Taking Meeting Minutes

Meeting Skills

Team FME

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Preface

Meeting minutes are a summarized written record of a meeting. Being asked to take the minutes can be a stressful experience as it can be difficult to know what to put in and what to leave out. This eBook provides detailed guidance on how to take notes during the meeting and how to turn them into professionally presented minutes.

You will learn:

- How to minimize stress by preparing thoroughly before the meeting begins.
- A step-by-step approach to note taking that makes sure that you don't miss anything important.
- How to overcome the most common problems encountered when taking minutes.
- The ten questions your meeting minutes must answer before they can be considered complete.
- How software tools can make minute taking easier and how to choose one.

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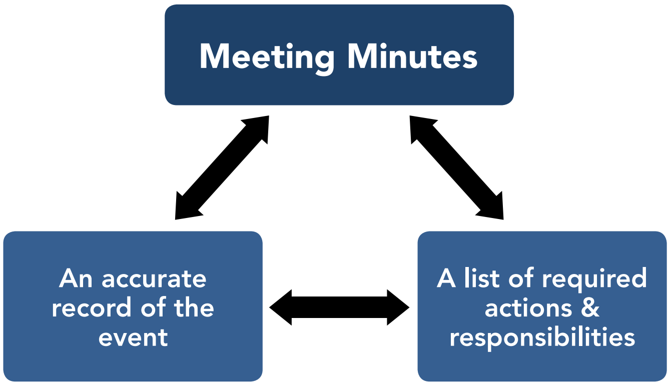
Introduction

To work effectively in any organization it is essential that accurate notes are taken at all meetings. They form a vital part of your communications and ensure that all interested parties are aware of their own and others' responsibilities and timescales.

These notes can take many forms: they may be formal meeting minutes, or an email sent as confirmation of a conversation you and your colleagues have had in connection with a project or activity. For such notes to help you be effective they must be an accurate record of the main points discussed and detail any resulting actions, along with the person or persons responsible for them.



Meeting minutes are a summarized written record of what took place during the meeting. They should not be a transcript of all that was said during the meeting. For 'notes' to become meeting minutes certain aspects must be included in the document. The minutes must describe the events of the meeting, starting with a list of attendees, a statement of the issues considered by the participants, and related responses or decisions regarding the issues discussed.

The minutes of certain groups, such as a corporate board of directors, must be kept on file and are important legal documents. Whether the minutes are from a board or a project meeting they provide an important record of who agreed to what during the meeting and detail the essential points and outcomes of any discussions that took place.

Being able to produce 'good' meeting minutes is an essential management skill you must perfect. They don't need to be long or complicated, but they must contain the key information mentioned above. You will need to record clearly and simply what decisions were made at the meeting and who is going to carry them out.

Anyone who attends a meeting can be asked to take the minutes and if you are asked to do so then it can be quite stressful until you gain experience. You may even ask one of your team to produce minutes on your behalf so it is also essential that you train your team in this skill.

The best advice is not to try to write everything down but to concentrate on WHAT has been decided and WHO is going to do it. It is often advisable to gain clarification of key points discussed to ensure that accuracy is attained.

While being the person who takes the minutes does not mean that you are unable to participate in the discussions, it is essential that you listen carefully during the meeting to ensure your minutes are a true reflection of the events that took place. This is why often the person selected for taking the minutes is not a major contributor to the meeting. In some cases, as with board meetings, taking the minutes is the minute taker's sole responsibility during the meeting.

Minutes also record if a task has been assigned to a specific person responsible for its completion. The deadline for the task should also be included in the minutes as well as any dependent activities required for the task's achievement. The minutes will frequently contain a review and update on past actions, which is typically detailed on the meeting's agenda.

KEY POINTS

- ✔ Meeting minutes are a summarized written record of a meeting which detail what has been decided and by whom it is to be actioned.
- ✔ In certain circumstances, minutes may be considered as legal documents, but even where this is not the case they represent the definitive record of the meeting.
- ✔ Often the person selected to take the minutes has this task as their sole responsibility during the meeting.

Essential Elements of Meeting Minutes

For minutes to be an accurate reflection of what took place during a meeting there are certain elements that must be included in the electronic or written document.

Many organizations use a standard template or have their own special format for keeping minutes. The order of the parts may vary but would typically include:

Heading

The name of the team or committee and the date, as well as the location, and time of the meeting.

