Taking great minutes

What are Minutes?

The term 'Minutes', describes the (usually) formal set of notes taken during a meeting that records who was present, the discussions held, the decisions made and future actions to be taken.

Minutes are important as they form a record of planning processes, timetables for action, decision-making and agreements. Everyone can be kept informed through the distribution of minutes. They can also be used as evidence of activity for project monitoring.

This fact sheet aims to provide good practice examples of ways your organisation or group can set up its minute-taking system, support the role of minute takers and plan more organised and effective meetings.

What does a Minute Taker do?

Minute takers attend meetings in order to produce summaries of what went on. These summaries (minutes) should be logical, to the point and reader-friendly. This does not necessarily mean that the meetings themselves are logical or the discussions are 'to the point' and easy to follow, which can make minute taking a demanding and difficult task.

It can be demanding and difficult because:

- the minute taker has to remain alert throughout the meeting. There's no room for falling asleep or letting the mind wander, no matter how boring the discussion is;
- attendees discuss issues of which the minute taker has no prior knowledge;
- attendees don't explain the meanings of specialist language, jargon or abbreviations with which the minute taker is unfamiliar;
- the discussions get heated, confusing and hard to follow;
- the Chair does not direct the meeting in a logical manner and/or follow the agenda.

Who takes the minutes?

For most organisations, the administrator will act as minute taker. Management Committees and Boards of trustees will have elected Secretaries who might have responsibility for taking minutes, but whatever the case, there needs to be someone responsible. That person should be able to:

- objectively record what took place not give their interpretation of events. Any emotional reactions during the meeting should not be recorded. The reader does not need to know how strongly an argument was put or whether someone responded angrily to a suggestion or whether someone was overjoyed to have gained recognition for completing a project;

- produce documents that are free from typographical and grammatical errors and proof-read (and agreed) before being distributed;
- archive minutes in a way that they are easily retrievable and able to be cross referenced with agendas and supporting documents such as reports;
- maintain the confidentiality of the discussions that took place in the meetings and (where appropriate), how, when and where documents are archived and accessed.

Preparing to take minutes

You can make the task easier by:

- Looking at copies of previous minutes to get a feel for the layout, language, amount of information recorded, how action points are recorded and the types of issues discussed.
- Making a note of the names of the people attending the meeting so you can 'put a name to the face' once in the meeting.
- Look at how attendees contributions are recorded. Is it by job title, full name, first name, or initials? Match the names to abbreviations where this form of recording is used. Watch out though, for people who share the same initials!
- Prepare a blank template that is similar to the minute format. This will help order your notes during the meeting.
- Sitting centrally in the meeting room so that all attendees can be seen and heard.
- Familiarise yourself with the agenda so that you can help the Chair keep the meeting on track.

It's not just the minute taker who can help the process. The way a meeting is chaired can make all the difference. The actions of a good Chair include:

- giving full introductions to the attendees (or getting them to introduce themselves);
- going through, confirming and following the order of items on the agenda;
- identifying Any Other Business (AOB) items at the start of the meeting;
- explaining any specialist language, jargon and/or abbreviations; and
- summarising the key points of the discussion at the end of each agenda item and agreeing any action points.

If the worst should happen the minute taker can always ask:

- for the point to be clarified
- how the contributor would like the point worded for the minutes.

So what should a set of minutes look like?

There are no set rules for laying out minutes or what you record in them. The aim should be to give an overview of what was discussed, the decisions made and what follow-up actions need to be taken. Most importantly, the minutes should be reader-friendly and easy to navigate around.

Example layout of a set of minutes:

Here's an example of some minutes with some notes explained in the key that follows.

Name of your organisation
Name of the meeting – Staff meeting, Coordinators' meeting, etc
Date and location
Time

Present: Jo Jones (JJ), Sunita Shandu (SS), Kiran Sahota (KS) and Karen Mitchel (KM).

Apologies: There were no apologies

Minutes of the last meeting: Agreed as accurate.

Matters Arising:
1. Awayday venue:
JJ reported that she had visited the New Woman Centre as a potential venue for the Awayday and would be reporting back to the Management Committee on her research for a final decision.

1. New Staff
Funding has been approved for the new disability project. A Project Manager will need to be recruited within the next two months.

ACTION: SS to draft a job description for approval at the next Management Committee meeting on 30 June 2007.

2. Awayday
The date for the staff Awayday has been agreed as 12th September 2007. All staff will attend and childcare arrangements will be made where appropriate. Staff with childcare needs should speak with KS by 20/08/2004.

ACTION: Deadline for agreeing childcare arrangements - Friday 20th August 2007. KS to coordinate.

