves one or two at a time, not with a too-fast rotation where nobody ever gets a chance to really get it down. It takes time.

Pick Your Process

The group has got to agree on a decision-making process. The obvious choices are democratic consensus and majority. If it's done right you'll almost always have consensus anyhow, but you've got a really functional system to go forward with when consensus can't be reached.

Consensus usually means long meetings with a lot talk that goes way off the subject at hand. In my experience you can get a lot fairer, more democratic and egalitarian process, in actual practice, with a democratic majority, and get a lot more work done. Consensus is more applicable to a house meeting, to a small group that lives together and is really tight. With a more diverse group like an IWW local, that actually has a lot of work to get done, majority rule is the best bet. Consensus is also much easier than sabotage. I've seen it done more than once.

A Sample Meeting

You have to set a time and place and frequency for your meetings. Call the first one, and put this on the first agenda. No time is good for everybody. Do the best you can, and remember it can always be changed. Get a place that's quiet, private, and preferably doesn't belong to one of the members. That's a possible power problem, so avoid it if you can.

The first part of an agenda is the order of business. Take the one from the IWW constitution for starters, and modify it if need be. It's a good one, tried and true. The chair prepares a proposed agenda, leaving space for additions. The agenda has to be approved by vote of the group, or else you're already being led by the nose. Sort of like the situation you meet in the voting booth.

The Agenda, One Item At A Time

The chair should be chosen at the previous meeting, so as to be able to prepare in advance. The chair gets there early, sets up chairs for the membership, makes coffee or whatever, prepares a proposed agenda big enough to be easily read by all, and greets people as they arrive.

When it's time to start the chair calls the meeting to order. I recommend doing this at the exact moment the meeting was scheduled for and let the latecomers be late. One of the most important things in a good meeting is to avoid wasting people's precious time. Let the late ones be late and miss out (they can read the minutes), and reward the prompt ones by not wasting their time.

Choose a recording secretary. This person takes the minutes. The minutes should be clear, legible, and brief. They must include motions made and whether or not they carried or not, how they are to be implemented, by when and by whom. That's the meat of it. Also include time and place of the meeting, who chaired and recorded, who was present. You can leave out the discussion on questions usually. Get the bones and keep it clear and brief.

Read the minutes from the previous meeting. They should be read in full and approved, or amended and then approved by vote of the group. This way everybody is clear on a decision and who takes accountability to get it done and when. That's your starting point for the meeting. It keeps you honest. It makes a record of the collective. It's necessary for making the next agenda. Don't shortchange the minutes.

Approve the agenda or amend and approve. Make sure people know they have a say in this. It's more important than the average newcomer realizes.

Brief announcements and communications. The key word here is brief. These items require no discussion. If they generate agenda items for new business, get them on the agenda and move on. You can easily get mired down here, so watch it. They should be relevant to the group, and if they are lengthy either have them in written form for interested parties to read later or have people who want details talk to the person later. Keep it rolling.

Reports also require no discussion, except for possible clarification. If they generate business to be discussed and acted upon, they go to new business or to the appropriate committee. Reports should be kept brief, and can be

presented in written form if they are long. "I've got a report here from the doodad committee regarding current innovations and the rising cost of gizmos. It's long, so I'll let you read it after the meeting if you're interested." Reports include those of officers, standing or special committees, delegates, attendees of events or activities.

Also report on the implementation of previously made decisions of the group. "We decided last meeting to poison the stream to murder the neighbor's dog. Bill and Nancy were in charge of implementation on that one. Can we hear a report?" That sort of thing.

Now we're into the main meat of the meeting, the business. We should have whizzed through everything up to here pretty quick (but not so quick as to neglect), because now is when the going, of necessity, gets a little slower.

Business is anything that requires a decision and/or implementation by the group.

Old business was once new business, but we're done with it quite yet. Maybe it got tabled 'til we got more information. Maybe we were too dingy to deal with it last meeting, but didn't want to just forget it. Maybe it was too hairy to handle all at once. Whatever business wasn't satisfactorily completed last meeting is now old business, unless all we need is a report on implementation.