Attendees

Must include the names of all those who came to the meeting, those who sent their apologies because they were unable to attend, and those who require copies of the minutes.

Approval of previous minutes

This is often the first heading below the housekeeping-type items so that it can be easily identified. Notes in this section will detail whether the minutes of the previous meeting were approved, what if any corrections were required, and list any outstanding actions and responsibilities.

Any individual who is unable to attend the meeting but has outstanding actions to be addressed from previous minutes is under an obligation to ensure either the Chair of the meeting or the minute taker is given an update on their action. This will ensure the smooth running of the meeting, as all appropriate information is available.

Action items

These items requiring action will include any unfinished business from the previous meeting as well as all current and new ones that now require attention.

The minutes will provide a report on each topic discussed at the meeting. For each item, note the subject of the discussion, the name of the person who led the discussion, and any decisions that may have been reached. Names of other individuals, third parties, or organizations will also be included where it adds clarity to the item.

Individuals who are unable to attend a particular meeting have an obligation to inform the Chair or minute taker of any progress they have made on their own actions.

Announcements

This section of the minutes reports on any announcements made by participants or those who sent their apologies, including proposed agenda items for the next meeting.

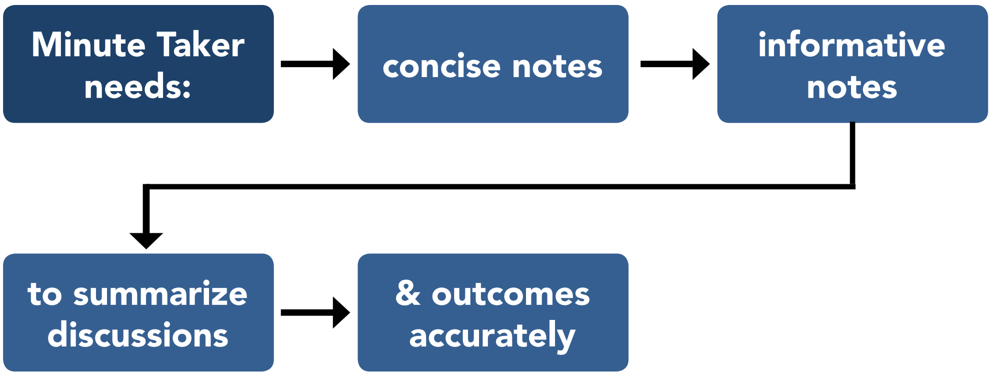
Next meeting

A note on where and when the next meeting will be held.

Signature line

The name of the person who prepared the minutes and the date they were submitted and agreed. Some organizations require more than one signatory for minutes of a legal nature, i.e. board meeting minutes.

A key area of consideration for the individual that is responsible for taking the minutes of the meeting is to keep the notes concise and informative so that they summarize the discussion and outcomes that took place.



Some organizations have a prescribed outline of who is supposed to receive the minutes and a timeframe for when minutes must be circulated following a meeting. The nature and length of how long the minutes are supposed to be maintained on record will be unique to your organization.

The minutes also perform another function in that they assist the person responsible for producing the agenda, often the Chair, when finalizing the next meeting's agenda and help in allocating sufficient time to each agenda item to ensure a thorough discussion can take place. If any critical issues have been highlighted or outstanding actions are becoming a bottleneck for a project's progress these may need to be separate items on the agenda depending on their importance.

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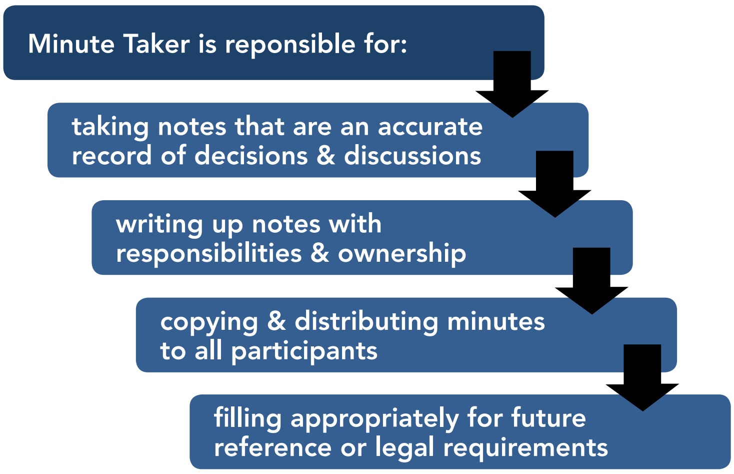
KEY POINTS

- ✔ Meeting minutes typically include: the name of the team or committee and the date, location, and time of the meeting as well as a list of the attendees.
- ✔ For each item on the agenda, the name of the person who led the discussion as well as any decisions that may have been reached should be recorded.
- ✔ Minutes are circulated with sufficient time for updates and reports to be provided to the meeting.
- ✔ Minutes provide key pointers for organizing the next meeting's agenda and help in making the decision whether or not critical issues or outstanding actions need to be a specific item on the agenda.

