

Tips for Shorter Meetings

by

Jim Slaughter, JD, CPP-T, PRP

Updated from "How to Keep Discussions Short: Tips for Shorter, More Effective Meetings," *Association Management*, 2000

“Be sincere . . . be brief . . . be seated.” Unfortunately, not all members follow this good advice from Theodore Roosevelt. That’s why effective presiding officers use various methods to keep discussion moving. Among them are the following 10 techniques, 3 of which are procedural rules that must be applied to certain types of meetings, and 7 of which are suggestions to shorten any discussion at any meeting.

Three Rules of Debate

Most associations follow *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (10th Edition)*(“RONR”). If *RONR* is your parliamentary authority, its procedures are binding except as spelled out in any specially adopted rules of order.

RONR has several helpful restrictions on debate that apply to most meetings and conventions (though not to boards of fewer than 12 members):

1. No one can speak more than 10 minutes.
2. No one can speak a second time until everyone who wishes to speak a first time has spoken. The person chairing the meeting can facilitate new debate by asking, “Is there anyone who would like to speak who has not yet spoken?”
3. No one can speak more than twice on the same issue.

Seven Practical Suggestions

1. Announce the adjournment time before the meeting. Members often police the length of their own comments when the meeting has a foreseeable end.

2. List starting and ending times for each discussion item on the agenda.
3. Set the discussion time prior to starting on lengthy issues: “Is there a motion to limit total debate to 30 minutes?” Such a motion requires a two-thirds vote.
4. Encourage new discussion (and prevent repetition) by asking for speakers who have not yet spoken.
5. Alternate pro and con. After hearing from a proponent, ask, “Is there anyone who wishes to speak against the motion?” Alternate. When no one wishes to speak on a particular side, ask unanimous consent to end debate. “Is there any objection to closing discussion? Hearing no objection, discussion is closed.”
6. Ask for a motion to end discussion: “Is there a motion to close debate?” Most parliamentary authorities allow debate to be closed with a two-thirds vote.
7. Establish speaking rules for all meetings by adopting special rules of order with notice and a two-thirds vote. That is, set guidelines to limit the amount of debate and number of speakers).

Jim Slaughter is President of the law firm of Forman Rossabi Black, P.A., and is an attorney, Professional Registered Parliamentarian, and Certified Professional Parliamentarian-Teacher. Jim’s Web site at www.jimslaughter.com contains many articles and charts on meeting procedure.