



The Astronomical League

A Federation of Astronomical Societies

Astro Note G2 – Constitution or Bylaws

Every organization needs a written document which spells out its reason for being and the rules by which it operates. This document is called the constitution or bylaws of the organization. (While there are strict differences between the two terms, "constitution" and "bylaws" are usually used interchangeably in most astronomy clubs.)

There are usually at least six sections to a club's bylaws:

1. Name and objective of the organization.
2. Qualifications for membership and categories of membership.
3. Officers, their duties, terms, and the method of election.
4. Meetings and activities, including voting and the definition of a quorum.
5. Dues and financial controls.
6. Logistics of club operation.

While these seem simple and straightforward, a few comments follow on each of the sections.

Name and Objective:

Both the name and the objective should be simply stated and reflect the desires of the prospective members. Objectives range from merely sharing common interests in astronomy to providing public education and outreach for an observatory or planetarium. Some clubs organize specifically to promote deep-sky or planetary or meteor observing. You are encouraged to keep the purpose as general as possible. Operationally, you can have different groups tackle different aspects of your purpose

Membership:

What does an individual need to do to become a member? Certainly, they should have an interest in your objectives as stated above. What else? Do you plan to have different classes of members? Some examples of membership categories are individual, family, student, honorary, regular, or charter. It is not necessary to differentiate members into classes, but some clubs find it convenient to do so. It all depends on your intent. After all, it's your club!

Officers:

The usual officers are President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer. The duties for such officers can be found in standard references like *Robert's Rules of Order*. Smaller clubs often combine the office of secretary and treasurer; larger clubs keep them separate. Similarly, larger clubs may include additional officers: membership, observation, Webmaster, Newsletter Editor, AL-Cor, etc.

Whatever officers you have, your bylaws should also specify how they are to be elected and what are the terms of office. Elections can be by mail ballot or by the members present at a specified club meeting. Terms can be for single or multiple years. If you decide on multiple year terms, you may wish to stagger the terms so that all of the officers are not elected at the same time. You may also want to consider term limits, and a process for filling vacancies if they occur.

Some positions with the organization are filled by appointment rather than election. As chief executive of the club, the President usually appoints chairs such as librarian, programs, nominations and other standing and ad hoc committees.

Meetings:

When and how often does your club intend to meet? If you are just organizing a club, you may only wish to specify infrequent meetings, such as quarterly. Remember, it is OK to meet more often than the bylaws require, but if you require too frequent meetings, e.g., weekly, members may become "burned out." Some clubs meet monthly except for the three summer months when members may be away on vacation.

Whatever frequency you decide, at least one meeting each year should be designated as a business meeting. At that meeting you can elect officers, decide on the next year's budget, and conduct any other business of a non-urgent nature. While urgent business can be carried out at any meeting (if your bylaws so specify...), having a specified time will leave general meetings free for members' benefit and promotion of your organization's objectives. Larger clubs may also have Board Meetings of the officers. This is an opportunity to conduct day-to-day business for the membership. But again, it is important that this be defined in your bylaws.

Dues and Financial:

If the dues amount(s) is not specified, the manner in which the amount is set should be specified. Many clubs leave the question of dues to the discussion of the budget and only require that the dues be such that each year's budget be balanced. It expedites changing the dues, when necessary, if the dues amounts are not set in the bylaws.

You may also wish to specify how finances are to be controlled: spending limits for any one officer; more than one check signer; more than one signature required for each check; etc. You may wish to discuss some of these controls with the bank where your club keeps its account(s).

Logistics and Club Operation:

Amendments to the Bylaws: You need some provision for changing your bylaws. As your club grows you may wish to include new provisions or modify old ones. As with electing officers, amendments can be ratified either by mail ballot or the membership at a specified meeting. But do not make amending too easy. Changes should not be made lightly. Two thirds of the members are usually required, and sufficient notice of any meeting should be specified so all members can make their thoughts known.

Dissolution of the Club: You need some provision to define how the club's assets will be handled if it becomes necessary to dissolve the club. This may be to a local observatory, to local schools, or to another nearby astronomy club.

Other: Include provisions for any other topics that do not neatly fit within other sections of the bylaws.