Responsibilities of a Minute Taker

The role of minute taker is not confined to that of just of attending the meeting. The individual performing this role has certain responsibilities that must be met to ensure that communications are efficient and timely.



The basic tasks for the minute taker are:

- Taking rough notes that accurately reflect the decisions and discussion that took place during the meeting.

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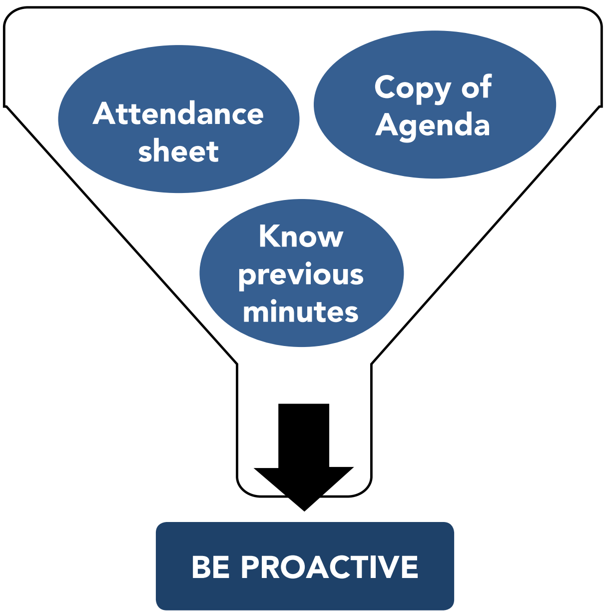
- Writing up these notes in an agreed format (whether electronically or in hard copy) so that information can be easily discerned and communications are clear, thus avoiding any confusion. Responsibilities and ownership must be clearly indicated within the minutes.
- Copying and distributing the minutes to all relevant people as detailed in the Participants section.
- Ensuring that a copy is filed appropriately, keeping all minutes together in a file for future reference.

One of the most difficult things about taking minutes is knowing what is most pertinent to make a note of and which information is superfluous and should be left out, as it is only noise required to help aid in the final decision. It is key that you concentrate on WHAT has been decided and WHO is going to do it. In certain circumstances it may be relevant to précis the reasons behind why a decision has been made. These are the most important things to have records of.

The level of detail required can often be gauged by looking at previous minutes of meetings. If this is a new meeting then what to include or exclude should be judged by how important the fact or message itself is in terms of communication to ensure your successful completion of the task or project.



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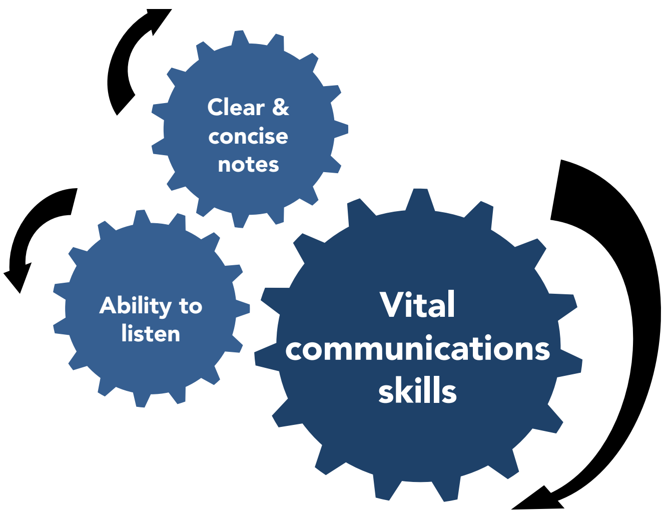
Be proactive

There are certain steps you can take to ensure that your task as minute taker portrays you in the most professional way.

