



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 #127 Unfinished Business

Tell the major he'll have to wait; I have some unfinished business. – This ominous remark was made by Sidney Poitier in the movie “Duel at Diablo.” (Cherokee Productions, 1966.) So what is unfinished business when used on an agenda? Is it a threat, a promise, a checklist, or a report of ongoing activity? The answer is— none of the above.

Some of the confusion is created by the term itself. It is not the business that is unfinished – it's the agenda from the previous meeting that is unfinished. If the previous meeting adjourned before completing all of the items on the agenda, those items are automatically transferred to the next agenda, within certain time limits. If the agenda was completed, then there is no unfinished business to list on the next agenda.

The time limits have a certain logical sense to them. If the next meeting is going to be held relatively soon, then it makes sense to carry over business, but if the next meeting isn't going to be held for a long time, the items that weren't reached are not automatically brought forward to the succeeding agenda. The time limit is described as a quarterly time frame, but that definition also has a twist: if the next meeting is held on any date within the next three calendar months, it is considered to be within the quarterly time frame. Thus, if the meeting is held on June 15 and three agenda items were not taken up at that meeting, they are automatically carried over to the next meeting as unfinished business, if the next meeting is held on or before September 30.

An interesting consequence of this rule is that the agenda for an annual meeting never includes unfinished business because, by definition, an annual meeting is held approximately a year later – well outside the quarterly time frame. Although business is not automatically transferred to the next agenda, it can be brought up as a new item.

So what happens to all those interesting items of business that we have incorrectly labeled unfinished business? Many of them are merely informational, with no need for action. They could be mentioned as part of another report, but another idea if you are customizing your agendas – something we strongly support – is to create a heading titled “Updates.” This might be early in the agenda to give the assembly information on progress that has been made since the last meeting. If an item requires action, it can be placed in a different position on the agenda and the update given as part of the background or rationale. See Snippet #155 for more ideas on agenda development.

An agenda should be primarily a list of decisions to be made by the assembly. Updates and reports that don't require decisions or actions can be delivered outside of the meeting setting without taking up valuable decision-making time.