

What is a parliamentarian?

by Dr. William J. Puette, Professional Registered Parliamentarian (April 2019)

A parliamentarian is an expert in interpreting and applying the “Rules of Order” for meetings. These rules, such as *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised*, enable groups to efficiently and fairly discuss and determine actions to be taken. *The Parliamentarian does not rule!* Parliamentary law gives to the chair alone the power to rule on questions of order and on the proper application of the rules. The role of the parliamentarian during a meeting is purely an advisory and consultative one, helping the presiding officer to respond to points of order and parliamentary inquiries. Only on the most involved matters should the presiding officer ask the parliamentarian to give an explanation directly to the assembly.

In many cases, the parliamentarian's duties extend beyond giving opinions to the presiding officer during meetings, and may include assisting in the planning and steering of business to be introduced. Some ways a parliamentarian can assist organizations include:

- Writing, revising and/or editing Constitutions, Bylaws, Standing and/or Special Rules
- Parliamentary Procedure Training for officers, members, delegates
- Writing a presiding officer script for a meeting or convention.
- Serving as a professional presiding officer
- Supervising elections
- Preparing a meeting agenda
- Preparing meeting minutes
- Providing a formal written Parliamentary Opinion

If a parliamentarian is needed by an organization, the president should be free to appoint one in whom he has confidence. A parliamentarian should be appointed as far as possible in advance of the meeting at which he is to serve, since his main work should be done outside the meeting.

If during a meeting the parliamentarian notices something being done out of order, the parliamentarian should call the attention of the chair to it as unobtrusively as possible. For this reason, the parliamentarian should always be assigned a seat next to the president or presiding officer.

Though the president is not obliged to follow the advice of the parliamentarian, no self-respecting parliamentary expert would continue to hold the position of parliamentarian in an organization where the advice given is not followed.

A member of an organization who acts as its parliamentarian has a duty to maintain a position of impartiality, and therefore does not make motions, participate in debate, or vote on any question except in the case of a ballot vote.

See *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised* (11th ed), pp. 465-467; *Robert’s Rules of Order Newly Revised in Brief* (2nd ed.), p. 95; and *Parliamentary Law* by Henry M. Robert (1923), pp. 323-326.