

Taking Minutes

Quick and easy guide to taking minutes

Minutes are simply notes taken during the meeting to remind you what was discussed and agreed. They don't need to be long or complicated, in fancy language or perfect grammar. They do need to record clearly and simply what decisions were made at the meeting and who is going to carry them out. Some sample minutes can be found on page 6.

It is the Secretary's job to take minutes.

See also our information sheets on:

- ♦ *Secretary's Role*
- ♦ *The Agenda*
- ♦ *AGM checklist*
- ♦ *Chairing a meeting*
- ♦ *Roles of Officers*

Why is it important to have minutes?

- ♦ It is useful to have a written record of the meeting, what you've decided to do and who is going to do it – memories are unreliable! This is true even if the meeting is very small and informal.
- ♦ Minutes keep members of the group, especially those who were not able to attend the meeting, informed about what went on.

What tasks are involved in taking minutes?

The basic tasks for the minute-taker are:

- ♦ Taking rough notes during your meetings.
- ♦ Writing up these notes neatly or typing them out.
- ♦ Copying and distributing them to relevant people.
- ♦ Keeping all minutes together in a file for future reference.

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What skills do you need?

- ♦ You need to be a good listener.
- ♦ Minute-takers often spend more time listening than writing things down.
- ♦ You need to be reasonably confident about writing things down.
- ♦ It's useful to be able to use a computer, but not essential.

What should you write down?

One of the most difficult things about taking minutes is knowing what to write down and what to leave out.

Keep these two central points in mind:

- ♦ Don't try to write everything down – it's impossible and not useful. Minutes are *not* a blow-by-blow description of what was said.
- ♦ Concentrate on *what* has been decided and *who* is going to do it. The purpose of minutes is to record decisions and actions agreed by the meeting.

Sort out the basics

- ♦ Make sure you have a copy of the agenda (see our information sheet on *The Agenda*). If the agenda is produced in advance of the meeting, read it carefully and if possible go over it with the Chair beforehand.
- ♦ Have the file of past minutes with you, in case any questions come up about decisions from previous meetings.
- ♦ Get a decent pad of paper and some good pens.
- ♦ Make sure you've got a table and comfortable space with enough elbow room to write in.

At every meeting

There is some information that you need to record at every meeting.

- ♦ The name of your group, and the date, time and place of meeting.
- ♦ Apologies: this is a record of people who haven't been able to come to the meeting, but have let the meeting know that they won't be there. Don't record people who just haven't turned up.
- ♦ The names of any guests, and which organisation they are from.
- ♦ Details of who is at the meeting. If it is a small meeting, list everyone by name. If it is a large meeting, note the committee members and the total number of members present.
- ♦ Make up an attendance sheet in advance, and pass this around for people to sign.

Keeping clear notes

The rough notes you take at the meeting are for your use, so you can use abbreviations and organise them in any way you like. Don't get too messy or obscure, though, as you need to be able to make sense of them when you come to write things up.

Organising your notes in the following ways can help:

- ◆ Number each item and give it a heading.
- ◆ Leave a few lines of space between one item and the next, so you have room to add other points if the discussion comes back to it later in the meeting.
- ◆ Underline or highlight decisions and who has agreed to do what.
- ◆ Try dividing the page so you have a narrow column down one side for recording who has agreed to do what.
- ◆ If you are using a loose leaf pad, number each page.

More on what you write down

- ◆ Remember the most important things to get down are *what* has been decided and *who* is going to do it.
- ◆ Use simple, straightforward language. You want to be as clear as possible.
- ◆ Try to sum up the issue, rather than write down all the ins and outs of a discussion. For example, say 'Several residents reported missed or late rubbish collections' rather than 'Mrs Jones said her rubbish wasn't collected last week. Fred Brown said his wasn't either and Jane Green said hers was always late...'
- ◆ If there is a discussion about an important subject, you might want to include some key points in the minutes. For example: 'there was a long discussion about the rubbish service and the following points were made...' List the points, not who said them.
- ◆ If there is a presentation or talk at a meeting you don't need to minute the whole presentation, just record that it took place, e.g. 'Jim Blue, the local Housing Officer, was welcomed to the meeting and gave a presentation on the repairs service'.
- ◆ *Never* say 'I thought' or 'I said' or use 'I' at all. Minutes are not a personal record of your thoughts, but an official account of what was discussed and agreed.
- ◆ It is not necessary to name everyone who spoke. Sometimes it is useful to, for example if they are presenting a report, but on the whole it is better to think about what the main point is, rather than who said it.
- ◆ Remember that the minutes need to be understood by someone who wasn't at the meeting, so give a bit of background. For example, 'the people in Hargreave Court were disgusted by the rubbish in the street' rather than 'they all thought it was disgusting'.
- ◆ Only record what actually happened at the meeting. *Don't* include additional information you may have gained since the meeting.