1. Ensure that you have a copy of the agenda, which you can use to help structure each section of the minutes and enables you to follow the thread of the meeting as you make your notes. It is essential that the agenda is produced in advance of the meeting so that you have the opportunity to read it carefully and discuss any issues with the Chair prior to the event.
2. Make up an attendance sheet in advance based on the Participants section. You can then identify anyone unable to attend, and pass the sheet around for people to sign as everyone settles down for the meeting so that no one is distracted during the event. This enables you to have an accurate list of those who actually came to the meeting. This is especially useful if you are responsible for the minutes at a meeting where you are unfamiliar with the attendees.
3. Ensure that you are familiar with and take the file of previous minutes with you so that if there is a need to refer back for information you can locate it easily. You will also be able to provide the answer to any questions that arise about decisions made during previous meetings.

How to Take Meeting Minutes

There are two crucial communication skills you require to ensure that your minute taking is an accurate reflection of what took place during a meeting. These are the ability to listen, and the ability to take clear and concise notes.



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By proficiently performing both of these skills you will be able to accurately communicate the decisions made at the meeting to everyone involved.

Active Listening

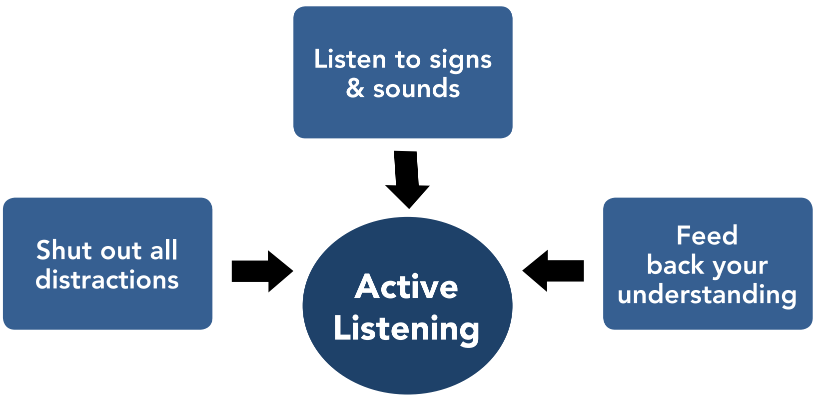
Your ability to really listen to those who are talking to you is a skill you can enhance. Developing your ability in this way will help you to gain greater levels of information and further your understanding of the topic under discussion.

Many research projects have shown that we only retain between 25 and 50 percent of what we hear. If you look at this in terms of your average thirty-minute meeting you will be attentive and listen to less than half of it. You will not hear, or appreciate, the nature of the message the speaker wants to communicate.

This level of listening is not going to enable you to make sufficient notes to produce accurate minutes, as you will not be able to truly understand the speaker's communication. You can overcome this by changing your behavior to that of an active listener.

Your behavior needs to demonstrate three key aspects to the speaker:

1. You are paying attention to the conversation.
2. You are actively showing that you are listening to them.
3. You demonstrate your understanding of their message through feedback.



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Show Your Attention

You will achieve this by ensuring that you shut out all distractions, including boredom, from your mind and give 100% of your attention to the speaker's words, tone, and meaning. You must not let yourself think about your response or reaction to the nature of the conversation; this must only be considered once the speaker has finished. This enables you to be more accurate in the notes you make.

By waiting until the end of the message you will have a greater understanding of the communication and therefore your resulting response will be more persuasive.

Demonstrate You Are Listening

You will be able to demonstrate this to your speaker by the position you adopt. During the meeting where possible you need to be facing them and maintain eye contact. You should also nod your head, raise your eyebrow, or smile to indicate that they still have your attention.

Outside of a meeting situation if you are talking to a person you can utter verbal confirmation that you are still listening by saying such things as, 'Um,' 'Uh huh,' 'Yes,' or 'No,' whatever is most appropriate.

Display Your Understanding

The best way to show that you have understood and appreciated what the speaker has said is by feeding this back through the technique of paraphrasing. For example, 'Do you mean …… is the key issue?,' 'Can I clarify that you meant …..?,' 'If I summarize what you've just said as …. is that accurate?'

These are skills you can develop in all your conversations so you will have plenty of opportunity to become an active listener.

Writing Notes

The rough notes provide the backbone of your minutes and need to be a true description of discussions that took place. Your notes need to be clear and informative enough for you to make sense of them when you come to write them up!

