When a motion is made, the chair must listen very carefully to the words and determine whether the motion is in order. This process seems very complicated – how can anyone keep track of all those picky rules? But careful listening and following the rules can save time and frustration.

The first question the chair must ask herself is: “What does this person want to do?” The object is to provide the translation between the intent and the correct action to accomplish it. Motions exist to provide clarity. They set boundaries for keeping the discussion on track, ensure every member knows exactly what is being vote on, and generate an exact record of the decision made. It stands to reason that motions must describe a clear outcome should the motion be adopted.

The most obvious improper motion is sometimes called a “negative motion.” These motions are phrased in the negative, such as “that the board not spend reserve funds to pay for the anniversary party.” Defeating a negative motion doesn’t result in a positive action or, in other words, voting “no” on not spending the money doesn’t automatically mean the money will be spent. The best way to avoid this kind of confusion is to make sure that all motions propose a positive action. For example, a motion could be made to spend reserve funds for the anniversary party. A negative vote means the funds won’t be expended in that manner and a positive vote means they will. The outcome is clear.

Likewise, an amendment to not do something is out of order. For example, if the motion is to create a task force and someone moves to insert the word “not,” so that it would read “to not create a task force,” the amendment is out of order as an improper motion because the same result is achieved by voting against the motion. If the motion fails, the task force will not be created.

Motions cannot conflict with the association’s governing documents. One such example might be a motion to waive an eligibility requirement for an officer that is contained in the bylaws. A motion to elect such a person or to change the requirements is improper because the bylaws cannot be suspended. The only way to change anything in the bylaws is to follow the process for amending bylaws.

Motions remain in effect until they expire or are rescinded, so a motion that is in conflict with an existing motion (no matter how long ago it may have been adopted) is improper. However, sometimes a motion is adopted in complete ignorance of a previous conflicting action. Parliamentary authorities have different solutions to this dilemma. Robert’s Rules gives the subsequent motion legitimacy if it was passed by the same margin as would have been required to rescind or amend the earlier action. American Institute of Parliamentarians (AIPSC) uses a concept called repeal by implication, which means that the more recent decision stands, with the caveat that this is only for inadvertent situations.

Motions that deal with a matter currently in the hands of a committee are improper and out of order because the authority for that matter has been given to the committee. It requires a motion to discharge the committee to put the matter back in the hands of the assembly.

Establishing the intent of the maker will tell the chair if there is another way to achieve that intent and avoid making improper motions.