

Guide to Effective Minute Taking

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Minutes of Meetings

INTRODUCTION

Minutes and Notes: Why bother?

- 1 Any decision-making group, formal or informal, will want to be clear what decisions it has taken and who is expected to execute that decision. It is not necessary to write the decisions down on paper to make them happen. For example, in a fast-moving business, a team meeting might end by someone writing the action points from the meeting on an overhead projector screen. It is agreed who is responsible for the action and they are left to get on with it. However, other group meetings may decide that they would be helped by a short written record of their decisions and who is responsible for follow-up action. This serves as a reminder for those at the meeting and can also be given to those who were not able to attend the meeting and who need to know what happened.
- 2 A more formal group, i.e. one which operates under a constitution, is likely to demand a more formal record of its proceedings since the group must act, and be seen to act within its constitution. (It is likely that it will be a requirement of the group's constitution that minutes of its meetings are taken.) Being seen to act within its constitution is important since the group's decisions may be subject to external scrutiny by (say) its auditors or even Judicial Inquiry. The minutes of the group will need to testify, therefore, that the correct procedures for decision-taking were followed. This means providing a record of those present at the meeting, the decisions taken (and whether they were taken unanimously) and who was given authority in the group's name to carry out any follow-up action. The correct decision-making procedure will also be demonstrated by a record of what advice the group was given to enable it to take its decisions (i.e. was it properly informed) and the group's thought process in making them (i.e. did it consider thoroughly the issues). These latter two factors in particular distinguish a formal minute from a note of an ad hoc group which merely records action points.
- 3 The permanent nature of formal groups, as opposed to ad hoc ones, means also that their work is on-going. This in turn means that they are more likely to need to refer back to past decisions and to know why those decisions were taken (which could have important future policy implications). The need to be informed of past decisions to enable it to conduct its on-going work is another reason why a formal group will wish to have a formal record taken of its proceedings.

The Church Commissioners' Board and Committees

- 4 The Church Commissioners are a statutory body which operates under Measure. This statutory framework means that, as with the formal bodies mentioned above, their Board and Committees will wish to demonstrate, through the minutes of their meetings, that they took their decisions in line with their constitution. Their decisions may also be subject to external scrutiny. For example, the Assets Committee's minutes may be read by the Commissioners' auditors. The minutes of the Redundant Churches Committee may be examined by a non-statutory public inquiry. Both the Lambeth Group and Social Security Select Committee requested the sight of Board and Committee minutes. It is vital, therefore, that the minutes of the Commissioners' Board and Committees provide a proper record of decisions taken. The on-going nature of their work also demands such a record. For example, the Redundant Churches Committees may set a precedent in dealing with a case which becomes policy; it will then need to refer back to that decision and the reasons for it when it considers similar cases. Other Committees will also refer back to past decisions as they review policy. The Assets Committee will find it helpful to know when considering a property sale that a sale has been considered before and the reasons for not pursuing it at that time. A good set of minutes of Board and Committee meetings is vital, therefore, for the effectiveness of their on-going work.

These Notes

- 5 These notes concentrate on the preparation of Board and Committee minutes. The principles involved will normally apply to preparing the minutes or notes of other group meetings (e.g. departmental meetings) although the requirements of such groups may vary. (The words 'minutes' and 'notes' are used interchangeably but minutes imply a more formal record than notes). It is a waste of time preparing a formal record of an informal meeting which only demands a note of the key action points rather than *why* the decision was made. Other meetings which have to be minuted may be of a more discursive nature and the minutes will reflect that. In each case it will need to be decided what purpose the minute is for and who will, or potentially may see it.

WHAT IS A GOOD MINUTE?

Purpose of a Minute

- 6 In the Introduction, a number of different elements were mentioned as being necessary to a set of minutes. In summary, minutes should provide a record of:-
- a. when and where a meeting took place, and who was present,
 - b. what was considered, and
 - c. what was decided.
- 7 All these elements are important. However, the last is crucial since the basic purpose of minutes is to provide a record of decisions or agreed follow-up action. The Standing Orders of the Commissioners' Board of Governors say that 'decisions, resolutions, and orders of the Board at any meeting shall be minuted by the Secretary in a book to be kept by him for the purpose': they do not refer to the Board's discussions. Everything in a minute, therefore, should point towards the decision taken.

