

Mina's Guide to Minute Taking

Principles, Standards & Practical Tools

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Introduction

Minute Taking can be complex, tricky and challenging. Minute takers are often expected to produce concise and coherent summaries out of chaotic and disorganized meetings. Many are directed to take minutes without documented guidelines on what to record and what to leave out, and without a prior explanation of issues and technical terms used at a meeting. Sometimes they require a rare combination of diplomacy and fortitude, to deal effectively with demands to record inappropriate details in the minutes.

Minutes of meetings are important documents, for recording consensus and decision-making, and for tracking the evolution of issues and the history of an organization. This book offers principles, standards and practical tools to help reduce anxiety about minute taking and establish clarity on what to record. It also explains how minute takers can build rapport with their groups and generate respect for their work.

Specific questions this book will address:

- ▶ How much of the discussion should be recorded, and how can arguments about minutes be avoided? Learn to shift the focus of minutes from words to key concepts and ideas, and find out how to convert discussions into concise, coherent and objective summaries.
- ▶ How much procedural detail should be recorded in minutes of formal meetings? Find out how motions, amendments and other formal procedures should be recorded. Learn which procedural details are significant and which are extraneous.
- ▶ How much detail should be recorded in minutes of closed meetings? Learn to balance the need for transparency and access to information with the occasional need for confidentiality. Find out how to organize agendas of open and closed meetings, to preserve confidentiality.
- ▶ Who should tell the minute taker what to record? Learn to formalize a policy on minute taking standards, so the minute taker will take guidance from the group as a whole, and not from individual members.

Chapter

1

Definitions and Key Principles

In this chapter:

- What minutes are
 - Why minutes are important
 - When minutes are required
 - Who should take minutes
 - Ten key principles for minute taking
 - Ineffective versus effective practices
 - Analysis of poorly recorded minutes
-

What Minutes are

In a formal sense, minutes are the historical record of an officially convened meeting of an organized decision-making body, such as a board of directors, municipal council, or executive committee. Informally, the term *minutes* can extend to mean a summary of a meeting of a group that is not formally organized, and may or may not have collective decision-making powers. Minutes should generally focus on decisions and actions taken by the group, and may also capture the thought process that led to decisions.

Why Minutes are Important

- ▶ Minutes enable an organization to meet its obligation to conduct business in a transparent and accountable manner. They keep the organization's membership, stakeholders, or the general public informed on the evolution of decisions that affect them.

Minutes should also be taken in the following settings (even if not specifically required):

- ▶ Informal staff meetings. Here, minutes are summaries of discussions, consensus, and follow-up actions. Such summaries enable the group to monitor and track progress of initiatives or projects.
- ▶ Planning, teambuilding and problem-solving sessions. Here, minutes are summaries of discussions and consensus. Without concise and complete summaries, the benefits of such sessions and the opportunity for organized follow-up activities are diminished.
- ▶ Negotiations or bargaining sessions. Here, agreements reached should be recorded, but it is not usually necessary to record discussion details.

Minutes are not needed in settings where they are not required and would provide no value. For example:

- ▶ An informal gathering of colleagues
- ▶ An ad-hoc staff meeting for the sole purpose of presenting an update (unless there is a need to inform absent members of what was reported)

Who Should Take Minutes

The minute taker should be chosen with care. The selected individual should have the required skills, and at least a basic knowledge of the group's mandate and issues (see Chapter 7 for tips on boosting the minute taker's knowledge and skills).

Options for choosing the minute taker:

- ▶ The organization may designate a *secretary*, *recording secretary*, *executive assistant*, or *administrative assistant* to take minutes for a group on a regular basis.
- ▶ The individual holding the title of *corporate secretary*, *executive secretary*, or *secretary-treasurer* may be responsible for the minutes, but usually delegates the minute taking task to a staff member or an outside professional.
- ▶ In closed meetings, where some or all outsiders are excluded, a board or council may designate one of its members to take minutes, or it may delegate the task to a *confidential secretary* (who may be required to sign an oath of confidentiality).

5. **Objectivity:** Minutes should be free of offensive or inappropriate language, even if such language was used at a meeting. They should not include subjective interpretations of the mood of the meeting or the tone in which comments were made. Phrases like "*There was a heated discussion,*" "*The presentation was very motivational,*" or "*Mr. Davenport was emphatic*" do not belong in minutes. The document should be clean and objective.
6. **Consistency:** Minutes across the same organization should share the same general look and style, and should comply with content and format standards. Such standards should be approved as a policy of the organization (see Chapter 2).
7. **Professionalism:** Minutes should be reviewed thoroughly, and be free of typographical, grammatical or technical errors. A knowledgeable person should proofread technical terms for clarity, before draft minutes are circulated to members.
8. **Readability:** Minutes should be clearly laid out, visually appealing, and easy to read. Long paragraphs should be replaced by concise point-form summaries. Word processing features (bolding, underlining, etc.) should be used to highlight key points and decisions.
9. **A logical flow:** Minutes should be logically organized, even if the meeting itself was fragmented and confusing. If the group addresses an agenda item sporadically throughout the meeting, all events that relate to the same item should be grouped in one place.
10. **Archivability:** Minutes should be easy to archive and retrieve electronically. Standardized names of computer files should be used across the organization. Consistent word strings should be used, wherever possible, for ease of electronic searches. The naming of electronic files should make it easy to link minutes, agendas and reports. The coding of decisions and motions should make it easy to track their history.