A new business item is best presented as a motion, though sometimes you may need a few whereas to make it clear why you are presenting the motion. The maker of the motion should have taken the time to think it out pretty well, maybe kicked it around with friends, and should have a pretty clear idea of what needs to happen, thus saving us all a lot of time. "I move that we take off our pants and sing Yankee Doodle on 14th Street, this Wednesday at noon, and that a committee should be set up to help implement this decision." There, now! That's a nice clear way to bring up a new business item. The chair says: "It has moved that we blah, blah..." restating the motion, both for the sake of the membership and to help the recording secretary get it right in the minutes. The chair says: "Is there a second?" If nobody seconds it then that's that. It's not much of an idea and we can get on with the business. If one more person wants it to pass, they second it, and it's not totally out of left field, and apparently worthy of our time. "Is there any discussion?"

If it's a shoo-in there doesn't need to be much discussion. We don't really need to hear three people say why they think it's a good idea if nobody disagrees. The chair should

direct the discussion with this in mind. Ask if anybody wants to speak against the motion. Ask if anybody is unclear on it or has hesitations or reservations about it. Draw them out, to be sure it's adequately discussed, but ride hard on it to avoid waste of time. Keep the discussion to the topic. The chair has to tactfully interrupt if somebody is wandering off the track. Membership should also do this as needed.

When it seems the question is clarified, adequately discussed, the chair or any member can call the question, call for a vote. "All opposed. All in favor." If you think it's a shoo-in, which is really common in a well-functioning group, you can save a lot of time by asking, after the motion has seconded, if anyone's opposed. If not, it passes without the need for discussion.

When the motion passes, make sure to get it implemented. If it's a one or two person job, call for volunteers. If it's a committee job refer it to the appropriate committee or set one up. Make sure we know who's going to do it, by when, and when we'll hear a report on it. Make sure the recorder gets all that in the minutes. Move on to the next item of business.

Often you'll need a break to get through a two-hour meeting with a clearheaded group. We usually take five or ten minutes between old and new business. It's best if people will move around, go outside, make noise.

If there's too much business and you see that you're losing the membership, see if there are items that can be tabled. You have to ask the person whose item it is or the group about tabling something. The chair can't just do it without permission, but the chair can suggest it.

The last item is good and welfare. This is a more general discussion of things pertaining to the good and welfare of the group and its members. It's less structured, more touchy-feely, if you will. It includes critique of the meeting and the chair, somebody needs a place to live or a part for their car, somebody needs help or has extra zucchinis, somebody has a general feeling about how the group is doing, the direction it's moving. Stuff that matters, but doesn't really fit into the motion-making-and-implementation mode. It's the community part and deserves time and attention.

Pick your next chair, agree on the next meeting time and place and somebody can move to adjourn. No matter how good your meetings get you'll rarely hear anyone speak against a motion to adjourn.

Robert's Rules Reduced

A few basic rules need to be in place to carry out the making and passing of a motion. Robert's Rules of Order are so complex that they're of little actual use, but the basic ideas are sound.

A motion can be made by any member at any time, having recognized by the chair. Any time there isn't already a motion on the floor, that is. If there's a motion on the floor, that motion must be dealt with before another motion can be made. Exceptions are a motion to table or the suggestion of an amendment.

Once a motion is on the floor, anything that doesn't pertain directly to that motion is out of order, and must be cut off promptly before the whole shooting match is sidetracked and fuddled. You can come back to it later.

If an amendment is suggested it must be accepted by the maker of the motion before it can be acted upon. Otherwise the original motion has to be voted on before another motion, even an amended version of the previous, can be made. Otherwise you get the situation where some people are speaking to the original motion, some to the amendment, and maybe some to a second or third possible amendment. The result is a muddying and a loss of sense of the meeting.

A 'point of order' is always in order. In other words, it can be made at any time. You just say "point of order" and make your point. It should either be for clarification of the motion at hand or clarification of the process. Use it to point out that the speaker is not addressing the business at hand, that the chair has overlooked some part of the process, that people can't hear what's going on, something directly related to the process, not the content, of the meeting.

"Call the question" is a common point of order. This means that this discussion took too long, the ground has covered, that people are repeating themselves, and let's vote on it now.

Miscellaneous Words of Wisdom

The meeting isn't really time for social stuff, hanging out with your friends. It's about business. The friend stuff is at least as important, so give it its due. You may want to have a social hour before the meeting or retire to a nearby pub

afterwards to hang out and talk.

Committees are a good way to get work done and save time. If something can be done in committee, don't use up the time of the whole body on it. The committees have to report back to the larger group, but you don't need twenty people to decide where to get a good price on paper clips and who should pick them up.