Overall Style

- 8 Since the main purpose of a minute is to record the decision, it follows that minutes should be **brief**. By concentrating on a Committee's decision, a minute will provide only a **selective** recording of what was *discussed* at the meeting. It is not a substitute for a verbatim record, and should not attempt to reproduce, however summarily, what every speaker said. It should record only the essence of the discussion, picking up the main threads which lead to the conclusion. Since it is the decision that matters and this is taken by the whole Committee not individual members, a minute should also, to the fullest extent practicable, be **impersonal** - i.e., it should not attribute views to persons. This point is dealt with more fully in paragraphs 21-23 below.
- 9 In addition to being brief and impersonal, a good minute should normally also be **self-contained**, so that it is intelligible without reference to other documents. Minutes are designed not only as a basis for current action but also for permanent record; and for purposes of subsequent reference they are much more valuable if they can be understood without reference to other documents. That does not mean it has to repeat or even summarise at length the content of any paper under discussion. A reference to the main point at issue is usually enough.
- 10 The language of minutes should be lucid, concise, and as far as possible, jargon-free. The language should also be relatively restrained and neutral, however impassioned the discussion. In other words, if an important point is made in an intemperate way, the minute will record the substance of that point, but will tone it down. For example, a Board member arguing that "it is a scandal that Bishops have palaces and the latter should be burnt down" is likely to be minuted along the lines of "it was questioned whether the historic residences of the bishops were appropriate and whether other means of housing them should be explored". Whilst the language should be restrained, there are occasions on which the flavour of a discussion or a complex argument can be caught by a particularly memorable phrase that somebody used.

Structure of a Minute

- 11 Although the main purpose of a minute is to set out the decisions reached, it can be appropriate, as mentioned in the Introduction, to demonstrate the decision-making process was thorough by recording what information the Committee received and why its decisions were taken (which can also play an important part in the Committee's policy development).
- 12 A normal minute should, therefore, fall clearly into three parts:-
 - a. The statement of the problem.
 - b. Points in discussion.
 - c. The decision.

Statement of the Problem

- 13 Most minutes record the discussion of a paper or note. The minute should therefore start by referring to the paper/note, and should record its reference number, and author, e.g.

"The Group considered a Note (SG(89)6) by Mr Stalin..."

- 14 It then sets out the problem for decision, e.g.

"...which set out the case for liquidating the remaining old Bolsheviks."

- 15 The opening statement should not try to summarise the whole of the note under discussion. Its sole purpose is to make the record of the subsequent discussion intelligible without reference to other documents. This can usually be achieved in a few lines. If it cannot, the subject should be stated and the subsequent reader left to refer to the paper itself.

- 16 If any papers are tabled, this should be mentioned. If an item was presented by way of an oral report rather than a paper, the minute might start as follows:-

The SECRETARY reported that the Standing Committee had approved the Commissioners' proposal that..."

- 17 Most discussions begin with a statement by the author of the paper, who either summarises or enlarges upon their note. The minute should not include both a summary of the note and a record of the author's opening statement. If the speaker adds nothing to what was in their paper, the minute should provide merely a summary of that; if they enlarge upon it, the summary of the note should be omitted and a comprehensive statement put into his mouth covering both the essential substance of the note and the supplementary points brought out by the speaker e.g.

"MR STALIN added that Mr Beria had discovered only that morning conclusive evidence of a conspiracy on the part of the old Bolsheviks to assassinate the leadership and install a counter-revolutionary government."

(When a statement is made attributable, it is made clear who said it by recording their name in capitals. Subsequent references to him or her should be in lower case.)

Points in Discussion

- 18 The minute should summarise the main points which arose in discussion, if and only if they were relevant to the decision. As already mentioned, a Minute is *not* a verbatim account of the discussion, and will summarise the main points briefly and impersonally e.g.

"In discussion, it was suggested that some of the old Bolsheviks, at least, should be spared as they had played a heroic part in the Revolution. However, most members agreed that the risk of sparing them was too great, given their current behaviour."

- 19 Some Minutes may, however, give a rather more detailed account of the main points in discussion, especially if an important policy issue is at stake, or if the discussion was itself long and the issue difficult. Such a Minute should aim to reflect not only the most important points expressed, but also a fair spectrum of views (to avoid accusations of partial Minutes).
- 20 A more detailed account of discussion is also likely in the Minutes of a Working Party, or Sub-Committee, where there is considerable value in recording the "argument" behind a recommendation, and even the reasons why some options were rejected, as these may need to be rehearsed when the recommendation is considered by the Committee to whom the sub-Committee reports. (The self-contained nature of a minute is important here since the main Committee will probably not have before it the paper which the sub-Committee discussed and will, therefore, require a good summary of its main points.)

Attribution and Non-attribution

- 21 As a general rule, speakers are not identified in the Minutes of discussions, but the passive voice is favoured i.e. "It was suggested that ...", "It was generally felt that ...", "It was questioned whether ..." etc. As said earlier this rule (which is subject to various exceptions, some of which are noted below) results from the minute concentrating on the decision which is made by the Committee not individuals. The Committee is a **collective** body. There are other reasons for non-attribution. Firstly, it makes for brevity: a point can usually be recorded more concisely in an impersonal form. Secondly, a point raised by one speaker will often be taken up and developed by others: in an impersonal minute you need record it only in its final form: if you attribute it to the original speaker you will have to add the comments and re-state it. Thirdly, it is often convenient to weld together into a single paragraph a number of points made by various speakers. Fourthly, the impersonal style also tends to avert suggestions for amendment of the minutes. People naturally look with special care at paragraphs which attribute statements to them and tend to ask for additions and modifications which are not strictly necessary for the purpose of a minute.
- 22 If, however, a discussion is very contentious, and one or more members presented a view which dissented significantly from the majority, then attribution is appropriate e.g.

