



TIMOTHY WYNN, PRP
PRESIDENT

2552 Scottville Ave
Deltona, FL 32725
386.228.2242
Tim@PerfectRules.com

PerfectRules.com

The Basics of Debate

What is the purpose of a meeting?

A meeting is for the TRANSACTION OF BUSINESS. It's not for discussing issues or talking about problems. DEBATE is an essential part of the transaction of business in a deliberative assembly, but idle discussion is a major hindrance to the process.



Debate Vs. Discussion?

What is the difference between Debate and Discussion?

DEBATE is discussion on the merits of a pending question -- that is, whether the proposal under consideration should, or should not, be agreed to.

For discussion to be DEBATE, it must pertain to a matter that is PENDING.

For discussion to be DEBATE, it must pertain to whether or not the proposal should be adopted.

If a motion is debatable, members have a right to debate it. However, members may not take up time in a meeting with discussion of matters that are not pending, and the chair should ensure that debate is confined to the merits of the pending question.

Each member is allowed two speeches of 10 minutes each for each debatable question. The assembly may alter this rule or end debate immediately by a two-thirds vote.



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What is good debate?

- ▶ It is focused on the pending motion.
- ▶ It's clear.
- ▶ It has a purpose.
- ▶ It gives information to the other members.
- ▶ It expresses your view.

Don't be shy in debate. Debate is about what you think. It's your time to express your view.

BAD DEBATE:

"I'm a member of another organization that does a lot of raffles, and a lot of people like them, and I also know that they take a lot of time and energy."

Does the member support the motion or oppose it? The member's position is unclear.

HE COULD HAVE MEANT . . .

"I support this motion. I think a raffle is a good idea, because I'm a member of another organization that regularly holds raffles, and all the members have a good time with it. I realize that it takes a lot of time and energy, but I think it's worth the effort. So, I urge members to vote in favor of this motion."

OR HE COULD HAVE MEANT . . .

"I oppose this motion. I don't like the idea of a raffle, because I'm a member of another organization that holds a lot of raffles, and I realize that a lot of people like them, but I see that they take a lot of time and energy, and I think there's a lot more we could be doing with all that effort, including finding better ways to raise money. Therefore, I encourage members to join me in voting against this motion."

1. State whether you're for or against the motion.
2. Give your reason for your position.
3. Recognize counter points.
4. Urge support, if desired.



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What can you say in debate? (Answers on next page)

- ▶ 1. Can you say, "This motion is a horrible idea."
- ▶ 2. Can you say, "This idea will never work."
- ▶ 3. Can you say, "While I have the floor, I'd just like to take the opportunity to thank all of our volunteers for doing such a wonderful job at the voter-registration drive, last week, and I hope all of you will consider volunteering again, in the drive we're doing next week."
- ▶ 4. Can you say, "Before I talk about this motion, I'd like to say that the last motion was truly a great idea, and I'm glad we were able to adopt it."
- ▶ 5. Can you say, "If this motion is adopted, membership will drop off -- not necessarily this month or next month, but eventually, we will lose members as a direct result of this motion."
- ▶ 6. Can you say, "I feel that the chairman of the fundraising committee only wants to have this raffle because he wants to make a good impression before he runs for office in two months."
- ▶ 7. Can you say, "We all heard our fellow member, Mr. Jones, say that last year's raffle made money. But he knows that's not true; it lost money."

Special Rights and Restrictions as the Maker of the Motion.

- ▶ The maker of the motion has the right to speak first in debate.
- ▶ The maker of the motion is prohibited from speaking against his own motion, though he is free to vote against it.



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Answers:

- ▶ 1. Can you say, "This motion is a horrible idea."
Yes, debate is your opportunity to express your opinion. Debate is not impartial; it is very opinionated.
- ▶ 2. Can you say, "This idea will never work."
Yes, debate is an expression of your opinion. You're saying "I don't believe this will work."
- ▶ 3. Can you say, "While I have the floor, I'd just like to take the opportunity to thank all of our volunteers for doing such a wonderful job at the voter-registration drive, last week, and I hope all of you will consider volunteering again, in the drive we're doing next week."
No, debate must be confined to the merits of the pending question. It is out of order for members to go off topic, and doing so is a major delay to the transaction of business.
- ▶ 4. Can you say, "Before I talk about this motion, I'd like to say that the last motion was truly a great idea, and I'm glad we were able to adopt it."
No, this too is off topic. If comments are not related to the pending question, they're not DEBATE.
- ▶ 5. Can you say, "If this motion is adopted, membership will drop off -- not necessarily this month or next month, but eventually, we will lose members as a direct result of this motion."
Yes, these are your opinions. They don't have to be provable or guaranteed to be accurate. They are opinions, which you are free to express in debate.
- ▶ 6. Can you say, "I feel that the chairman of the fundraising committee only wants to have this raffle because he wants to make a good impression before he runs for office in two months."
No, it is out of order for a member to speak to the motives of another member or to disparage another member in any way. The chair should stop this behavior immediately.
- ▶ 7. Can you say, "We all heard our fellow member, Mr. Jones, say that last year's raffle made money. But he knows that's not true; it lost money."
No, it is out of order to call another member a liar or dishonest in any way.