3. AOB: There was no other business.

4. Date of the next meeting: 24/06/2007 at Any Women's Centre

Meeting closed: 3.55pm

Minutes agreed: _____

Notes

It is common to use people's initials in minutes when noting points made or actions to be done. Always list people's names in full in the attendance list so it is clear who you are refering to.

You should note that the previous minutes were agreed as accurate - and get them signed. Keep a hard copy of all minutes. If the minutes aren't accurate, you don't have to redo them, just write "The minutes were agreed with the following corrections...".

Sometimes issued raised at the previous meeting may also be on the agenda for this meeting. Whether you discuss and minute things in the matters arising section or in the main body of the meeting is down to the chair. Often a Chair will say "are there any matters arising not already on the agenda" for instance.

Make sure ACTION points are clear. You can either do this by changing the format of the text - making it bold or capitals, or by using an action column running down the right hand side of the page. Every time there is an action, put the person's initials in this column alongside the relevant text.

Very formal minutes indicate the time the meeting closed. However, this can also be helpful in less formal settings where you have to calculate the time spent on meetings as part of match funding or project monitoring.

Minutes for formal meetings, such as Trustee or Board meetings, have to be signed by the Chair as a true record and a copy kept for future reference.

Readability

The 'readability' of the document is vital. It is entirely up to the organisation / group how much or how little detail is recorded in their minutes. However, in terms of good practice, minutes should:

1. Follow a set format:
   - indicate the date, time and venue of the meeting and what type of meeting it was i.e. staff meeting, sub-group meeting, etc. This will assist with the filing, archiving and accessibility of the documents;
   - use indents, underlining and/or bold to separate sections but don't make it too fussy;
   - number each agenda item (this may or may not include the 'Minutes of the last meeting' and 'Matters Arising' sections);
   - record the meeting in the order of the agenda even if items were swapped. If a topic was discussed periodically throughout the meeting then all the points related to the agenda item should be recorded in the same place;
   - show the time the meeting ended (optional).

2. Be free from jargon and/or abbreviations and certainly not record any inappropriate or offensive language used in the meeting.

3. Fully record all agreed action points with the name of the person responsible for carrying out the activity.

Plain text or bullets?

The way the information is presented is up to you. Whichever you prefer, a high readability level should be the aim. You should still use plain language and complete sentences, especially with bullet points. Here you are condensing the information in terms of how much detail you give – not writing shorthand. The use of bullet points is not an excuse for poor grammar!

Plain text example from the minutes above:

3. New Staff

Funding has been approved for the new disability project. A Project Manager will need to be recruited within the next two months.

ACTION: SS to draft a job description for approval at the next Management Committee meeting on 30 June 2007.

4. Awayday

The date for the staff Awayday has been agreed as 12th September 2007. All staff will attend and childcare arrangements will be made where appropriate. Staff with childcare needs should speak with KS by 20/08/2004.

ACTION: Deadline for agreeing childcare arrangements - Friday 20th August 2007. KS to coordinate.

Which would look like this with bullet points:

3. New Staff

Funding has been approved for the new disability project.

A Project Manager will need to be recruited within the next two months.

ACTION: SS to draft a job description for approval at the next Management Committee meeting on 30 June 2007.

4. Awayday

The date for the staff Awayday has been agreed as 12th September 2007.

All staff will attend and childcare arrangements will be made where appropriate.

Staff with childcare needs should speak with KS by 20/08/2004.

ACTION: Deadline for agreeing childcare arrangements - Friday 20th August 2007. KS to coordinate.

A is for ACTION Notes:

Action Notes are a very simplified way of recording what went on in a meeting and can often supplement a set of minutes by summarising all the action points together at the end of the minutes. Action notes will not give you any of the discussion or the reason why decisions were taken, they only record:

- what was decided;

- action to be taken;
- who will take the action; and
- when the action must be completed by.

Example:

Decision	Action	Who	Deadline
Project Manager to be appointed	Job description to be drafted for MC sign-off	SS	30 June 2007
Childcare will be available for Staff Awayday	Childcare arrangements to be made	KS	20 August 2007

These Action Notes can be useful summaries at the end of minutes - people will know exactly what action points they need to follow up and complete by when.

Finally...write up, proof read, get signed-off and distribute minutes as soon as possible after the meeting. Remember, if people have 'actions' they'll need the reminder and the time to carry them out!

Resources

There are several organisations that offer training in taking effective minutes: WRC cannot endorse any in particular. The Directory of Social Change runs a course on taking minutes so those based in London may wish to start there. Remember, when sourcing training on any subject, ask your colleagues or those from other organisations for recommendations. If you can't find anything through recommendation, an internet search is the place to start. Always ask if the training provider if they do a charity discount.