



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 #109

Why a Professional Parliamentarian?

The most important work product of a board, delegate assembly, or any group is the decisions they make during meetings. A professional parliamentarian pays close attention to the meeting process rather than the content, and helps steer the assembly on a safe and productive course. But the work of the parliamentarian doesn't start and end with the sound of the gavel. In fact, some of the most important problem prevention begins in the early planning stages, long before the meeting convenes. The critical parts of a great meeting are the agenda, the script, the governing documents, and staff cooperation.

The professional parliamentarian can help the chair organize the agenda for the meeting to ensure logical flow. Whether there are nine or nine hundred in attendance, the two most important considerations are clarity, so that everyone is making the same decision, and compliance – fair process according to the rules the organization has adopted. An important tool to promote clarity is the chair's script, which provides an opportunity to get comfortable with the process of handling motions and amendments, and to prepare explanations for complicated issues. Having suggested language on hand gives the chair confidence, and helps prevent misstatements during the meeting.

Parliamentarians who hold advanced credentials have been trained in writing and organizing governance documents, especially bylaws and board policies. Language in written rules such as bylaws is subject to future interpretation, and the choice of words can completely change the meaning of a section or create unintended consequences. It's important to get the right words and the right *amount* of words: too many and people won't read them; too few and people won't understand them. When the documents are to be presented at a meeting, another major concern is that suggested changes can go viral: there might be several different versions of the same proposal floating about. The parliamentarian, as the language and process expert, should be the final stop for wording scripts, motions, and other proposals. Preventable problems such as these can become icebergs and cause an otherwise successful meeting to lose course or sink altogether.

Running a great meeting requires confidence and concentration. The parliamentarian can help the chair stay focused, but cooperation from other members and staff is key. The chair needs to listen to what is happening with the members on the floor, while the parliamentarian is in the best position to handle the procedural matters. The parliamentarian is seated closest to the chair (we use the rule that we must be able to touch the chair's elbow). All communication with the chair goes through the parliamentarian during the meeting: as the meeting manager, the parliamentarian will know the right moment for the chair to be interrupted.

A good working relationship between the parliamentarian, chair, assembly, and staff promotes trust. A short training session for delegates, either by webinar in advance or on site, is another option to enhance member participation. As the years progress, this training can become more advanced, raising the skill level of the assembly so that they can use their valuable time debating the issues instead of fighting about the rules. When the assembly is not in session, the parliamentarian can hold open office hours for members with procedural questions. Even a short consult can save a great deal of time during the meeting, as members will have the right language – and motion – ready to meet their needs, and the chair can be prepared to handle the situation correctly. Everybody wins!

A long term relationship with a professional parliamentarian provides an objective institutional memory, as members and officers cycle through their roles. There are many credentials offered by parliamentarian associations. For more information on credentials, see Snippet #105 – *Parliamentarian Credentials*.