Something an old Wobbly taught us (along with most of the rest of this) is to always conduct your meeting as if there were a hundred people there, to be ready when the times comes when there are a hundred people there. Sound advice. For instance, it's a good idea to get people to stand up to speak. It helps us all hear, and gives us all a little experience speaking t a group. Makes it a lot easier when you have to stand up in front of a large group to speak at a rally or something.

Good meeting procedure is something we all can learn. It's not that hard, and not that boring or unpleasant. In fact, when compared to bad meeting procedure it's downright fun and exciting. A lot of groups start to fall apart or cease to be democratic when they get past a dozen people, because they don't make the jump from the little group of friends that functions in a loose family style to the larger-group ways of working.

Many of us have little or no experience with a functional and healthy large democratic group, but such things do exist. The relearning and development of the forms and ways of doing this large-group democratic collective work is in an of itself a pretty subversive action in the present social context. Like it says in one old Wobbly cartoon: Organize now! Organize right!

Rusty's Rules of Order

Decisions in Seattle DSA are made by a majority vote of the General Membership in attendance, once a quorum is present or participates in the vote. A Quorum is ten percent of the General Membership at the time of the meeting. During in-person meetings, Cards will be checked at the beginning of each meeting. Nonmembers may be seated by decision of the group, but may not vote or make motions. Meetings should be businesslike and efficient, lasting, in most cases, no more than two hours. The tone should be one of mutual respect. Insults and personal attacks will not be tolerated. Members may speak only when recognized by the chair. When speaking in the meeting, address the group as a whole. No private conversations allowed during the course of the meeting.

Sample Agenda

1. CALL TO ORDER
2. CARD CHECK REPORT
3. CHOOSE RECORDING SECRETARY
4. READ AND APPROVE MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING
5. REVIEW, AMEND AND APPROVE AGENDA
6. ANNOUNCEMENTS AND COMMUNICATIONS
7. REPORTS
8. OLD BUSINESS
9. NEW BUSINESS
10. GOOD AND WELFARE
11. ADJOURNMENT

Announcements, Communications, and Reports must be brief, or submitted in writing. There is no discussion, beyond brief clarification. No decisions are made, unless they are so obvious as to require no discussion. If any discussion is required, the item goes to New Business. Good and Welfare should include a critique of the meeting, critique of the chair, selection of next chair, time and place of next meeting. Items under Old and New Business begin with the statement (or restatement) of a main motion.

Making a Main Motion

A Main Motion concerns business to be carried out by the group.

There may be only one main motion on the floor at a given time.

The motion is stated, beginning with: "I move that" The motion should be clear and concise.

If the motion is not seconded it dies.

If the motion is seconded, it is repeated by the chair, to establish the exact wording. The maker of the motion either agrees to the wording or corrects it. The chair instructs the secretary to record the motion and to read it back. When it has read back, in exact wording, from the minutes, the chair calls for discussion.

The chair begins discussion by asking if anyone is opposed. If not, the vote is taken. If so, discussion begins with opposition.

Discussion goes back and forth between favor and opposition until all relevant opinions have heard. No member may speak twice on a motion until each member that wishes to speak has heard. Possible exception to this rule would be to allow the maker of the motion to explain and clarify. Members must not repeat a point. If someone else makes your point before you get your turn, just say, "I pass," when called upon, or that you agree with the previous speaker's point.

A member may offer a Friendly Amendment during discussion. It should be stated in exact wording. The chair asks the maker if they accept that amendment. If not, discussion continues on the original motion. If the maker accepts the amendment, it is repeated by the chair, agreed upon, recorded and read back from the minutes. Then the discussion continues on the Amended Motion, which becomes the motion on the floor.

The maker of the motion may Withdraw the motion at any time before the vote.

The vote is taken when discussion is completed. The chair may call for the vote (Call the Question) or a member may do so. Call the Question is a Procedural Motion (see below).

The vote is taken, counted, and recorded in the minutes.

Before moving on, the motion must be implemented.

Decide what is needed to carry out the motion, who is going to take responsibility, by what time, and when they will report back to the group. This should be prearranged if possible.

Procedural Points and Motions

Points of Procedure and Procedural Motions speak to the process of the meeting. They are in order at any time and must be dealt with right away, before going on with the meeting.

