



Are you sure it's minutes you need?

TN45 Training Notes series: Structures

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Most people think that, if you have a meeting, someone needs to write up the minutes. Exactly what constitutes 'minutes' is not always clear; there seem to be rather different perspectives on the issue. But whatever the interpretation of the term, people feel that it's minutes they need.

These notes challenge that idea. Properly written minutes are exactly what is required in many situations, but by no means in all. They may be an inappropriate output for either that meeting or the people you are sending them to.

For example, if you want to tell your congregation about last week's Church Council meeting, reading out the minutes next Sunday is not the right way to go about it. Nor is posting them on a notice-board, as a number of churches do. Minutes are not designed for either of these uses.

Here are some reasons why any kind of meeting might need a written output in some form.

- A legal record is required in case anyone wants to challenge a decision.
- Those present need a reminder of what was decided and who is supposed to be doing what.
- Those not present but in the group need to be given a summary of what happened.
- A wider group needs to be kept in the picture.
- You need to tell a big-picture story over time of how this group developed or how it covered a major item of business.

Different forms of output can fulfil these roles in very different ways. Here are five possibilities which these notes will consider in turn: 'complete transcript', 'formal minutes', 'notes', 'report' and 'nothing at all'. The point is to check out which is best for your group (given the above list) and for the readership you have in mind.

1 Complete transcript

This is often known as the Hansard approach, the complete record of parliamentary discussions. You will rarely, if ever, need such a transcript, although sometimes it can be helpful to audio-record a meeting (but not to transcribe the recording) if contentious matters are under discussion and there are legal implications. Of course, just the knowledge that a complete transcript is being made can of itself affect the debate. Some people will not wish to speak if their every word is there for posterity.

The transcript of a Church Awayday Team meeting (CAT for short) might start like this, though the thought of bothering with this for a group like CAT seems odd...:

(Andy speaking) Good evening, everyone. Glad you've made it at such short notice following my thought and email to you all this morning that it's about time we met.....(and so on for 25 pages).

But although such an approach is rarely necessary, many secretaries edge too close to this end of my spectrum of outputs. So I turn now to what most people are used to and think they understand...

2 Formal minutes

Most reading this will be well used to these, although not so many will be used to a well-written set. The minutes form an official, legal record of proceedings and so need to be authorised by the group, and signed by the person chairing, at their next meeting. Good minutes will have a clear heading (name of group, date of meeting, a list of those present, etc.) and well laid-out text for each item with its own heading and, preferably, a reference number of some kind. They will often be confidential to group members.

The point of minutes is NOT to record what was *said* (as with the complete transcript), but what was *decided*. Many secretaries put too much in and this often causes problems. If the minutes record that Janice said X but fail to say that Josh said Y, Josh may well get upset. And if Janice's words are the writer's summary of what she actually said, they may well fail to give the exact nuance that she was trying to put across. Who would be a minutes secretary?

But all this trouble can be avoided if the minutes are shortened by simply listing the final decision (showing clearly who is to be responsible for action) and offering a brief idea of how the decision was reached without mentioning anyone's name. The only time a name should be mentioned is if there is a formal proposer and seconder, or if someone has officially and properly asked for their name to be recorded.

It may help to give a short list of main points argued for the motion followed by points against to summarise 15 minutes of discussion. This is enough to remind those present of the points and to give those who missed the meeting some idea of what was discussed. But err on the side of brevity, and so cut the time taken to prepare the written record.

Most minutes are also a tad too stuffy (so try 'We agreed ...' instead of 'It was resolved that...') Much, though, depends on the level of formality of the meeting.

Here is an extract from CAT's minutes of that evening (but do you really need this formality for this particular group?):

17: Lunch at the Awayday

Some felt that a 'bring and share' would be the easiest option but we remembered last year's disaster. Others recommended one particular external caterer but several were worried about the cost. After much discussion we agreed to buy in fish and chips from the shop next door. Action: Mavis.

