

Preparation for Meetings — A Checklist

(for a large co-op house)

There is a great deal of literature about how to conduct meetings, but a much neglected and very important part of good meetings is the preparation that goes into them. This list is intended to be a practical aid without theoretical discussion or justification.

Some items listed are more important, others less — usually indicated by a comment in the text. Please excuse me if much of what I have written seems obvious; much of good meeting process is just common sense. Note that tasks may be done by anyone, not just the person designated — this is just a convenient way to divide the responsibilities.

All House Members

- **Collect agenda items** — Several days before the next meeting think about whether you have any issues to bring up at the next meeting. Write them on the agenda as early as possible.
- **Add relevant comments** — As agenda items get put up, read them and write any comments, questions, criticisms, alternatives, or relevant information that you want to bring up.
- **Arrive on time** — Get to the meeting a couple minutes early so everyone can get settled and the meeting can start on time.

Agenda Item Proposers

It is very important that you let people know what you're going to bring up as early as possible and as clearly as possible! It will take some time for you to include all this information, but if you don't you will take twenty other people's time.

Putting an item on the agenda is not something to be done carelessly. It is a request that over twenty busy people talk about something you think is important. If it's really that important, then it should warrant an expenditure of time from you. This way more people can give feedback, ultimately leading to a better, faster decision and a more informed community (hopefully).

- **Agenda items** — As soon as you think of an item for the meeting write it down on the agenda (preferably no later than a day or two before the meeting). Be sure to do the following:
 - Indicate whether this is an **announcement**, an **action item**, or a **discussion item**.
 - Announcements require only you to speak; there should be no need for response or discussion.
 - Action items are issues about which you have already formulated a fairly concrete proposal and hope that the house will decide about the issue at that meeting.
 - Discussion items are issues you'd like to bring up to the house for discussion, but don't have enough information or a concrete enough proposal to expect immediate resolution. Often discussion items come back at later meetings as action items.
 - **Describe the item**. Write several sentences, not just three words! [Announcements should contain the full text of the announcement.] This description should contain:
 - Enough background information that people know what the issue is and can form an opinion about it.
 - A concrete proposal saying what you'd like the house to do. [Warning: Don't get so attached to your specific proposal that you reject alternative perspectives on the issue or different solutions to the problem.]
 - Post any **additional information** you have about the issue (e.g. posters, flyers, pamphlets, books, etc.)
 - Estimate the **amount of time** it will take at the meeting. Announcements typically take one minute. It's usually a good idea to limit discussion items to five or ten minutes. Action items can take anywhere from five to twenty minutes or more.
 - Write your **name**.
- **Respond** to any comments written by other house members as well as you can. Find new information if necessary.

Facilitator

- As early as possible (preferably about one week before the meeting) **post an agenda** including the following:
 - The **date and time** of the meeting. (It's really bad form and inconvenient for people if it gets changed too often.)
 - A place for people to post **agenda items**, including:
 - description of the item
 - type of item: announcement, action item, discussion item
 - estimate of time required
 - space for comments/discussion by other people
 - poster's name
 - additional information
 - **Facilitator's name** (so people who post agenda items can talk to you)

- Some time in the days before the meeting **get people to help** you with the meeting. I like to pick people I think would do a given task well, but have not had that position at recent meetings. Also, I like to go over my expectations of their task with them so we work together as a team better.
 - A. **Visible note-taker.** There are a lot of techniques associated with this task. Experience and training help a lot.
 - B. **Recorder** in house journal. This person should read back final decisions to make sure they're written correctly.
 - C. **Timer.** This is pretty easy, but the person needs to time each agenda item so they have to be on the ball during the meeting.
 - D. **Vibes-watcher.** There are two main functions of this person: to point out tension, distractions, or weariness in the group and recommend changes, and to point out coercion or intimidation or any lessening of safety in the group.
 - E. **Minority views watcher.** Makes sure that if anyone has a different view on an issue than most people, this view isn't forgotten.
 - F. **Food/fun preparer(s).** Optional, but nice.
- As items get put up on the agenda, **make sure all the necessary information gets posted.** If something is missing, you are unclear about something, or you think the amount of time is inappropriate, talk to the people involved.
- About half an hour before the scheduled meeting time, **set up the room.** A few hints:
 - Arrange seating in a semicircle facing a large flat wall space for notes. The semicircle should be large enough for everyone to fit, but small enough that everyone can see the notes and hear each other.
 - Leave one side of the semicircle with just cushions and pillows (no sofas) so latecomers can easily join the meeting. (You will probably still have to explicitly invite latecomers to join the circle during the meeting, but at least it will be easy for them to do so.)
 - Write the agenda on a big piece of paper. Don't forget a quick agenda review and a few minutes to review the meeting, as well as the agenda items, the people proposing them, and suggested time limits.
- Ten minutes before the meeting start gathering people together.
- Start on time.

Notetaker

- The day before the meeting get several big sheets of butcher paper, a few markers of different colors (make sure they work), and masking tape. It's nice to have plenty of space for different opinions, pictures, etc. You can get butcher paper from the Row office. Maybe Gina or Matt can get it for you.
- Ten or fifteen minutes before the meeting tape up your paper. Make sure you have a visible place to move the sheets of paper to when they get full. Help the facilitator write down the agenda if she has not yet done so.

Vibes Watcher and Minority Views Watcher

- Not too much in the way of specific preparation beyond that of any house member (see above), but these people should try especially hard to be aware of other people's feelings and views on the issues, especially if these feelings are very strong or the views divergent from that of the majority.

Food/Fun Preparer

- Make food, drinks, etc. or prepare a short game, trust building activity, consensus practice activity (nothing too heavy right after a meeting, please), massage workshop, or other fun activity for right after the meeting.