Procedural Motions:

A Procedural Motion must be seconded and voted on by the group. This should be done quickly, so as not to distract from the main business at hand.

The chair may make a point of procedure, or suggest (entertain) a procedural motion.

- To Table (includes when it is to be dealt with)
- To Refer (to committee or wherever)
- To Adjourn
- To Recess (take a break)
- To Overrule the Chair
- To Replace the Chair
- To Call the Question (call for a vote)
- To Censure (the group tells an individual member that their behavior in the meeting is unacceptable and will not be tolerated)
- To Expel (must be preceded by a motion to censure, except in case of immediate danger. This motion expels the individual from the meeting, not the organization.)
- To Call for a Straw Poll (this is a non-binding vote, to assess the feeling of the group)

Points of Procedure

The maker raises their hand and speaks out: "Point of Procedure" (or "Point of Order"). The chair must recognize the member immediately. The chair may rule on a point of procedure. The ruling of the chair may be challenged by a member and put to a vote. Point of Personal Privilege: It's

too hot, too stuffy, can't hear the speaker, etc. Point of Procedure (or Order): This is a suggestion as to how to carry out the business better. It is ruled on by the chair. The ruling can be challenged and the point made into a motion. Don't get too carried away here, please.

The Chair

The Chair is elected by the group and has a mandate to carry out the will of the group as regards the procedure of the meeting. The chair speaks with the authority of the group, for the group.

The chair should get to the meeting early to prepare for the meeting, set up chairs, etc. They should make up a proposed agenda that is legible and visible to the whole room.

The chair cannot vote, make motions nor discuss motions. If the chair really needs to do these things they must pass the chair on to another member for the duration of that item of business. This shouldn't happen very often.

The chair is to oversee the process of the meeting to insure that the following criteria are met:

That the business moves along quickly. The chair must keep track of the time. A timekeeper may be appointed by the chair if needed. A meeting should take no more than two hours unless agreed upon by the group. Time limits may be set on discussion as needed.

That the Agenda is followed.

That each item of business is taken care of.

That each member who wishes to participate is encouraged and given that opportunity.

That none dominates the meeting and speaks excessively at the expense of the others.

That the meeting is carried out in accordance with the rules and procedures agreed upon by the group.

That the process is clear, understandable, accessible and transparent to the members.

That an atmosphere and tone of mutual respect is maintained.

The chair, in the name of the group, does not allow disrespect, insult or personal attack in the meeting. The chair may not take part in the business of the meeting.

They can and should offer suggestions for the sake of clarity and to move the business along. The chair may suggest (entertain) a motion or procedure.

The duties of the Chair should be rotated, but a member should chair several times in succession, in order to learn and refine the skill of chairing. The group critiques the chair at the end of each meeting in order to improve that skill. The ability to chair a meeting well is considered to be a basic skill and necessity, to be learned and perfected by each member, over time, as a part of the work of the organization.

Minutes

Minutes are to be taken by the recording secretary, elected at the beginning of each meeting. The minutes are to be clear and legible, following the standard format. Minutes should be accessible to, and only to, all members in good standing, and must be present at each meeting. Minutes from the previous meeting are to be accessible to the chair in order to make up the proposed agenda.

This is the Minutes Format:

- Date and place of meeting. Type of meeting (monthly branch meeting, for instance). Number of members present. Name of chair and secretary.
- Called to order- at what time.
- Cards checked.
- Minutes read and approved or amended.
- Agenda approved.
- Synopsis of reports. This must be brief. Longer reports may be submitted in written form, for inclusion in the minutes.
- Old Business, then New Business, to be recorded as follows:
 - Name of member (maker of motion)
 - M/S (moved and seconded): That we . . . (Motion stated in exact wording)
 - Carried or Failed (tally of votes - number Yes, number No, number Abstained)
 - Withdrawn, Amended to . . . (exact wording)
 - Tabled or Referred (to when or whom).

- To be implemented how, by whom, by what time, and reported back by whom, when.
- Example: James M/S: That we send \$100 to the striking tap-dancers. Carried 23Y,5N, 6A. Mike will write a check and mail it this week, and report back to the next branch meeting.
- Synopsis of Good and Welfare. Next chair. Next meeting time and place.
- Adjourned - at what time..
- These rules and procedures are to be made available to all members.