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# Thirteen Rules for Academic Meetings

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## THIRTEEN RULES FOR ACADEMIC MEETINGS

THOMAS L. SHAFFER\*

1. All delegates to academic meetings must cultivate the ability to discuss any subject for any length of time. This largely implicit credential supports an ancient threshold principle: No subject is too trivial for serious academic consideration. An ancient tradition is at stake, a tradition which has been identified (in unpublished research by the Notre Dame Law Faculty) as the *pantalogue*—that is, the public life of a community of scholars in which everyone talks about everything all the time.

2. No subject is unitary; there are no irreducible elements in academic meetings; everything is capable of being separated into parts and discussed, one part at a time, as provided in Rule 1. Seldom affirm, as the medieval scholastics said; never deny; always distinguish.

3. Academic meetings in the pantalogical tradition are deliberative rather than decisional. Decision is to deliberation what conviction is to the pursuit of truth; delegates in the deliberative tradition therefore avoid decision in meetings. Reference to committee—or, if the meeting is a committee meeting, to sub-committee—and mandate for further study, are ideals for the responsible delegate, much as equivocation, rather than tiresome assertion, is the ideal in scholarship.

4. Fraternal correction requires that delegates discipline the occasional errant proponent of action. One should first recommend cold showers. If cold showers fail, the only solution may be compromise and a call for multi-page, single-spaced mimeographed memoranda. See also Rules 8–9.

5. If the proponent of action does not profit by fraternal correction under Rule 4, delegates must look to the defense of the pantalogical community. In that case, the duty of delegates is to declare unclear all memoranda written by the proponent of action. This declaration must be made without reference to or demonstrated familiarity with the content of the memoranda, to the end that substance which survives Rule 4 will be referred somewhere under the provisions of Rule 3.

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6. Delegates to academic meetings are called to an exacting level of personal humility. It is especially important that delegates who have information capable of being communicated in a meeting exercise restraint. Information is not and never has been within the academic tradition codified in Rule 1.

7. Rule 6 does not, however, pertain to statements of insular information which communicate nothing. If, for example, the meeting is composed of persons on both sides of what C. P. Snow calls the two cultures, each side may orally initiate information directed to the other side, provided only that each side couch its initiated information in language peculiar to its scholarly tradition. Glimmers of understanding in the eyes of listeners will indicate to the speaker that he has either misread Snow, or overestimated his audience, and that the statement falls under Rule 6, rather than under this rule. Because the sudden realization that he is understood is embarrassing to a speaker, courtesy suggests that listeners devise whatever means they can to appear interested but puzzled. Questions which betray no understanding of the speaker are useful, are to be encouraged, and should be answered in reference to the principle of Continuous Interrupted Monologue. (See Rule 12.)

8. Proposals for decisive action, and especially action taken without full and fair adherence to these Rules, may be designated as legalistic, tied with ribbon and stored in 14-inch filing cabinets. This Rule obtains except in meetings of academic lawyers, where offending proposals are to be designated as metaphysical or theological and treated under Rule 9.

9. Proposals which do not clearly fall within Rule 8 may be designated as metaphysical or, in colleges and universities which are church-related, theological. Metaphysical and theological proposals are to be mimeographed. (See Rule 4.)

10. Enthusiastic endorsement of proposals tends more to decision than to deliberation. Enthusiasm is therefore not appropriate in academic meetings. If a proposal is brought to a vote—and that result will signify that these Rules have been neglected—all affirmative votes should be stated with facial expressions signifying reluctance. (Negative votes are forbidden. See Rule 2.)

11. Every qualified delegate to any one academic meeting must normally also attend other academic meetings. Meetings take time. These facts suggest, as a canon of professional courtesy, that no referral be made which requires action by delegates who are present. Of course, proposals calling for *any* kind of action are clearly outside the spirit of the pantalogue. But should proposals requiring action, notwithstanding this spirit, be passed, the action they call for must be carried out by non-delegates, or, if there are none, by delegates who are not present. If no one is absent and available to do the work, the proposal is by definition legalistic (see Rule 8) or metaphysical (see Rule 9).

12. The spirit of Rule 1, and the pantalogical tradition, require Continuous Interrupted Monologue. C.I.M. is a skill as difficult to master as it is to understand, but a qualified delegate neglects it at peril of incompetence. The central dynamic of Continuous Interrupted Monologue is that no speaker listen to or answer any other speaker. A courtly yielding of the floor, for a moment, is all that the pantalogical tradition has ever required. Once

the floor has been returned the speaker should proceed as if he had not been interrupted. Questioners should endeavor to ask questions and make comments which are not related to what the speaker is saying, so that the speaker may conform to this Rule with a minimum of psychic disruption. Academic delegates who believe they teach classes according to the Socratic Method will conform to this Rule with relatively little pain.

13. Duties related to students are normally an economic if not a necessary evil in the pursuit of academic representation. However, teaching and research redound to the credit of a delegate only if he pursues them without detectable interference with his duties as a delegate. A book, two courses and ten committees, for example, is an enviable semester's regimen (attendance at meetings being assumed under Rule 11). Two books, four courses and five committees is less desirable than one small book, no courses and fifteen committees. A regimen of books and courses without committees is, of course, cause for dismissal.