

INTRODUCTION

Every chapter has a president, some vice presidents, and probably a secretary, treasurer and even a pledge trainer. Those offices, common to most chapters, are well known, as are the responsibilities that come with them. The sergeant-at-arms and the parliamentarian, found in some chapters, are offices of mystery and uncertainty. Because of their rather unique and specific roles, many members do not know what they do.

If your chapter has a sergeant-at-arms and/or a parliamentarian, this leadership series publication is for you. If your chapter feels it needs one or both of these officers, it is for you as well. The goal of this publication is to begin to answer the question “What does the sergeant-at-arms or parliamentarian do?”

No publication, however, can provide all the answers to that question, and because these offices vary greatly between chapters (more so than other offices), this document only talks about the very basic or common responsibilities. Accordingly, it does not attempt to cover every possible responsibility these offices could have; instead, it tries to provide some guideposts as you plan your term of office. At the very least, this document should give you a better understanding of your role as the chapter’s sergeant-at-arms or parliamentarian.

It is highly recommended that during your term of office you work on a creating a supplement to this handbook to assist the future sergeants-at-arms and parliamentarians of your chapter. Whether you use a binder, folder, or some other way of keeping the documents together, the following information should be included:

- Chapter bylaws
- National Articles of Incorporation and bylaws
- Copies of any standing rules or policies that are used by your chapter
- Contact information for the current Section Chair, Region Director, and Chair of your chapter’s advisory committee
- Same Page Booklet

Throughout your service as sergeant-at-arms or parliamentarian remember that you have chapter advisors and a section staff who are willing and able to assist you. Make use of their talents and experience.

WHAT IS THE SERGEANT-AT-ARMS?

The sergeant-at-arms is, historically, a ceremonial but important figure in legislative proceedings. In most parliamentary societies, the sergeant-at-arms assists the presiding officer in maintaining order. This individual (or, as in the case of large convention, individuals) carries out the directives of the presiding officer, whether it is to distribute and collect ballots, close the chamber to outsiders, clear the room of all non-members, etc.

So, if that's what the sergeant-at-arms is historically, what is a modern-day sergeant-at-arms? Well, about the same, really. They are order keepers and, for lack of a better word, the "enforcers" for the presiding officer. If you've ever had a chapter meeting get rowdy, perhaps your sergeant-at-arms helped restore order. Regardless of the organization or the size of the chapter, the sergeant-at-arms is much the same office as it always has been.

WHAT DOES THE SERGEANT-AT-ARMS DO?

There is no easy answer. We have already talked about the general role of the Sergeant-at-Arms. What, specifically, might that person do?

To begin with, the National Fraternity only assigns one specific duty to the chapter's Sergeant-at-Arms, and that is to serve as a member of the Ritual Team. This member plays a role in both the Pledge Ceremony and the Initiation Ceremony (some may refer to the Initiation Ceremony as the "Activation" or "Induction" ceremony.) The sergeant-at-arms has speaking roles in both ceremonies.

Beyond this one national responsibility, the duties of your chapter's sergeant-at-arms will be defined by your chapter's bylaws or other operating policies. Below are some examples of the types of things that chapters typically require or expect of their sergeant-at-arms:

- **Elections and Voting:** Many chapters assign the duty of counting ballots for officer elections to the sergeant-at-arms. Some even go so far as to make the sergeant-at-arms the presiding officer for elections.
- **Ritual Chair:** Some chapters have the sergeant-at-arms serve as the Ritual Chair, with the responsibility of coordinating the various rituals, ensuring that all materials are available, etc.
- **Parliamentarian:** Some chapters assign the traditional functions of a parliamentarian (see the appropriate section in this handbook for a list of those functions) to the sergeant-at-arms.
- **Disciplinary Procedures:** As unpleasant as it is, some chapters are faced with enforcing discipline among their respective members. To assist in that, chapters often have the sergeant-at-arms, as a neutral party, deliver all notices of disciplinary action and coordinate related activities (meetings, etc.)
- **Risk Management Issues:** Some chapters have a Risk Management Team, and some make the sergeant-at-arms the chair of that team or committee.

- **Historian:** The sergeant-at-arms is largely a ceremonial or historical role. To that end, some chapters assign to that office the duties of historian. Perhaps this officer would maintain the chapter's history, collect and maintain biographical data of the members, put together a scrap book of photos and other mementos.

At the end of the day, the responsibilities of the sergeant-at-arms will be decided by your chapter and placed in your chapter's bylaws.

WHAT IS A PARLIAMENTARIAN?

Think back on all those meetings where things just seem to get out of hand: the chapter is considering some major issue, everyone wants to talk, and the president doesn't seem to know how to get from point A to point B in the discussion. Every chapter has nights like that, and knowing the rules often times helps make those meetings a bit easier to get through.

