

Robert's Rules of Order is the most widely used framework for running orderly, fair, and efficient meetings. Most nonprofit boards adopt it in their bylaws but never actually learn it — which means meetings are often run inconsistently, with no shared understanding of how decisions get made.

This guide covers the motions and procedures that actually come up in nonprofit board meetings. You do not need to memorize the full manual. You need to know this.

Key Concepts to Understand First

Before the motions, a few foundational ideas:

- A quorum must be present before any business can be conducted. Check your bylaws for the number required — typically a majority of board members.
- Only one main motion can be on the floor at a time. You can make secondary motions (like amendments or postponements) while a main motion is pending.
- Any member can make a motion. Any other member can second it.
- Once a motion is made and seconded, it belongs to the full body — not the person who made it. It can only be withdrawn with permission.
- Motions that originate from a committee do not require a second — the committee's deliberation is considered sufficient. They go directly to the floor for discussion and vote.
- Debate must stay on topic. The chair can call a member out of order if they stray.

The Motions That Actually Matter

These are the motions nonprofit boards use most often. They are organized by type.

Main Motions – how business gets introduced

Motion	What it does	Second?	Debate?	Vote
Main motion	Introduces a new item of business for the board to act on	Yes	Yes	Majority
Amend a motion	Modifies the wording of a pending main motion	Yes	Yes	Majority
Substitute motion	Replaces the entire text of a pending motion with new language	Yes	Yes	Majority

Procedural Motions – how business gets managed

Motion	What it does	Second?	Debate?	Vote
Table / postpone	Delays action on a motion to a later time or meeting	Yes	No	Majority
Call the question	Ends debate immediately and forces a vote on the pending motion	Yes	No	2/3
Refer to committee	Sends a motion to a committee for further study or recommendation	Yes	Yes	Majority
Postpone indefinitely	Kills a motion without a direct vote against it	Yes	Yes	Majority
Recess	Calls a short break without adjourning the meeting	Yes	No	Majority
Adjourn	Ends the meeting	Yes	No	Majority

Points – no motion required, no vote required

Motion	What it does	Second?	Debate?	Vote
Point of order	Calls attention to a rule violation or procedural error	No	No	Chair rules
Point of information	Requests a factual clarification (not an opinion)	No	No	No vote
Point of privilege	Raises an urgent personal or comfort issue (noise, health, safety)	No	No	Chair rules

Revisiting Decisions

Motion	What it does	Second?	Debate?	Vote
Reconsider	Brings back a motion already voted on (must be made by someone who voted on the prevailing side)	Yes	Yes	Majority
Rescind	Repeals or cancels a previous action of the board	Yes	Yes	2/3 or majority with notice

How a Motion Moves: Step by Step

1	A board member seeks recognition from the chair: "Mr./Madam Chair."
2	The chair recognizes the member by name.
3	The member states the motion: "I move that [specific action]."
4	Another member seconds the motion: "Second" or "I second the motion."
5	The chair restates the motion and opens debate: "It has been moved and seconded that [motion]. Is there discussion?"
6	Members debate. The chair recognizes speakers alternating pro and con when possible.
7	The chair calls for the vote: "All in favor say aye. Opposed? The motion [carries/fails]."
8	The chair announces the result and the meeting moves on.

What to Actually Say: A Quick Phrase Guide

Most board members hesitate to participate in formal procedure because they don't know the words. Here are the phrases that cover almost every situation.

When you want to...	Say this:
Make a motion	"I move that we [specific action]."
Second a motion	"Second."
Amend a motion	"I move to amend the motion by [adding/removing/changing] [specific language]."
End debate and call a vote	"I call the question." (requires 2/3 vote)
Delay a vote to later in the meeting	"I move to table this motion until [later in this meeting / our next meeting]."

Send to committee	"I move to refer this motion to the [committee name] for review and recommendation."
Flag a rules violation	"Point of order." (then state the concern after the chair recognizes you)
Ask a clarifying question	"Point of information — could someone clarify [specific question]?"
Request a counted vote	"I request a division of the assembly." (forces a show of hands or roll call)
Withdraw your own motion	"I request permission to withdraw the motion."
End the meeting	"I move to adjourn."

Voting: What the Thresholds Mean

Threshold	What it means	Typical uses
Majority	More than half of votes cast (abstentions typically do not count)	Most main motions, amendments, procedural votes
Two-thirds	At least two-thirds of votes cast	Calling the question, rescinding without notice, suspending rules
Unanimous	No opposing votes (abstentions usually allowed)	Consent agendas, courtesy motions, uncontested items

Abstentions:

An abstention is not a vote. It does not count for or against. A member who abstains is simply not voting. This matters when calculating majorities — a motion can pass with less than half of board members present if several abstain, as long as it has more than half of votes actually cast.

Practical Tips for Nonprofit Boards

- Most nonprofit boards do not need strict Robert's Rules for every agenda item. Reserve formal procedure for contested or consequential decisions.
- A consent agenda groups routine items (minutes, non-controversial reports) into a single vote. Any member can pull an item for separate discussion. This saves significant meeting time.
- If your bylaws say you "follow Robert's Rules," your board is bound by them. If the language says "generally follow," you have more flexibility.
- The chair sets the tone. A chair who is calm, consistent, and fair makes Robert's Rules feel like a help rather than a hindrance.
- When in doubt, a simple motion and vote is almost always appropriate. You do not need elaborate procedure to make a decision.
- When a committee brings a motion to the full board, no second is needed. The recommendation goes directly to the floor.
- New board members should not be afraid to say "I'm not sure of the procedure here" — a good chair will guide the room.

Questions about meeting facilitation or board governance?

Book a free 30-minute discovery call at www.spiegelconsulting.com — or reach Noah directly at noah@spiegelconsulting.com or 615-997-0944.