

RUSTY'S RULES of ORDER ✓

All about
good meetings

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Notes

This text is based on Portland GMB's booklet, *How to Hold a Good Meeting & Rusty's Rules of Order*, which combines two documents one after the other. In this printing, the content of two documents have been merged to form one whole, with modifications to reflect local practice. Neither piece had an author or printing date stated. In addition, the illustration was taken from a seperate version of *Rusty's Rules of Order*, also printed by Portland GMB, which was credited to FW Amanda Gross of the Chicago IWW Education Department.

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Good meeting procedure is probably the most basic tool in the organizer's kit and the building block for any form of collective action. A good meeting helps a group of people—small or large—to accomplish more than they could as individuals. Without a democratic and efficient way to make decisions, people can do little more than burn themselves out and reinforce the idea that fighting the boss and authorities is impossible and that the labour movement is nothing more than one useless meeting after another.

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 the **bright idea**. This comes out of discussion or out of somebody's head. We need to encourage the formation of bright ideas because we need them. Make sure your organization has a place for unstructured discussion and brainstorming outside of formal meetings. Bright ideas are vulnerable when first born, so don't be tough on them. The time to challenge, criticize, amend, argue against, point out unfeasibility—all these things come later. If you jump all over the newly hatched ideas, your chickens will stop laying them.

Next comes the **discussion, maturation, clarification**. You've got a cool idea, but will it work? How could we make it work? This is discussion

amongst friends, outside of the business meeting, before the idea is proposed. Get it thought out well and be able to state it clearly before taking it into the meeting to be proposed.

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

Implementation is next. Who's going to do it? How? What money, equipment and support is needed? By when? Maybe this is a committee matter. The committee is instructed by the group to do such and such, by this time, with these provisos, and to report back on such a 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 do it, by this date. The larger group needs to hear what has happened. Is the job done? If not, why not and when will it be done? This is the easiest part to let slip, yet if we slack on this, the organization is little more than a flakefest that can't do anything. We're screwed.

Reviewing and drawing conclusions or lessons is the last part. Did the project accomplish what we wanted it to? Why or why not? What should we do differently next time? Or, this thing worked really well, so let's remember to repeat these good procedures. This is how we learn and advance.

Remember to leave a written **record** of the action and the review and conclusions so we don't forget, and for the sake of the next wave of Fellow Workers who are better off learning from our successes and mistakes than reinventing the wheel. It's also good to share this stuff with the rest of the union, too, so we can learn and advance together.

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. This is easy to spot if you watch for it: people get a glassy look in their eyes, become restless, irritable, snappy. Time to adjourn.

Long, stupefying meetings leads to less members and lower member participation. This last is our organization's lifeblood so cultivating it must be our priority. Restructure 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.

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 on tangents or gossip or irrelevant news.

The basic tools of a good meeting include an agenda, a chair, often a co-chair, a recording secretary, and most importantly a rank and file that knows how to take part in a good meeting. That's the real key. If the rank and file is passive and sheep-like then you're just out of luck and you're better off going home. If the people in the meeting don't care about the business on the agenda, all you can do is find out what they care about and do that instead. This falls under the heading of agenda.

If people at the meeting just don't know how to do a meeting, 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 how to meet. This must be a high priority.

Majority rule

The group has got to agree on a decision-making process. The obvious choices are consensus and majority rule. Majority rule has a bad reputation amongst some people, but it gets the job done. 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 of talk that can go off topic. In my experience you can get a lot fairer, more democratic and egalitarian process, in actual practice, with majority rule, and get a lot more work done. Consensus is more applicable to a house meeting, to a small tight-knit group that lives together. 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 to sabotage. I've seen it done more than once.

Calling the 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 Agenda, One Item At A Time

1. Call to order
2. Choose recording secretary
3. Read and approve minutes
4. Agenda review and approval
5. Brief announcements and communications
6. Reports
7. Old business
8. New business
9. Good and welfare and meeting critique

Call to order

When it's time to start, the chair calls the meeting to order. This should be done at the exact moment the meeting was scheduled for to avoid wasting people's precious time. Reward the prompt ones by not wasting their time and let the late ones be late and miss out (they can read the minutes).

Check membership cards at the beginning of the meeting. This is important because decisions are to be made by a majority vote of members in good standing. According to the Constitution, you are considered to be in good standing if you have paid dues in the past 3 months. Non-members may be seated by decision of the group, but may not vote or make motions.

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. See page 17 for more about taking minutes.

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 has it clear what has been decided and who said they would do what by when. That's your jumping-off point for the current meeting. It keeps you honest. It makes a record of the life of the collectivity. 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. 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

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 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.

About business

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

Old business was once new business, but we're not 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.

New business

A new business item is best presented as a motion, (see below for more on that) though sometimes you may need a few whereases 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.

Good and welfare

This is the last item. 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.

Adjourn

No matter how good your meetings get you'll rarely hear anyone speak against a motion to adjourn.

Keeping going

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 do it without permission, but the chair can suggest it.

Main motions

A motion (also called a proposal) can be made by any member at any time, having been 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.