Written Skills	**Clear Language**
Accurate Reporting	**Assessed by Management**

Your ability and skill at communicating with the written word will be reflected in the accuracy and clarity of language you use to express what was said during the meeting. Many of your peers and seniors will receive the minutes and judge you on their quality.

There are certain steps you can take to ensure your communication skills are perceived in the best manner. Try following these general guidelines:

- Use a front page to contain the major headings required which will be easy to record. For example;
    - Meeting name and title, date, time, and place.
    - A 'Yes / No' to circle under the heading of 'Approval of previous minutes.' Leave several lines for outstanding items to be listed and details of critical issues to be written down.
    - A heading for 'Announcements'
    - A heading for the date, time, and location of the 'Next Meeting.' Ensure you have a diary with you to avoid any confusion over dates and have an awareness of the traveling times involved if the meeting moves to another location.

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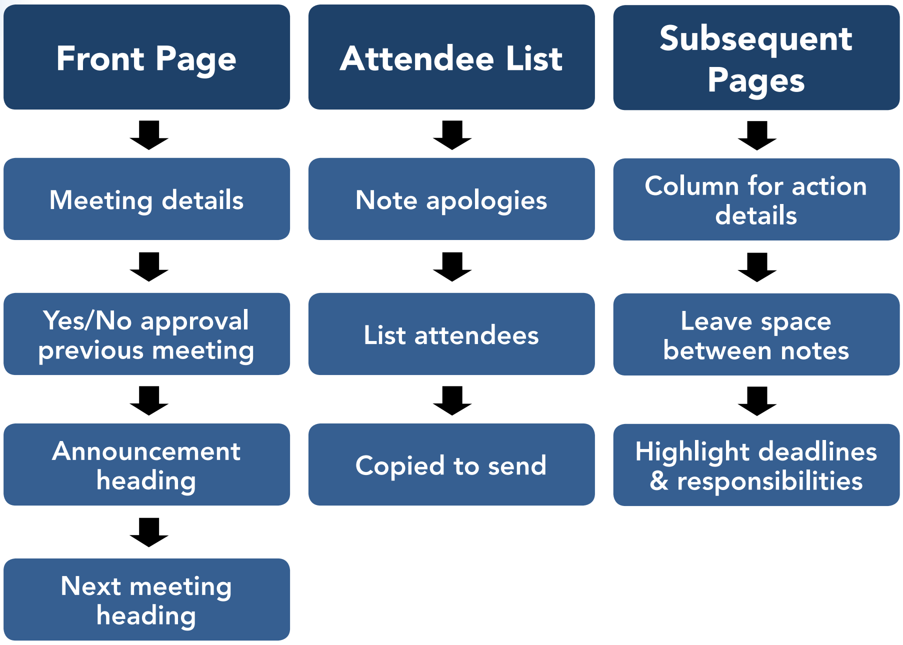


- Have your list of attendees ready to pass round with non-attendees already marked up.
- In all subsequent pages divide the page so you have a narrow column down the right-hand side for recording who is responsible or accountable for the action. You may want to use a separate column for recording timescales against each action.
- As you take notes always underline or highlight the heading for each separate item.
- Leave a few lines between each item, so you have room to add other points if the discussion comes back to a particular item later in the meeting.
- Underline or highlight decisions on who has agreed to do what and by when.

The most important thing is to write the minutes up in a timely fashion. You should allocate some time either immediately after the meeting or the next day to perform this task. Others are relying on you to send these minutes out and they will act as a reminder for those who have actions that need to be completed before the next meeting.

Don't put the job off for weeks—it makes a huge difference if the meeting is still fresh in your mind and others are relying on you to provide them with an accurate communication from the meeting.

Solutions to Potential Problems

For the person taking the minutes all meetings present the same basic problems. They can be summarized as:

- Deciphering what is an important fact from all the noise.
- Difficulty in making a contribution to the meeting.
- The need to be forewarned or aware of potential issues or problems that could arise during the meeting.

Minutes are not a transcript of the discussions that took place at a meeting; they are a summation of the key and important facts that need to be communicated to all necessary parties. But as with any group discussion the conversation does not follow a simple path and it is difficult to know exactly what *has* been agreed.

