

Appendix I – Writing a Constitution

Introduction

The dictionary defines the constitution as the “system of fundamental principles according to which a nation, state, or group is governed” (Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary). One authority on parliamentary procedure states that the constitution of an organization: 1) defines its primary characteristics; 2) prescribes how it functions; and 3) includes all rules that the organization considers so important that the rules cannot be changed without previous notice to members (Roberts Rules of Order, Newly Revised).

Thus, the constitution of an organization is its basic **roadmap**, defining the limits of its authority, establishing the structure through which it achieves organizational goals, providing a sense of order and organization, and identifying allowable actions. The recommended practice that all fundamental rules be placed in only **one** document promotes easy readability and understanding. Keeping all provision of **a topic** under **one** heading within a **single** document results in fewer problems of redundancy and internal inconsistency.

The following outline /questions are designed to help you write a constitution for your organization. The constitution should contain statements and provisions concerning the enduring aspects of your organization. Items that are subject to frequent revision should be included in the organization’s operating rules. The staff of the Co-curricular Activities, Programs & Services of Student Activities can provide you with advice and consultation with constitution formation, revision, etc.

Sample Outline for Constitution

TITLE: CONSTITUTION OF THE (NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION)

ARTICLE I: NAME

Section 1: What is the exact title/name by which the organization is to be referred? If the organization will be using the “University of Hawai’i at Manoa” in its name, then the organization should be referred to as “XYZ Club **at** the University of Hawai’i at Manoa.”

ARTICLE II: PURPOSE

Section 1: What is the purpose of the organization? What are its broad goals? Are the aims political, cultural, religious, social, service, etc.? Why was the group founded?

Section 2: Include a statement of the group’s willingness to abide by established University policies.

ARTICLE III: MEMBERSHIP

- Section 1: Who is eligible for membership? What qualifications are there for membership? Are there any restrictions? Nondiscrimination clause should be provided for and include the following: race, color, creed, sex, religion, handicapping condition, sexual orientation, etc.
- Section 2: How does one become a member? What steps must be followed? How long is membership--semester, yearly?
- Section 3: What types of membership are there (e.g. regular, honorary, associate, alumni, etc.)? What privileges accrue to each type of member? Which types of membership are voting members and non-voting members?
- Section 4: How can membership be terminated and be reinstated?

ARTICLE IV: OFFICERS

- Section 1: Composition: How many officers are there? What are their titles?
- Section 2: Qualification: Who is eligible to become an officer (e.g. regular voting member, active member, seniors and juniors, students only, faculty/staff only, etc.)
- Section 3: Duties & Responsibilities: What are the duties of each of the officers listed in Section 1, Article IV. Have a separate paragraph for each officer listed, e.g.
- The duties of the President shall be to preside at all meetings of the organization, to enforce the constitution and rules of the organization, to decide questions of order, to appoint committee chairs with approval, to call special meetings...
- The duties of the Vice-President shall be to preside at all meetings in the absence of the President, to assist the President in his/her duties...
- The duties of the Secretary shall be to record minutes of meetings, to maintain the membership roster, to take roll, to handle correspondence...
- The duties of the Treasurer shall be to collect dues, to maintain financial records, to make expenditures, to regularly report to the organization...
- Section 4: Term of the Office: How long do officers serve -- one semester, one year...specify begin and end dates if standardized?
- Section 5: Removal: What procedures exist to remove/recall officers?

Section 6: Vacancy: How are officers who resign, are recalled, are removed to be replaced? Usually, provision is made for automatic succession by the Vice-President to President should the President resign, be recalled, be removed. Provisions for the other officers need to be specified.

ARTICLE V: EXECUTIVE BOARD

Note: Provision might need to be made for an executive board/executive committee in cases of large organizations. The executive board could be responsible for managing the affairs of the organization between meetings of the general membership. Specific provisions are suggested below.

Section 1: Composition: Who serves on the executive board? (Usually, the board would include the executive officers; the organization advisor; sometimes, the chairs of all standing committees; and an at-large member of the organization.)

