



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 #112

How to Make a Motion

Why are motions important?

The major complaint that we hear when we ask workshop attendees what problems they have faced during meetings is that the discussion goes “all over the place.” Although it’s ultimately the chair’s responsibility to keep the group focused, it can be quite a challenge – especially for an inexperienced presiding officer. Another common complaint is that meetings take too much time. Both problems are easily solved when motions are used correctly. A motion is simply a string of words that describes the decision being made or the action being taken. People can have general agreement on ideas but have very different expectations about how those ideas will be put into action. By putting forth a clear motion, the member makes sure that everyone is talking about the *same thing*. It’s much easier to follow a clear path than one that is overgrown or cluttered. The motion as it is stated by the chair before taking the vote is the official action of the assembly, so it’s that text that goes in the minutes.

Where do I start?

First, figure out what you want to happen when your motion is adopted. Are you proposing a specific action? Do you want to look into options for an action? Are you hoping to change the way things are currently done, or perhaps propose a new way of doing things? Make some notes about what you want to happen, and check to see if there is an existing rule or policy that covers the same topic.

If you are proposing a one-time action, write a potential motion and ask someone else to read it to see if they understand your intent. Clear up any confusion with the words, and remember that more words don’t always make things better. Think of the details that you might want to include with your motion. The more complete it is, the fewer details will need to be filled in by the assembly, and the more likely you are to get what you really want. Remember that anyone can propose amendments to your motion, so don’t be upset if your motion gets changed before it is adopted. One of the most painful group exercises is wordsmithing – the term given to making editorial changes to make a motion read correctly.

If you don’t have the details, but want to get something started, your motion might take a different form. For example, if you want to explore the options on having a fund raiser event, consider proposing that a committee be formed to investigate and report back at the next meeting. (Then volunteer to serve on or lead the committee!)

How does this work?

Once you have your motion language developed, make sure at least one other member is interested in bringing it to the floor. Before making your motion, line up someone to second it. That way you won’t be embarrassed because no one seconded your motion. Then, make a few notes about the important points you want to make – no more than three, to use later. Three words get you started: “I move that...” Just give the text of the motion when you are recognized – this is not the time to debate the merits of the motion.

Once you make the motion and someone else seconds it, the chair restates the motion. Now the floor is open for debate and you have the right to speak first if you wish, using the important points you noted earlier. Or, you can wait until you’ve heard from a few other members before making your remarks. Be clear about why you think your motion is a good idea and how it meets the other members’ needs.

Good motions don’t spontaneously emerge. They take thought and planning. When the language and the intent are clear, members can debate the merits of the proposal rather than getting sidetracked with details.