Problems Minute Takers face:

Separating the real facts from the noise of the discussions	Being able to make a real contribution to the meeting whilst taking notes	Anticipating potential issues or problems that may arise

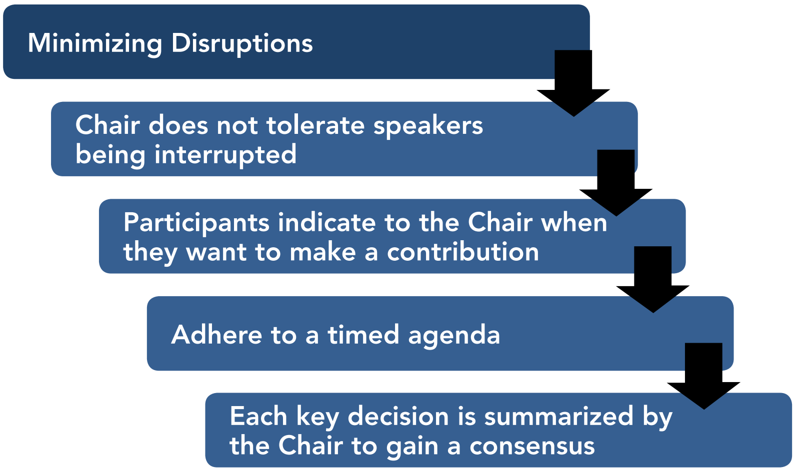
Many participants do not stick to the main point of discussion. They will introduce issues of their own that they feel should also be talked about, thereby distracting the focus of the meeting away from the main discussion point.

Often you will find several discussions going on at the same time and you have no idea, which one is the one you should be following, or the discussion jumps from one item to another before any of them are finished.

The likely result is that many suggested solutions are being put forward but no agreement is being attained for any of them.

Your active listening skills will be put to the test fully when you are trying to identify the key facts during a long, confusing discussion. There is so much being introduced to the conversation that it is difficult to know what is pertinent to note down.

Many of the solutions to these types of distractions are outside your remit, as controlling the meeting is the responsibility of the Chair. This is why as minute taker your relationship with the Chair is extremely important. 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 if the rules governing behavior in the meeting are clearly stated and the Chair gains the cooperation of everyone at the meeting. Discussing and agreeing some guidelines between you will help run your meetings effectively and allow key facts to be clearly minuted.

Examples of guidelines might be:

- Not allowing speakers to be interrupted.
- Participants clearly indicating that they want to speak to the chair, by raising a pen or hand.
- Keeping to the agenda item under discussion.
- The Chair summarizing the main decision points to gain agreement from all participants.

If the situation is such that you feel unclear as to how best to summarize a discussion that is getting out of control or diverting from the agenda you can ask for clarity in a number of ways. Ask the Chair to clarify the final decision.

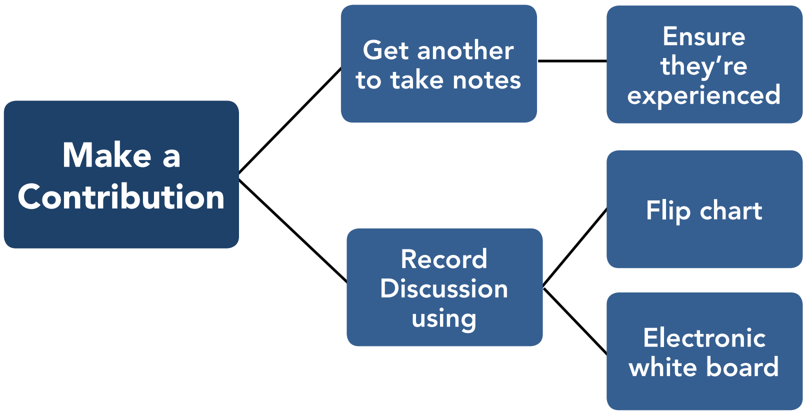
You may ask the meeting to agree to what you are proposing to write in the minutes. For example; 'So the meeting wants it minuted that ....' This is a useful technique to use especially if it is a particularly important or controversial decision.

If the arguments are contradictory or confusing you may want to ask the Chair if you can use a flip chart or electronic white board to visually gain consensus for and assist in making a decision. You can then use this material to support you when writing up your notes.

Often the use of visual or electronic aids can help to focus all participants' attention on the salient points of each argument and hasten the decision-making process. You may find that your Chair asks you to take on this role to assist in the smooth and timely running of the meeting.

Your other potential problem if you are minute taking is how to change your role to a participant when you have something of worth to contribute to the discussion. This is especially true when you have been very involved in a particular issue and have a valid contribution to make, but find yourself drawn into the discussion rather than thinking of what facts need to be minuted.

