Nothing is forever. Sooner or later, one term of office will end and another will start. It’s simple in concept but, under some circumstances, extremely complicated to change. As with other segments of governance, one size doesn’t fit all.

The length of a term must be specified in years. Terms of one, two, or three years seem to be the most common, each with its own benefits and challenges. A term of one year lends urgency – there’s little time to “create a legacy.” The larger the organization, the more the staff will have to carry the load from year to year to keep things progressing. Many presidents have been heard to say that they were just beginning to figure it all out when the term ended. Two-year terms seem to work well, but it slows the succession pattern and makes the climb “up the ladder” longer, often discouraging emerging leaders from getting involved. Three-year terms can exacerbate that slowdown.

A major factor in term length is whether there is an automatic succession plan. Sometimes it’s helpful to put the terms in a spreadsheet to see how things fit together. Not all terms must be equal, but it is important for all to be compatible. There could be a two-year president’s term with a president-elect elected during the first year, taking office the second year, and automatically succeeding to president the following year. The size of the board can fluctuate or the president can sit as immediate past president (the person who was president immediately prior to the current president) for one year. Staggered terms require additional calculations. The number of directors divided by the length of the term will tell you how many are elected each year.

The start and end of a term should always be included in the bylaws, establishing when the authority of the office transfers to another person. For example, an officer’s term could begin on election, at an event, or on a particular date. Each has its pros and cons. In a slight variation, the term may begin at the close of the meeting at which the officer is elected. However, this option leaves very little time for preparation, so it doesn’t work well for complicated organizations.

A term might start at the close of an annual convention or conference. This allows the incumbent president to continue to preside over the meetings and ceremonial activities and bring closure to the term. In such cases, it’s not unusual to grant the incoming president the authority to appoint certain positions (such as committee chairs) to the prior to the start of the term. One complication is that the event timing may be a bit more or less than a year. In these circumstances, the phrase “. . .or until a successor is elected and assumes office” bridges that gap. Alternatively, some associations like to get elections and installations away from the annual meeting to keep the focus on the association and its programs and away from politics.

Some terms begin on a specific date that coincides with the calendar or fiscal year. Using dates instead of events for terms makes scheduling easier and important deadlines more logical. The best time for a term to begin is during a slow time of year, preferably after the annual meeting. Elections can be scheduled to give plenty of time to complete the election, including unforeseen problems, and allow time for transition to take care of administrative matters.

Terms of office can have strategic impact – make them fit your needs.