The purpose of these Training Notes, however, is not to present advice on how to write minutes (that merits separate treatment – see TN97, *How to minute a meeting*), but to present alternatives. So here is one that may often be more appropriate...

3 Notes

'Notes' is the name I would give to a short summary of a meeting, usually written in note-form rather than prose, and in list- or bullet-point format. 'Notes' would therefore be shorter and less formal than 'minutes', but the most important point about them is that they do not seek to become a legal or official record of proceedings. They will therefore not be agreed and signed at the next meeting, although if members feel the notes are inaccurate it would be wise to sort this out (preferably in person or by email as soon as the notes are published).

Notes should have a heading just like minutes and should clearly record all decisions taken and names of those responsible for actions. Headings should show the business dealt with, but there will be little attempt to provide much narrative. It is a good practice to aim to keep them to no more than one side of A4 and to distribute them to everyone within 24 hours (or within one hour for a workplace meeting).

Notes therefore act as a reminder of business done, decisions made and actions agreed. There is no attempt to produce a literary masterpiece. This will be a perfectly adequate system of recording any informal meeting: weekly staff meeting, most action groups, team gatherings, etc. and can save hours of hassle.

The notes of the CAT meeting (probably the correct level of output for this group) might have said:

17: Lunch

Mavis to organise fish and chips for everyone from the take-away next door.

But, so far, this list is very business-like. What about a wider group who may need to know something of what happened at the meeting (because they prayed for it, for example) but who would be bored silly by much of what we have considered to date? Not many people realise that there is another output that is rather different in nature...

4 Report

Take a typical example: you want to tell the church what happened at last week's Church Council meeting, either in print in the weekly newsletter, or by oral presentation during the service. It needs to be short, punchy, informative and interesting. Complete transcript? Er, no. Formal minutes? Some actually try this (eg. the minutes posted on a notice-board), but no. Notes? Getting warmer, but still not right. So, Report!

Think of a TV or radio news-reader. That is the kind of effect to produce. You are after one or two headlines (wow!), not a record of the meeting including apologies for absence (yawn). You might even go over to a correspondent on the ground after each headline to fill it in with two sentences or so (no more).

The choice will depend on what is news-worthy: the decisions you took that affect people most. Depending on your church's culture you can make a report humorous or unusual (eg. get the drama group to enact it). Minutes this is not!

Few churches use this, but it could become a vital way of keeping your membership in touch with your decision-making bodies in a way that gets the key information across effectively.

A printed 'report' from CAT in the weekly newsletter might consist just of one item to create one 'headline', such as:

Another awayday!

The big news from last week's CAT meeting is that we agreed to hold another awayday this year. It will be on Saturday 20th June at Mudbeach Cove. And for those who remember only too clearly what happened to the bring and share lunch last time, the team agreed, to order fish and chips for everyone! Well, the group is not called CAT for nothing! Details to follow.

For more detail on this approach read Training Notes TN38, *We've got news for us!* and, in particular, the worked examples for print and interview there. The point is that a report is all about 'news' rather than 'legal record'.

But there is still one more possibility...

5 **Nothing at all**

Yes, this is a genuine option, provided it is the agreed option rather than the default one. A routine meeting to check diaries each week may not need any output in print at all. Just make sure that anyone not present is told exactly what went on.

So, are you producing the most appropriate form of output? If your Mission Action Group Secretary is spending a couple of hours producing nice minutes, would a one-side of A4 notes be more appropriate? And if your Leadership Team never report to the congregation, is this really healthy?

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN45. See also Article A5, *How to chair meetings*, plus Training Notes TN13, *A purpose statement for those who chair*, TN38, *We've got news for us!*, TN88, *Advice to a new committee member*, TN97, *How to minute a meeting*, TN118, *Why, exactly, are we meeting?*, and TN128, *Effective staff meetings*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN45 under Structures (with a link to Communication).

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