



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 #138 Point of Order!

Perhaps you've seen one of the old movies where something big happened, and a reporter ran in and yelled "Stop the Presses!" With those three words the entire production of the newspaper halted. In meetings, those three words are "Point of Order!"

There are few (if any) other situations where this power exists. In general, people want to operate according to rules, and when they observe abuses of the rules they react with anger. On the highway, this can set up a dangerous situation. One way to react is to honk the horn – the length of time usually commensurate with the level of rage. On the highway, people can get killed. In a meeting, the wounds are hidden. Abuse of power causes resentment which can fester, only to erupt at a completely different time. Resentment can cause dysfunction in the team – and often with no overt symptoms or for no apparent reason.

One of the duties of the chair is to protect the integrity of the assembly's rules, but it's not just the chair who has that obligation. The members of the assembly share that responsibility, which is why they are given this powerful motion. Point of Order can interrupt whatever is happening in the meeting and no second is required. The chair, on hearing the words "Point of Order!" stops the meeting and asks the member to state what rule has been violated. The member needs to remember the three C's of stating a point of order: calm, clear, concise. This is not the time to debate. Once the point has been stated, it is the chair's responsibility to rule on that point by stating whether the point is "well taken" or "not well taken." The chair who is unsure on how to rule can also submit the ruling to a vote of the assembly, letting the assembly decide.

No one but the chair has the authority to rule on a point of order: not a lawyer and not a professional or member parliamentarian. It is the chair alone who is responsible for enforcing the assembly's rules – personal opinion must be set aside. In some cases, the question is obvious and there is a clear breach, but at other times the determination might require advice from a lawyer or parliamentarian. However, that advice is not binding on the chair.

A point of order must be timely, meaning that it must be raised immediately after the infraction occurs. For simple breaches of the rules, such as the failure to get a second to a motion, the point must be raised before debate on that motion has begun. Another example of this rule might be a motion that was not in order when it was made. The exception to this requirement is when the infraction is a continuing breach of the rules. It's like a statute of limitations: for minor offenses the statute of limitations runs out very quickly; for violations of the bylaws there is no statute of limitations. Suppose the bylaws set certain eligibility criteria for office, but at the annual meeting someone is elected who does not meet those criteria. That person's service in the office constitutes a continuing breach of the bylaws and the point of order can be raised at any subsequent meeting. The chair should rule the point "well taken" and someone who is eligible to hold the office must be elected.

Anyone who disagrees with the ruling of the chair can appeal. For more information on appeals, see Snippet 139.