

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. It is part of the secretary's role to take minutes.

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 who weren't able to attend a 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 the relevant people including those that were unable to attend
- Keeping all minutes together in a file for future reference

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 three central points in mind:

- Don't try to write everything down - it's impossible and not useful
- Concentrate on WHAT has been decided and WHO is going to do it
- Record the most important things said during a discussion (not the whole discussion)
- Don't worry about producing the perfect minutes - it's not a test or a competition

Sort out the basics

- Make sure you have a copy of the agenda to follow. If the agenda is produced in advance of the meeting, read it carefully and if possible, go over it with the chair for clarification (*see our information sheet 'How to create an effective agenda' for more information on producing an agenda*)
- Get a decent pad of paper and some good pens (at least 2 in case one runs out)
- Make up an attendance sheet in advance, and pass this around for people to sign
- Have the file of past minutes with you, in case any questions come up about decisions from previous meetings

Writing rough notes

The rough notes you take at the meeting need to be clear enough for you to make sense of them when you come to write them up!

The following things can help: -

- Start the page with the name of the meeting, team or committee and the date and place of the meeting
- Put an underlined heading for each separate agenda item
- Leave a few lines 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

- Remember that the minutes need to be understood by someone who wasn't at the meeting, so you need to give a bit of background. For example, put 'the cub scout section require additional funding to pay for the coach for their district trip to the zoo' rather than 'they need funding to pay for the coach'
- 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

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 cooperation of everyone at the meeting, (*see our information sheet 'Chairing Meetings' for more ideas*) One idea is to discuss and agree together some guidelines by which you'll run your meetings - for example not interrupting, putting your hand up if you want to talk, keeping to the agenda item under discussion *see our information sheet 'Chairing Meetings' for more ideas*)
- Feel free to point out that 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
- If there is a particularly important or controversial decision it can be useful to check what you are writing down with the meeting
- If you are concentrating on taking minutes, it does limit how much you can join in the meeting - it goes with the role. 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
- If there is a long discussion try to pick out the main points and just list them. For example; 'There was a long discussion about rubbish at the group's meeting place, the following points were made...'
- Go through your minutes with the chair after the meeting. It can be helpful to check through what you've written with someone else
- Don't worry if your minutes aren't perfect - this won't really matter, and like everything it gets easier the more you do it

Golden Rules

The main things to remember when you are taking minutes are:

- Don't try to write everything down
- Concentrate on writing down what has been decided and who is going to do it
- Give each item a separate heading
- Write your rough notes up soon after the meeting