Firstring, or proposing

"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.

Seconding

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.

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 secretary records the motion and reads it back. When it has been read back, in exact wording, from the minutes, the chair calls for discussion.

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. It's a bit tricky, but very learnable.

Members may not repeat a point that has already been made.

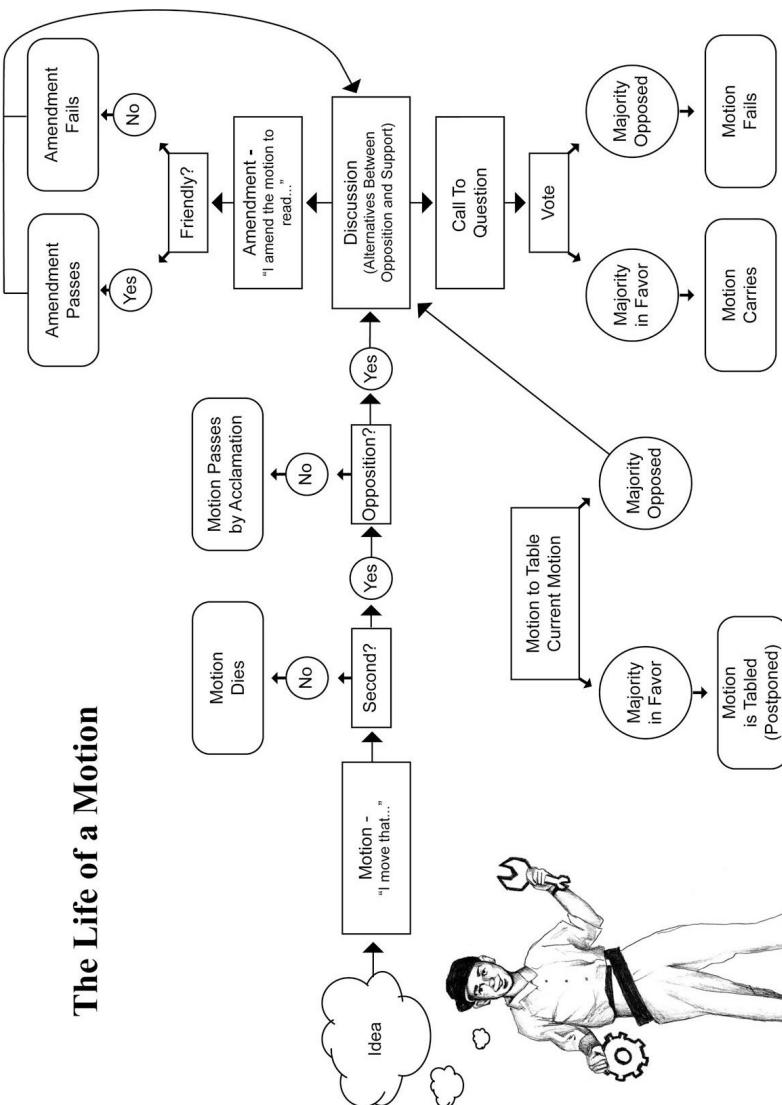
Amendments

A member may offer a **Friendly Amendment** during discussion. It should be stated in exact wording. The chair asks the maker if she accepts 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.

If the maker does not accept the amendment, it is considered **unfriendly** and 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.

Call the question

When it seems the question is clarified, adequately discussed, the chair or any member can call the question, call for a vote. Call the Question is a Procedural Motion (see page 14). The vote is taken, counted, and recorded in the minutes.



The Life of a Motion

Get it done

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.

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.

- 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 her 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, Order & Privilege

The maker raises her 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 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.

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.

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

Chairing A Meeting

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 is to oversee the process of the meeting to ensure 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 addressed.
- 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.

Taking 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). Names 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... (use exact wording)
 - Passed 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. Passed 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 meeting time and place.
- Adjourned - at what time.

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, at 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. Try to work out how the meeting or some part of the meeting could have been done better.

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 really make the chips fly. It's a real joy to chair people who know how to chair.

If you've got an experienced chair, get him/her 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 s/he is 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?

Miscellaneous Words Of Wisdom

Meetings must accomplish the union's business. Hanging out with friends and chatting isn't an accomplishment. The friend stuff is important, but that happens better during a social hour before the meeting or at a nearby pub after the meeting.

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 20 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 to 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 re-learning and development of the forms and ways of doing this large-group democratic collective work is how we learn to run the world.

Like it says in one old Wobbly cartoon:

Organize now! Organize right!

Meetings are crucial to running our union fairly and for the benefit of everyone involved. It is important that every member understands how to participate in groups so that we can put our heads together to find the best solutions.

Helping each other out today is how we learn to get past our differences and stand together so that one day we can take control of the world which we have spent generations building and caring for.

The idea that “we are all leaders here” has been with the IWW since its inception. That doesn’t just mean no bosses telling us where to go, what to do, how to do it. It also means we have to decide those things for ourselves, together. How will we know what is best?

Meetings are a basic building block to union democracy today and industrial democracy tomorrow.

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Build
a new
world
in the
shell
of the
old.