



*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](http://www.agreatmeeting.com).



## Snippet #148 Filling Blanks

It's time to choose a date for the conference, or a place for a picnic, or an amount of money to spend on a project. So many choices! How can we consider them all without getting tangled up in parliamentary procedure?

It's simple once you know how to create and fill a blank. A blank can be created when there are several similar choices that can be made, such as dates, locations, amounts, or times. It allows the assembly to consider multiple choices all in one action. Creating a blank takes a majority vote, but is often handled by general consent. *Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised* (RONR) and *American Institute of Parliamentarians Standard Code of Parliamentary Procedure* (AIPSC) handle blanks differently.

For example, there's a motion to hold the convention in Atlanta. Some members want to consider Baltimore, some Cleveland, some Denver. A member (or the chair) moves to strike Atlanta and insert a blank. Once the blank is created, the chair calls for suggestions to fill the blank, automatically listing Atlanta (from the original motion) as one of the suggestions. Suggestions do not require a second. RONR allows each member to make only one suggestion, unless permission is given by unanimous consent to make more. AIPSC has no stated limit on the number of suggestions each member can make. Once all suggestions are made, it's time to debate the options and fill the blank.

Under RONR, each suggestion is debated and voted on separately – in this case they would discuss Atlanta, then vote “yes” or “no” on it. If Atlanta does not receive a majority, Baltimore is debated and voted on. If Baltimore receives a majority vote, it fills the blank and the other suggestions are discarded. We see two problems with this. First, there's no opportunity to compare all suggestions before the vote when the scope of the debate is narrowed to a single suggestion at a time – the rule creates debate silos. Second, it forces the members to engage in insincere voting, which is voting against something they actually favor because they want something else more. In order to keep the voting alive to get to a later choice (and, remember – RONR lets the chair set the order!) members must vote against the earlier choices if they want a chance to vote on their later favorite.

Under AIPSC, all suggestions are debated at the same time, after which votes are taken on each suggestion in the order it was proposed. All suggestions are voted on and counted, and the suggestion that achieves the highest vote (provided it was at least a majority) fills the blank. Members are free to vote for all of the suggestions they like (which is also called approval voting) and the result is a truer picture of how each suggestion stands with the members. If there is not a majority or if there is a tie between the two highest votes, all suggestions are voted on again.

Filling blanks is a logical and easy way to consider many options and then make informed choices, but AGM believes loading up the process with additional rules about who can make how many suggestions, and isolating debate to one suggestion at a time breeds frustration. If your parliamentary authority is RONR, suspend the rules (two-thirds vote) and use the AIPSC method.