



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 #140 The Parliamentarian's Role

One of the most common meeting myths is that the parliamentarian “rules” on procedural matters. While it’s true that the chair is advised by the parliamentarian, the privilege of ruling is reserved to the chair, who is free to disregard that advice – perhaps at great personal peril.

The parliamentarian’s primary duty is to guide the chair and the assembly through the process of group decision-making in accordance with their rules. In order to do that effectively, the parliamentarian must be seated directly next to the chair. If there is a place for the chair to sit while not presiding, the parliamentarian is either seated on the other side of the lectern or the chair’s place is positioned on the other side of the parliamentarian. The empty place is never positioned between the parliamentarian and the lectern. A good rule of thumb is that the parliamentarian must be close enough to touch the chair’s elbow. A parliamentarian positioned any further away cannot unobtrusively prevent – or solve – problems.

The biggest enemy in any meeting is confusion, and the larger the meeting the greater the danger that members will not understand complex issues or the procedural options available to them. One way to help prevent confusion is for the parliamentarian to prepare a script in advance. Going through a script is the best way to plan a meeting and make sure nothing has been left out. It helps answer the “what if?” questions and prepares the chair to cope with otherwise unexpected interruptions. A script also helps the chair avoid constantly shuffling papers – everything is in one place. If additional support is needed, the parliamentarian should keep the extra pages and pass them to the chair as needed.

If the agenda includes amendments to the bylaws or other rules, the parliamentarian should assist the bylaws committee with drafting them in advance in order to prevent the agony of group wordsmithing. The parliamentarian can also help the members craft motions and amendments to motions. Amendments must produce a coherent result, as the motion as it is stated by the chair is what is adopted and placed in the minutes. Once the vote is taken, well-meaning members or staff may not make any changes.

Any member can ask for procedural help – it’s called a parliamentary inquiry. A member can even ask the chair what the ruling would be if they made a particular motion. The member can still make the motion, but now does so with a better idea of possible consequences.

A member parliamentarian gives up the usual rights of membership because the advice the parliamentarian gives must be completely impartial. According to Robert’s Rules, the parliamentarian, unlike the chair, cannot temporarily set aside the position; it takes a two-thirds vote to Suspend the Rules to allow the parliamentarian to speak in debate.

In a way, the parliamentarian is a tour guide; the members have chosen what they want to do, and the parliamentarian advises the chair to help keep the members on the path, helping them avoid obstacles and safely reach their objective. The collaboration between the chair and the parliamentarian is the most important element in having a great meeting.