As the minute taker you are limited as to how much you can participate in the meeting—it goes with the job. If there is an item in which you have been centrally involved and about which you have a lot to say, think about asking someone else experienced to take minutes just for that item. Or you could choose to use a flip chart or electronic white board to make notes whilst you are involved with the discussion.



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Prior to the meeting ensure that you have read through the previous minutes and have highlighted any key areas where issues could arise. Try to identify any problem areas that remain unresolved and make sure that your concerns are brought to the attention of the Chair. Discuss the agenda with the Chair before the meeting—the clearer you are about the nature and content of the meeting, the easier it is to minute it.

Finally, where possible agree with the Chair that they will read through your minutes as a finally check before you circulate them, or that they will spare you a few minutes immediately following the meeting to verify your notes. It can be helpful to check through what you've written with someone else.

KEY POINTS

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

- ✔ Actively listen to the discussion.
- ✔ Don't try to write everything down.
- ✔ Concentrate on writing down what has been decided and who is responsible for getting it done.
- ✔ Give each item a separate heading.
- ✔ Write your rough notes up as soon as possible after the meeting.
- ✔ Liaise with the Chair to ensure the meeting runs smoothly and work with them to achieve the meeting's objective.

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Meeting Minutes Tools

Rather than flounder in uncertainty you can use our checklist below to help you produce professional minutes. You may prefer to review some of the many software tools designed to help you make the most of the meetings you have to attend or organize.

Meeting Minutes Checklist

When you have written up your minutes you can check that they are complete by asking yourself the following 10 questions:

1. When and where was the meeting?
2. Who attended?
3. Who did not attend? (Include this information if it matters.)
4. What topics were discussed?
5. What was decided?
6. What actions were agreed upon?
7. Who is to complete the actions, and by when?
8. Were materials distributed at the meeting? If so, are copies or a link available?
9. Is there anything special the reader of the minutes should know or do?
10. Is a follow-up meeting scheduled? If so, when (date and time) and where?

If you are looking for something more sophisticated than a simple checklist you can consider some of the electronic tools and software available. Some of these minutes tools are free, others are priced per user. You will have to select the one that best meets your or the organization's needs and provides the right combination of functionality and simplicity.

There are four popular tools described below and this should give you some idea of the range of functionality available.

1. **Microsoft OneNote—**www.microsoft.com/office/onenote/

   Originally part of the Microsoft Office suite, Microsoft OneNote is the most widely used tool for managing meeting minutes. Designed to facilitate free-form information gathering and multi-user collaboration, it supports images, including screen captures, as well as audio and video files. The free-form nature of the software means that pages can be arbitrarily large and there is no support for enforcing a uniform page layout or structure.

Its multi-user capability allows offline editing and later synchronization and merging at the paragraph level. This enables collaboration in workgroups whose members are not always online. OneNote also operates as a shared white board tool that allows more than one person to work on the same page at the same time.

OneNote is available for: Android, iOS (iPad, iPhone), Symbian, Windows XP/Vista/7/Mobile/Phone 7, and as the market leader it represents a safe bet for compatibility with future platforms and operating systems.

2. **Minutes.io—www.minutes.io**

   This web app owes its success to its simplicity. It is designed to allow you take meeting minutes online and then share them with others.

   Its simple interface consists of a few text fields for pertinent meeting information like attendees, location and agenda. Beneath that is an area for adding minutes, categorizing them (is it a to-do item, idea or comment?) and giving them an owner and a due date.

   The app is free and doesn't require you to register or log in. It saves your minutes locally in your browser and you can then publish them to a secret or private URL for sharing.

3. **LessMeeting—www.lessmeeting.com**

   LessMeeting is a web-based platform priced at around $100 per user per year. It allows the creation of a private meeting space for each meeting in which attendees can take collaborative notes, follow the agenda, and view meeting progress in real time. It also allows the assignment of action items to specific individuals with explicit due dates.

   Features include:

   - Meeting minute templates.
   - Intuitive note-taking interface.

- ○ Action item tracking built in.
- ○ Shareable across your teams.
- ○ Analytics to help you improve your meetings.

It integrates seamlessly with Microsoft Outlook and Google Apps, which make it an attractive proposition for organizations who already use these applications.

In addition, it provides Personalized Meeting Analytics, Team Accountability, and Organizational Reporting on some key matrices, which enable you to measure the effectiveness of your meetings.

