



How to minute a meeting

TN97 Training Notes series: Structures

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Minutes of church business meetings cause much headache to some who are expected to write them. They too often turn into major projects. They may be distributed weeks after the meeting. Then someone will spot a comma out of place and say so next time.

These notes may not completely get rid of your committed comma-spotters, but they seek to give straightforward advice to all minute-takers to minimise other problems and to help produce a record of your meeting which is:

- accurate – so corrections at the next meeting become rare;
- clear – the right length and format to help everyone grasp all the main points;
- immediate – both for people's memories and actions agreed.

These notes assume your meeting does need minutes. Check first Training Notes TN45, *Are you sure it's minutes you need?*, in case another form of output would be more appropriate.

Five reasons for minutes

It's a good place to start. Exactly what are you trying to do when you write a set of minutes from your church council, diaconate, trustees meeting or whatever? You will not go far wrong if you are crystal-clear in your mind as to their purpose. Here's my list.

1 **All decisions need to be recorded**

The primary purpose of any set of minutes is **not** to describe what went on (please grasp this critical point – many people do not) but to record accurately what was decided. So if the meeting decided nothing ... yes, you get the idea!

2 **All actions need to be listed**

Along with the decisions, and just as important, is to list *who* now is responsible for doing *what* by *when* to ensure that those decisions are actioned in a timely way. Whoever chairs the meeting should ensure all this is agreed. If not the minute-taker should ask awkward questions.

3 **Some explanation may need to be given**

We are moving down the priority list now but it does help to have some *brief* summary of how the meeting arrived at its decisions – but not a description of who said what. You need just enough to help those who were not present and future members get the gist of what went on and to remind those who were there how you got to your end points. A 30-minute discussion can be cut to two or three sentences or bullet points.

4 **Some information may need to be included**

There may be some items which did not require a decision that it is still worth setting down: times of prayer, a welcome to newcomers, a report given purely for information, an agenda item that was not taken. This is all secondary to the above points but, when you put all the minutes in one year together, they should tell a coherent story.

5 **Key basics need to be stated**

There are some points that really need to be included to make the minutes a helpful, legal record and to avoid any confusion at a future date: the group's name as a heading, meeting place, date and time, those present. Keep this to a minimum. This forms the frame of the picture.

Keep those five in mind and you will have given yourself the right approach to your task.

Five skills to develop

From this it follows that the gifts you need to develop are:

1 **Good listening**

You also need to know the group members so that you understand points being made.

2 **Compact note-taking**

So that you can summarise what matters, accurately recording decisions.

3 **A precise writing style**

So that you can quickly produce a polished product afterwards.

4 **A keen mind**

So that you can spot and point out immediately what has been forgotten, such as who is to complete an action by when.

5 **Attention to detail**

And to context, in all the above.

Minute taking is not for anyone: it is a skill to be mastered and then passed on to others.

Five ways to prepare

Your output from the meeting will be greatly enhanced if you pay attention to what you need to do in preparation beforehand.

1 **Take a real interest in the group's work**

You need to understand the purpose of the group's work, something of the background to each item, and the individual members of the group by name and role. You will probably not be expected to take as full a part in the meeting as others, and you may even not be a member of the group and just present to take the minutes.

2 **Read the paperwork input thoroughly**

You will not understand the discussion or accurately record the decisions if you have not taken the trouble to study all the input documents with care, whether they are digital or hard copy. Ponder where any tricky points of the meeting may come and note where decisions and actions should be expected.

3 **Keep checklists**

It is important to keep your files in meticulous order and then to prepare checklists. One might be for what to take to the meeting (see point 5 below). Another, the required information for the eventual minutes: those present, date, time, space for signature, etc. Another, the names of the group members (with correct spelling) and their contact details. It's easy to forget something.

4 **Plan the meeting with the Chair**

It is wise to run through the agenda together. You may have information the Chair is unaware of, and they may have advice for you over decisions and actions.

5 **Ensure you bring all you need**

You will need your own papers/files, background reading, diaries, etc. You will need certain equipment: laptop or tablet, pens, etc. Some people will probably forget their papers so you may want to have spares with you, especially if you are the official Secretary. You are going to have to focus with great concentration for a couple of hours or more so make sure your seat is comfortable.