In the most basic of terms, a parliamentarian is someone familiar with the rules of procedure (more on those later) who serves as an advisor to the presiding officer (whether or not the president or some other individual is presiding.) A parliamentarian provides advice to the presiding officer, who then is free to accept or reject it. Under normal circumstances, the parliamentarian has no authority to actually make rulings himself.

In short, a parliamentarian is a "rules-resource", a walking, talking rule book.

WHAT DOES A PARLIAMENTARIAN DO?

While the answer to this question varies with each chapter and each organization that uses one, there are a few general responsibilities.

The first is that the parliamentarian must be knowledgeable about the rules that govern the chapter or organization. In addition to knowing the provisions of the national and chapter bylaws, the parliamentarian must be familiar with the rules of procedure. These rules might be Robert's Rules of Order, a set of standing rules used by the chapter, or some other set. Whatever the case, the parliamentarian must be familiar with them. A professional parliamentarian is well-versed in knowing the ins-and-outs of the rules; your chapter parliamentarian needs to know the rules to the extent the chapter uses them (for example, Robert's has an entire section on rules that govern a convention, and those wouldn't apply to your weekly or normal chapter meeting.)

The second is that the parliamentarian must know his or her place in comparison to the presiding officer. Unless your bylaws say otherwise (and there is no reason they should), the parliamentarian should not be making rulings on questions of procedure – that is entirely the domain of the presiding officer. In conventions or large assemblies, the parliamentarian generally sits next to or very near the presiding officer; it makes

advising the individual presiding much easier. In smaller chapter meetings or groups, where the parliamentarian sits is really not an issue.

The third responsibility (and the one that will probably be the most difficult) is to maintain the appearance of impartiality. To that end, if your chapter has a voting member who also serves as the parliamentarian, that individual should not vote on any matter where the results of his or her vote could be known. Written ballots are fine (after all, how would you know which vote this person cast) but the parliamentarian should abstain or not participate in any voting where his or her vote would be known. The parliamentarian carries a great responsibility, and if your members are to have confidence in your parliamentarian's advice, then the members must also have confidence in his or her impartiality.

These are the three major responsibilities of the parliamentarian. Your chapter, as in many other matters, may dictate or decide that the parliamentarian should do other things, such as preside over meetings or voting, issue rulings on matters of procedure (instead of the presiding officer), chair your chapter's bylaws committee (if you have one), and other similar items. Again, how much responsibility your parliamentarian will have will be up to you, but you can look at parliamentary sources such as Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised for some guidance.

DOES YOUR CHAPTER NEED A PARLIAMENTARIAN?

While the first two questions were fairly easy, this third one takes a bit more effort to answer. As with most other things, your chapter will decide what it does and does not need. But the decision to have a parliamentarian is different, in part because most members will never have had experience in either being one or seeing one in action. So, in an effort to help you answer this question, here are a few things to consider:

- **Chapter size:** Though there is no magic number, the larger your chapter, the more likely you are to rely on rules of procedure. The more complex those rules, or the more you rely on them, the more you have need of someone who knows the rules well.
- **Experience:** Many chapters seem to want someone to serve as the parliamentarian, but keep this caution in mind: a person who is inexperienced or one who has little knowledge of the rules and other governing procedures can cause more trouble than not having a parliamentarian in the first place. You don't need an expert, but you do need someone who at least understands the rules and how they work.
- **Reliance on Procedure:** Though briefly mentioned above, this is important enough to merit its own entry. Does your chapter follow each rule, word by word? If so, chances are that you'll need someone to help keep the chapter on the right track in following the rules. If your bylaws are complex, if the rules you use for things like elections, disciplinary procedures, and the like are complex, you'll probably want someone to assist. If your chapter doesn't really observe any formal rules, your need of a parliamentarian is less.

Many chapters have created the position of parliamentarian for their chapters. Just because some chapters use them doesn't mean that yours should. Many chapters have created the position only to regret it later. Think carefully before doing so.

WHAT TOOLS DOES THE PARLIAMENTARIAN HAVE?

A parliamentarian has many tools at his disposal, and like any person who works with tools, he needs to know how to properly use them. These tools are really the rules and documents that govern the organization. Some documents or procedures have superiority over others; that is to say, that if there is a conflict, the superior document takes precedence. In that regard, here is a list of items, in order from the highest to lowest ranking, that you may find:

- Alpha Phi Omega Articles of Incorporation
- National Bylaws*
- Standard Chapter Articles of Association
- Chapter Bylaws
- Chapter Standing/Special Rules
- Robert's Rules of Order (or the set of parliamentary procedure that you use)

**Policies of your school may conflict with the National bylaws of the Fraternity. If they do, and if the policies of your school are stricter, the National Bylaws defer to your school's policies.*

Alpha Phi Omega Articles of Incorporation

This is the legal document that is used to establish Alpha Phi Omega as a not-for-profit corporation. The papers are on file with the state of Missouri. You will find this document in the first part of the booklet that contains the national bylaws.