"MR SMALLWOOD argued that staff salaries should be doubled within two years "
- 23 Very occasionally, on a key policy issue a minute may attribute each person's point of view. But that is the exception rather than the rule.

Ordering points made in discussion

- 24 The record of a discussion should lead logically to the decision or recommendation for further action rather than reproduce points in the order in which they were made in discussion. In addition, points should always concentrate on the central issues, rather than the marginal issues that are often raised.

The Decision

- 25 The decision will normally be set out at the end of the minute. If, however, the minute falls naturally into a number of different sections, each separate section should end with the relevant decisions and all the decisions then repeated at the end.
- 26 Committee minutes normally minute a decision by rehearsing the recommendation given in the paper e.g. "The Committee agreed that ..." or "The Committee declined to approve the recommendation that ...". Sometimes a paper may not make a recommendation, in which case you will have to frame the decision yourself. If follow-up action was agreed to be done by a particular individual, this should be mentioned e.g. "Mr Radford undertook to provide a further paper ...". Where action is required, the conclusions should place the responsibility firmly upon the Department or Departments which are to carry it out. e.g. "The Committee invited the Houses Secretary to prepare a Report ..." not "agreed that a note should be prepared ...". If several Departments are concerned, they should all be named but it should be indicated with whom the initiative rests: e.g. "The Committee invited the Chief Surveyor, in consultation with the Estates Secretary, to prepare a report on ..."
- 27 On the rare occasions that the Board or Committee votes on a decision, this should be recorded as follows: 'The Board agreed by 13 votes to 5 that Anne Dickens should be appointed Secretary to the Commissioners.' A minute should also record (normally at the start of the item) anyone who declares an interest in a case and who, therefore, took no part in the discussion and decision. An example might be a bishop declining to take part in the consideration of a redundant churches case in his diocese.
- 28 To make them stand out as clearly as possible, it is often convenient to divide the decisions into their constituent parts, putting each into a separate paragraph. Thus -
- "The Committee -
- agreed in principle that...
- authorised the Chairman to inform...
- instructed the Secretary to arrange ..."
- 29 If no action was required, the minute is usually concluded by a statement such as "The Committee: took note". Such a statement would only be wrong if the Committee clearly disagreed with whatever had been reported to them.
- 30 Examples of a bad and good set of minutes are set out below:

A BAD MINUTE

The Politburo discussed a Note which stated that the situation had now got very dangerous, subversives were everywhere, the old Bolsheviks had committed treachery. Several comrades were guilty of flagrant breaches of state security, some had given information to the enemy, one or two had engaged in illegal currency dealings. Many were actively helping saboteurs and the revolution was in danger from what they were all doing. Something had to be done.

In discussion, COMRADE STALIN invited members to express their views. COMRADE BUCHARIN said he personally abhorred anything which endangered the revolution, but wondered whether things were really that bad. COMRADE MALENKOV asked if he were calling Comrade Stalin a liar. COMRADE BUCHARIN said of course not. COMRADE KAGANOVICH said the Note revealed an appalling conspiracy and so far as he was concerned, liquidation was the least these vipers deserved. COMRADE MOLOTOV said hanging might be better than shooting, but that was just his personal opinion. COMRADE TROTSKY said that many of those accused of treason had played heroic roles in the revolution and it was unthinkable that they would dream of doing what they were accused of. COMRADE STALIN invited Beria to report the latest news. COMRADE BERIA said decisive evidence of a conspiracy to assassinate the leadership had been uncovered that morning. It was all set out in a Note which he had passed round before the meeting began. COMRADE MOLOTOV said this proved everything. COMRADE BUCHARIN said it proved nothing, and he and COMRADE TROTSKY accused the meeting of conducting a witch hunt in the worst possible taste. They said all the evidence was a frame-up.

The Politburo agreed with the Note.

A GOOD MINUTE

The Politburo considered a Note (SG(3)31) by Comrade Stalin which reported on the outcome of investigations into the behaviour of the old Bolsheviks, and recommended the prosecution demand capital punishment.

COMRADE BERIA tabled a Note which reported on evidence uncovered that morning of a conspiracy to assassinate the leadership.

In discussion, COMRADE TROTSKY questioned the validity of both the investigation's finding and the evidence produced by Comrade Beria. However, it was generally felt the evidence was convincing and the case for capital punishment was conclusive.