Section 2: Powers & Duties: What is the executive board empowered to do? What are its responsibilities to the organization? What are the restrictions of its powers and duties?

ARTICLE VI: COMMITTEES

Section 1: Composition: What standing committees are necessary for the effective functioning of the organization (e.g. membership/recruitment, social programs, educational programs, service, finance, etc.)? Standing committees are generally permanent committees of the organization.

Section 2: Duties & Responsibilities: What are the duties of each of the standing committees listed in Section 1, Article VI? It is important to distinguish the duties of each committee to avoid misunderstandings of which committee is responsible for programs/projects which come up.

Section 3: Committee Chairs: How are committee chairs selected? Who appoints them? Who approves them? How long do committee chairs serve (usually, their terms run concurrently to the appointing authority, e.g. the President of the organization)?

Section 4: Special Committees: What provisions are available to establish special committees as the needs arises?

ARTICLE VII: ELECTIONS

Section 1: Nomination: How are officers to be nominated--open nominations by members, nominating committee, etc.?

- Section 2: Eligibility: What requirements must be fulfilled to be eligible for officer positions (e.g. g.p.a. requirement, current in payment of dues, etc.)?
- Section 3: Voting: When will officers be elected--specific month, designated time? How will officers be elected--secret ballot, at open meeting, etc.?
- Section 4: Installation: When do officers assume office? How will officers be officially installed--at special ceremony, immediately upon election, etc.?

The above provisions could be expanded to include election/selection of at-large members or any other position deemed critical by the organization.

ARTICLE VIII: MEETINGS

- Section 1: Time & Place: How frequent will regular meetings of the organization and of the executive board be held--monthly, weekly, twice a month, every other month, quarterly, once a semester, annual?
- Section 2: Quorum: How many members of the organization must be present to officially transact business at meetings of the organization and of the executive board -- majority, 2/3, whoever shows up? It is important that serious thought be given to this as there are advantages and disadvantages for any requirement selected.
- Section 3: Voting: What is the basic requirement for approving actions of the organization and of the executive board? Usually, this requirement is majority rule (50% plus 1 of the regular, voting members). Some cases require a 2/3 vote (2/3 of the regular, voting members).
- Section 4: Order of Business: In what order will items be taken up by the organization? A customary agenda follows:
- 1) Call or Order
 - 2) Roll Call
 - 3) Reading of Minutes of Previous Meeting
 - 4) Officer Reports
 - 5) Committee Reports
 - 6) Unfinished Business
 - 7) New Business
 - 8) Announcements
 - 9) Adjournment
- Section 5: Parliamentary Authority: What resource will be relied upon for questions of parliamentary procedure? Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised is the most common resource used; however, in smaller organizations, the following statement might be sufficient:

Parliamentary authority shall be derived from Robert's Rules of Order, Newly Revised for decisions related to budget, officer elections, and constitution revision. All other decisions shall be consensus.

ARTICLE IX: FINANCES

- Section 1: Dues: If dues are collected for membership, state here. An initial dues amount of \$___ could be specified, with the provision that dues may be changed. How often are dues to be paid? To whom are dues paid?
- Section 2: Budget: What plans for spending finances of the organization must be formulated for presentation to the membership? Who is responsible for developing budgetary plans? By when will the members present the budget for approval?
- Section 3: Disbursements: Whose signatures are required to expend funds--Treasurer only; Treasurer plus one other officer; Treasurer, another officer, and advisor; etc.? It is important that there be a check and balance between individuals who have access to the organization's funds.
- Section 4: Audits: Who will audit and double check the expenditures of the organization against the budget? This should be done at least once a year.

ARTICLE X: AMENDMENTS

- Section 1: Initiation: Who can initiate proposals for amending the Constitution? How are these proposed--in writing, verbally at meetings, etc.?
- Section 2: Voting: By when must the membership vote on the proposals for amendment--at the next regularly scheduled meeting, within two weeks upon receipt of the proposal, etc.? How will voting take place--written ballot, at a meeting, etc.? What is the numeric requirement for approving the proposed amendment--majority vote, 2/3 vote, 3/4 vote? Usually, constitutional amendments require 2/3 vote for approval.