



What's a Snippet? Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at www.agreatmeeting.com.



Snippet #134 Terms of Art: Eligible vs. Qualified

Every field has its terms of art – words that have a meaning specific to that endeavor. Parliamentary procedure is no different. If used incorrectly, such terms can cause serious unintended consequences, especially when used in bylaws. This Snippet will deal with just two of them: eligible and qualified.

When an association has requirements for membership, they are *eligibility* requirements, such as members must show certification, credentialing, degree, or a license. A medical society likely requires a valid medical license and a specialty medical society may require credentialing in that specialty. No matter the setting, eligibility requirements are non-discriminatory, objective, and tangible. These criteria are usually based on the mission of the association, for example: proof of ancestry, ownership of a type of automobile or pet, geographic requirements, or the recommendation of a current member. If a person does not possess the required elements, he or she is considered ineligible for membership in the primary membership category holding the most privileges. There may be secondary categories of membership with limited privileges, such as students who are in approved programs of study, or associates, who support the mission and ideals, but do not meet the eligibility requirements for the primary membership category. The categories of membership and their requirements are contained in the bylaws.

Beyond the entry level categories, there may be another level of eligibility--the requirements for holding elected office. These might include the membership category, board experience, a number of years as a member, committee chairmanship, or chapter or regional officer experience. Such candidate eligibility requirements must be objective, are contained in the bylaws, and cannot be waived unless that authority is also granted in the bylaws.

Eligibility requirements may be based on the assumption that certain types of experience will result in officers and directors who are more successful. In some cases there might also be an attitude that, in order to hold office, a member must “pay dues” in more than the financial sense. A danger in having too many eligibility requirements is that the pool of candidates becomes smaller and smaller – and candidates who have all had the same experiences may think in the same mold. Diversity of thought and its resulting wisdom can suffer because of the very criteria established to promote leadership.

The term “qualifications” refers to intangible aspects of leadership, although there may be some overlap depending on whether something is required by the bylaws. For example, one candidate may have experience as a region or district officer that adds to her qualifications for holding the position, but it may not be a requirement to be eligible to run for the office.

Qualifications imply competency and refer to experience or characteristics that are more subjective; the assumption is that required experiences have enhanced the candidate's leadership potential. A person could be eligible to be President of the United States, but not at all qualified, while there have been great statesmen who were qualified, but were not born in the U.S. and who were thus ineligible. In parliamentary terms, they are two different words, and should not be used interchangeably.