Producing the finished version

- ♦ The most important thing is to write the minutes up **quickly**. Don't put the job off for weeks. It makes a **huge** difference if the meeting is still fresh in your mind.
- ♦ If possible type the minutes up on a computer. Separate off each item and give it a number and heading.
- ♦ If you can't type the minutes up, then just write them up neatly.
- ♦ Distribute copies to committee members and anyone the committee has decided should be sent minutes.
- ♦ File a copy.

The Resource Centre has computers you can use for typing up your minutes. You can also get your minutes printed cheaply at the Centre.

Agreeing the minutes

A lot of small groups work quite informally, and don't go through the process of agreeing the minutes. The minutes are used as a simple record of decisions and reminder to members of tasks they have taken on.

If you want to have a more formal structure, the correct procedure is to have an item on the agenda called 'minutes of the last meeting'. Members are given the opportunity to say if they think the minutes are inaccurate. If a correction is uncontroversial, like a misspelling of someone's name, this is just noted, and the minutes amended. If the correction is about a decision or action, then the meeting has the responsibility of agreeing what the correct record should be.

Once the minutes of the meeting have been agreed as a correct record they are signed by the Chair, and become the formal record of the meeting.

If you are keeping minutes for a larger organisation, we recommend you read *The Minute-Taker's Handbook*, which is available in the Resource Centre's reference library.

Some common problems

There are some things that make every minute-taker's life difficult. Here are some of the most common problems:

- ♦ It is difficult to know exactly what *has* been agreed. No one is sticking to the point and lots of different suggestions are being made about what to do.
- ♦ The discussion jumps from one item to another before any of them are finished.
- ♦ Everyone is talking at once, and you can't follow the discussion.
- ♦ There is a long, confusing discussion and you don't know which bits are important to get down.
- ♦ You have been very involved in a particular issue and want to say things, but can't minute at the same time.
- ♦ You are nervous about getting it right.

Some solutions

- ♦ If a meeting is well run, it makes taking minutes much easier. It's the Chair's job to keep the meeting in order, but they can only do this with the co-operation of everyone at the meeting.
- ♦ It is really helpful to have a clear agenda for the meeting, and for this to be followed during the meeting.
- ♦ One idea is to discuss and agree together some guidelines by which you'll run your meetings. Some common guidelines are not interrupting, putting your hand up if you want to talk, not having side-conversations and keeping to the agenda item under discussion.
- ♦ Feel free to point out that it is impossible to take minutes if everyone is talking at once and not following the agenda.
- ♦ If it's not clear what decision has been made, ask the Chair to clarify this.
- ♦ It is useful for the minute-taker to sit next to the Chair so that you can work together easily.
- ♦ Discuss the agenda with the Chair before the meeting – the clearer you are about the content of the meeting, the easier it is to minute it.
- ♦ Go through your minutes with the Chair after the meeting. It can be helpful to check through what you've written with someone else.
- ♦ If you are concentrating on taking minutes, it does limit how much you can join in the meeting – it goes with the job. If there is an item where you have been centrally involved and have a lot to say, think about asking someone else to take minutes just for that item.
- ♦ Don't worry if your minutes are not perfect. They are a working tool, and like everything it gets easier the more you do it.

Sample minutes

Minutes of Merrydale Community Association meeting held on Thursday 28th February 2002, 7-9pm

Present at meeting

Mary Tyler (Chair), Jan Curtis (Treasurer), Andrew Brown (Secretary), Mavis Ashley, Tom Carter, Bill Forsyth, Ernie Grant, Doris Grant, Carol Parsons (Committee members) and 22 members of the Association.

Councillor Rob Price and Jeff Barnard from Housing Services were also at the meeting.

1. Apologies for Absence

Jenny Saunders, Mrs Dale, Bob Hartford.

2. Minutes of the last meeting

These were agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

3. Open Day

The local youth centre is holding an Open Day on Wednesday March 13th at the Community Centre 10am – 4pm. Mary Tyler and Jan Curtis said they would be attending.

4. Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer, Jan Curtis, reported that the Association has £456 in the bank and £32.87 in petty cash, making a total of £488.87.

5. Arrangements for the AGM

The Secretary, Andrew Brown, reported that the Community Centre has been booked for the 8th May. There will be a social and buffet after the AGM business is over. Doris Grant and Carol Parsons offered to organise the buffet.

- ♦ **ACTION:** Carol to organise the buffet for the AGM

6. Summer Fun Day

It was agreed to organise a summer outing to Thorpe Park during the school summer holidays. Jan Curtis will investigate the price of coaches, and the details will be discussed at the next meeting.

ACTION: Jan to investigate coach prices and report back to next meeting.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting is on Thursday 28th March 2002, in the Community Centre.

End of sample minutes