National Bylaws

You probably are familiar with these. The national bylaws give the structure and overall design of the National Fraternity, and includes such items as national fees and dues, national officers, national conventions, how chapters remain in good standing, etc.

Standard Chapter Articles of Association

At the end of the booklet containing the bylaws, these are provisions that all chapters must agree to, and there is a place for the chapter president to sign. They outline the basic rights and responsibilities of each chapter.

Chapter Bylaws

Much like the national bylaws, your chapter bylaws dictate the structure of your chapter, and probably addresses matters like elections, dues, disciplinary procedures, and so on. You are free to adopt policies and procedures as you like, so long as they do not conflict with any of the above documents, any Fraternity or school policy, or the law.

Chapter Standing Rules/Special Rules

These are not part of your bylaws, but a separate document. Essentially, these deal with administrative type things that you wouldn't put in your bylaws. They are easier to amend than your bylaws. You might include such things as the time and date of chapter meetings, any sort of awards you have and the criteria and manner in which they are awarded, etc.

Robert's Rules of Order/Other Parliamentary Guide

If parliamentary procedure is so important, why does it rank lowest among all your governing documents? The answer is simple: parliamentary procedure is supposed to assist you and your chapter, not dominate them. While most chapters, and indeed the National Fraternity, use Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised, there are other sources of parliamentary procedure. Your library is likely to have copies of such manuals.

Certainly, no one expects you or any member of your chapter to know each of the above items line by line, page by page. The more familiar you are with them, however, the more effective you will be. Do not be distraught if you have trouble learning the rules and such; there are many people who devote their entire lives to the study of parliamentary procedure, and they are still learning!

PARLIAMENTARY PROCEDURE AT A GLANCE

This is not a full-fledged tutorial on the ins-and-outs of the rules. It is just a short primer on what parliamentary procedure is and why we use it.

You're probably familiar with a general theory that we have in the United States, and that is the concept of "majority rules." Well, parliamentary procedure is designed to allow the majority in a group to act. What you probably don't know, though, is that these same rules also protect the rights of the minority, and that little fact is often overlooked in a discussion of parliamentary procedure.

Everyone in your chapter has rights of some kind: some can vote, some can speak but not vote, some can't do either. In any case, your members have rights. The rules are designed in such a way that the minority can't just logjam the will of the majority, but they do allow the minority to exercise their rights.

Here's a quick example that you may be familiar with. In a deliberative assembly (such as your chapter), you probably have some rule or policy that allows people to debate an issue. So, in your chapter meeting, debating an issue, and you're going on hour three, using Robert's Rules of Order can help you close the debate. Now, it is a fundamental right that in such an organization, people get to speak their mind (within reason, of course.) But it's also a fundamental principle that, at some point, debate has to end and you have to vote on the issue. Well, if your chapter could just say with a wave of the hand, "debate is over, let's vote!" that would be fair to the majority but not the minority, who may, even after three hours, have some important points to make. So, someone in

your chapter “moves the previous question” (and you probably know this by the more common name when someone blurts out “Question!”). Now, this motion allows debate to be ended (if it’s passed), but it takes more than a majority to pass it; because the right of debate is so fundamental in deliberative societies, it takes a 2/3 vote to end debate.

See how that rule works to allow the majority to work its will while protecting the rights of the minority? There are dozens of other examples, but this is one of the more common ones.

Parliamentary procedure is also very practical in meetings – it helps you get from item A to item Z in an orderly fashion. Sure, things might change the agenda (and it’s best that you do use an agenda) but, in general, it helps you get through it in order. Parliamentary procedure is also good for helping you try to keep things impersonal during debate (there are rules relating to debate decorum, etc.) Think of those chapter meetings where emotions run high – sometimes, better application or grasp of the rules can help reduce those tensions.

The rules are like any other tool. In the hands of someone skilled and proficient, they can help you work wonders. In the hands of someone who doesn’t know better, or someone who has more selfish interests in mind, they can be a dreadful weapon.

In using parliamentary procedure, do the best you can, follow the rules, and exercise good judgment and common sense.

CONCLUSION

It isn’t at all possible to cover everything about parliamentary procedure, parliamentarians, and sergeants-at-arms in one small handbook. But it is our hope that, at the very least, you have a better understanding of how all these work together to help your chapter do its business.

Remember that, while rules are important, so are the people who make and follow them!