



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 #131 Limiting Debate

When meetings take too long, it's not the fault of the chair, it's the fault of the members. The chair does not set debate limits or choose when debate must end. The time used for debate is completely under the members' control. The chair only enforces previously adopted rules.

Deliberation is a two way street. It's a choreographed collaboration between those whose responsibility it is to share opinions and make decisions (the members) and the person whose responsibility it is to organize and facilitate their efforts (the chair). The chair's right to debate is limited in order to maintain impartiality. Members' rights to debate may be limited in a number of ways: by rule, by motion, or by self-discipline.

Parliamentary authorities such as *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (RONR) or *American Institute of Parliamentarians Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* (AIPSC) handle the basic limits of debate differently. RONR states that a member may speak for up to ten minutes when recognized and two times per motion. AIPSC states that there is no limit on debate time.

Practically speaking, if there are more than a few people discussing things informally, some limits need to be set. Waiting until someone has talked on and on and then proposing limits is a reaction to the actions of one member and appears punitive. A better approach is to set forth the expectations before debate begins. If it is a large meeting, such as the annual meeting of a house of delegates, special rules to limit the debate time per person and the total debate time for each item are often adopted at the start of the meeting. Boards and assemblies that have continuing terms should have a set of adopted rules that govern their meetings, and included within those rules should be reasonable limits on debate.

What's a reasonable debate limit? Two minutes per person per speech has become the standard. It's long enough to make several key points, and short enough that, even if a member wanders off topic, it doesn't waste the assembly's time. Members who know exactly how much time is allocated tend to plan their remarks more carefully, and sometimes even practice giving them. Members will quickly internalize the two minute limit and are often seen getting restless as the limit draws near. Some assemblies adopt a variation on the rule limiting debate to two minutes by further limiting debate on subsidiary motions (such as amendments) to one minute per speaker.

A total time limit per item works best with the additional of an automatic vote provision. At the end of the designated time, if there are still people who want to speak, the chair takes an automatic vote to extend debate. Extensions are for a shorter period of time: if the debate time per item is ten minutes, the extension is five minutes.

It requires a two-thirds vote to limit or extend debate. Setting and sticking to time limits ensures everyone equal access to the floor and helps the assembly complete its business efficiently.