4. **After the Meeting—www.afterthemeeting.com**

Priced at $12 per user per month, After the Meeting provides an easy, structured way to enter and view minutes, notes, next actions, and decisions made.

The web app has a deliberately lightweight structure that avoids clutter and complexity whilst offering easy access to centralized meeting notes.

KEY POINTS

- ✔ Software tools can help you make the most of the meetings you have to attend or organize.
- ✔ Choose one that integrates with your existing software as well as being established and supported.

Summary

There are three key areas to minute taking—before, during and after the event—that you need to ensure are working efficiently. The notes below offer a refresher of how you can most effectively perform the role of taking meeting minutes.

Don't forget to include the name of the organization, name of the committee, type of meeting (daily, weekly, monthly, annual, or special), and purpose of the meeting. Always proofread the minutes before submitting them.

Before the Meeting

- Choose to use our checklist or select a tool. Then you need to decide how you will take notes, i.e. pen and paper, laptop computer, or tape recorder.
- Make sure your tool of choice is in working order and have a backup just in case.
- Use the meeting agenda to formulate an outline.
- Produce your attendee list and check off those who have sent their apologies.
- Review previous meeting minutes to highlight any key areas of concern or potential issues.
- Where possible liaise with the Chair to agree the format of the meeting and what will be acceptable behavior.

During the Meeting

- Pass around an attendance sheet.
- Get a list of committee members and make sure you know who is who.
- Note the time the meeting begins.
- Confirm that the previous minutes were signed off and note any announcements made in connection with this item.
- Don't try to write down every single comment—actively listen to select the main ideas discussed, what decisions were agreed and those responsible for delivering these decisions.
- Write down motions, who made them, and the results of votes, if any.
- Make note of any motions to be voted on at future meetings.
- Record the date, time, and location of the next meeting, if appropriate.
- Note the ending time of the meeting.

After the Meeting

- You should type up the minutes as soon as possible after the meeting, while everything is still fresh in your mind.
- Remember to collect any flip chart notes made or save any electronic notes taken. These can be used to consolidate and clarify your own notes.
- In some cases, a meeting may be recorded and this recording will serve as the record, or it may be used to transcribe the information to the meeting minutes template at a later time.
- Where possible quickly review your notes with the Chair to ensure the accuracy of your information.

Once you have written up the minutes you can then distribute them to all participants in the knowledge that you have performed the role of minute taker in a professional manner.

Sample Minutes

Minutes of Merrydale Corporation meeting
Held on Tuesday, February 28, 2012, 11-1pm

Present at meeting

Mary Tyler (Chair), Jan Curtis (Treasurer), Andrew Brown (Secretary), Mavis Ashley, Tom Carter, Bill Forsyth, Ernie Grant, Doris Grant, Carol Parsons (Regional Managers).

Rob Price and Jeff Barnard from Debret Marketing Services.

Copies to be sent to

John Taylor (Regional Director), Jay Green (Operations Director)

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. User Group

The next User Group for the Northern regional is being held on Wednesday March 13 at the Adelphi Hotel, Newcastle, 10am–4pm. Mary Tyler and Jan Curtis said they would be attending.

4. Treasurer's Report

The Treasurer, Jan Curtis, reported that the third quarter profits were 10% above target at $456 million. The Debret campaign brought in an additional $50 million revenue and this is expected to grow as the roll out continues.

5. Arrangements for the AGM

The Secretary, Andrew Brown, reported that the Regency Hotel has been booked for May 8. Following the main conference and AGM there will be a formal meal and entertainment. Doris Grant and Carol Parsons confirmed that all the activities are on schedule for this event

ACTION: Next report from Doris & Carol will be at the March 15 meeting.

6. Corporate Sponsorship of Thorpe Park Concert

Tom Carter and Rob Price outlined the main objective of this sponsorship and how it would integrate into the current corporate mission. Rob Price is still awaiting confirmation of the main artist but is unable to name them at this point in time at the artist's request.

ACTION: Rob Price will confirm main artist of concert at next meeting.

Jeff Barnard said the auditions for local youth groups that will form the bulk of the entertainment at the concert are going well and has made significant progress in the local perception of the Corporation.

ACTION: Jeff Barnard will provide a complete list of the local youth groups by the end of April.

7. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting is on Wednesday, March 28, 2012, at Seattle offices.

Other Free Resources

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