The Politburo:

agreed that the prosecution demand capital punishment in respect of the Comrades listed in the General Secretary's Note (SG(3)31).

HOW TO WRITE A GOOD MINUTE: BEST PRACTICE

- 31 As long as a good minute is produced, the method by which it was prepared is unimportant. Apart from a few essentials, the following notes are not meant, therefore, to be prescriptive but may be helpful to those writing minutes.

Before the meeting

- 32 It (almost) goes without saying that a minute taker should read in advance of the meeting any papers which are to be discussed in order that the issues are fully understood. If the minute taker does not understand the papers, then he/she should consult somebody who does.

- 33 It is also helpful to know before the meeting if any papers are to be tabled or there is 'any other business'. In addition, it is worth checking whether members have notified the Committee Secretary in advance of any issues which they intend to raise at the meeting. Minute takers should also be informed of who is supposed to be attending the meeting and of any apologies.

At the meeting

- 34 Again, it (almost) goes without saying that the minute taker should be seated at the meeting in a position where he/she can see and hear properly.
- 35 Although the minute writer should know who - Committee members and staff - will be present at the meeting, it is important to take a note of who actually turns up (and for which items they attend).
- 36 In respect of the notes taken at the meeting, it is a matter of personal preference as to how detailed they are. Some will wish to take a near verbatim record; others will be slightly more selective: as long it can be established from your notes who said what (particularly important if there is a dispute about the accuracy of a minute) it does not matter. Noting what was agreed is obviously essential and it can be useful to highlight decisions and action points as the notes are being taken.

After the meeting

- 37 Any action points from the meeting should be circulated immediately after the meeting. They may require urgent action; they may also not make it into the final version of the minute (for example, a request for information from a Committee member may not need to be minuted) and hence might be 'lost' if not circulated immediately.
- 38 The minute taker will then draft the minute, following the principles of a 'good minute' outlined in the previous section. It is a good rule to think out the sequence of a minute before writing it, working backwards from the conclusions. If it is clear what the conclusions are to be recorded and these are kept clearly in mind as the minute is written, it will help decide how much of the discussion needs to be recorded and in what order it can best be arranged. It is not advisable to summarise everything that was said and then consider what you can afford to miss out. The statement of the problem (i.e. the summary of the note or record of the author's opening statement) should also be informed by the conclusion, which will also help the minute be self-contained.
- 39 If the discussion was discursive or circuitous a certain amount of 'marshalling' will be necessary. Points should not be simply reproduced in the order in which they were made, unless (improbably) they emerged in a totally logical order. In addition the irrelevant and the inessential should be disregarded. Much said in a discussion need not be recorded. And much that was relevant to a certain stage in the discussion may, in retrospect, be found irrelevant to the conclusion eventually reached.

- 40 A Committee Chairman will normally sum up the discussion and indicate the conclusion reached. However, if he/she has not done so, it is the duty of the Secretary to draft a set of conclusions which express fairly the sense of the meeting. There are many occasions on which the members of a Committee are not altogether clear what has been decided until they see the minutes. It is a proper function of a Secretary to clarify, as well as to record, the results of a meeting. His conclusion should not, however, go beyond what is implicit in the general sense of the discussion. The minute taker should draft what they believe to be the conclusion of the discussion on the Secretary's behalf. In view of the importance of the conclusion in preparing the sequence of the minutes, it is advisable to check with the Secretary or his Deputy if it is unclear what the conclusion was.
- 41 It is also advisable for those drafting minutes to include points (in square brackets if necessary) about which it is not entirely clear whether they are relevant to the decision. This can serve as a helpful reminder to those approving the minutes that the point was made and it can then be left to them to make the final decision as to whether it should be included or deleted. It is better for those drafting minutes to include too much than too little. If there is a golden rule in preparing minutes, it is don't miss anything.

Timing and Circulation

- 42 Draft minutes should usually be produced within a few days of the actual meeting, and final minutes ready within 7 days. The sooner draft Minutes are circulated, the easier it is for the recipient to check them, as the meeting will be fresh in mind. Ideally, minutes need only be approved by one person, the Committee Secretary, but are likely to be approved by at least two people, the last being the Committee Secretary. Having minutes approved can be irksome and de-motivating ('why bother getting it right if it's all going to be changed?') but a well-produced minute is unlikely to undergo significant changes except, perhaps, to refine the decision in line with policy or 'political factors' of which the minute taker could not be expected to be aware. If more than one person is checking the minutes, and the minute taker is not satisfied with any deletions made by the first 'checker', it is their responsibility to inform the Committee Secretary of the difference of opinion and leave him to arbitrate.
- 43 In order that any dispute about the accuracy of a minute may be settled, it is important to keep the notes taken at the meeting until at least the next meeting.

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