Five actions at the meeting

1 **Sit in an appropriate place**

Perhaps next to the Chair – with a table. You need to be able to see everyone, be able to take notes without difficulty and be comfortable. Choose your place with care.

2 **Keep an overview of each item**

Keep notes of what is being said, but try to note the shape of the discussion so you are noting views held in lists, rather than focusing on what is being said word by word.

3 **Take careful notes**

These may need to be more detailed than you think you need so you can summarise later. If you are writing them, make sure you write legibly for your own sake! Decisions

need to be accurately worded. If you are into modern tech you can use Evernote or similar.

4 **Check back decisions and actions for each item**

It is wise to read back decisions made and actions agreed so there is no disagreement about the actual wording at the next meeting. Add voting figures only when required. Watch out for what the Chair forgets about actions when rushing on to a new item.

5 **Ask for clarification whenever necessary**

If anything is not clear, ask immediately. Others will be grateful you did – and you have the excuse to do so for the sake of the minutes. This applies in particular to decisions made and actions to be taken.

Five top tips for production

1 **Type up the minutes as soon and as briefly as possible**

If you wait three or four days you will have forgotten the themes running through the discussion. It is also good to get the minutes checked by the Chair (and proofed by someone else) and then distributed within four or five days of the meeting if possible – within a week at the latest. Several actions will need to be applied quickly. Distribution might be by hard copy, email, Google Docs, Dropbox, etc.

2 **Aim for clarity, brevity and simplicity in what you say**

Here is a list of key points for your writing-style. Resist those who demand long minutes showing who said what!

- aim for less formality than would have been the case in the past: use Christian names and avoid stuffy language;
- write in the active not passive tense: “We agreed that ...” reads much better than “It was agreed that ...”;
- keep sentences short and language straightforward;
- use lists of bullet points rather than prose where this makes sense;
- list possible solutions and then, in more detail, the one agreed, rather than give a rambling account of a complex discussion;
- never use people’s names in the narrative as stating a view – others will demand their views be minuted too;
- in formal minutes you may, however, need to list names of proposers and seconders – and you will need to say who gave a report, etc.;
- keep your own views out of the minutes so avoid adjectives and adverbs where they load a statement in a certain way.

3 **Focus not on discussion but on decision**

Remember the purpose of each item, and the purpose of minutes in general. Keep what are called ‘narrative minutes’ (giving background explanation) to a minimum. Learn from the first three words of Acts 15:7 which probably summarised a very complex discussion and is a brilliant minute! The aim should be for the decision and actions to come across more than the discussion. Keep your minutes short!

4 **Word the decisions and actions with care**

If you checked the decision and action wording with those present in the meeting (see top of this page) there should be few problems. With actions, here are some possible ways of communicating them:

- leave them in the main text, highlighting names of people responsible in bold;
- have a separate 'Action' column to the right of the text for names;
- have a separate list of actions grouped by names at the end of the record.

Be careful about confidentiality.

5 **Make the minutes look good**

It is important that they look good if an official, legal record (once agreed and signed) designed to communicate well. So have wide margins, plenty of space between items, good headings and sub-headings in bold, an easy-to-understand referencing system, numbered or bulleted points, etc..

EXAMPLE

Here is an example of a 45-minute discussion and decision:

17:12 **New service times**

Based on the paper from the Worship Group (ref WG5), we discussed a range of options open to us with three ideas coming out as viable from the seven in the paper:

- leave everything as it is today;
- bring the early service forward by, say, half an hour;
- move the second service back by a similar amount of time.

We eventually agreed to start the second service half an hour later for an experimental period of three months from January and to review this at our March meeting. **Lois** agreed to explain this before this weekend to music group and service leaders not present, **Richard** would front a major notice this Sunday at all services and **Phyl** would ensure the website and weekly notices explained the reasons for the change.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN97. See also Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN45, *Are you sure it's minutes you need?*, TN61, *Mapping out a meeting*, TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?*, and TN141, *A church council 'Code of Conduct'*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN97 under Structures (with a link to Communication).

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