



Meetings and minutes

Handbook

Department of Defence

plan • think • write • review

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Meetings and minutes

Introduction

Minutes are the written record of a meeting. They record discussion, decisions and calls to action made at the meeting, and they also inform people who didn't attend about what happened.

This guide will help you write the minutes of meetings. It does not cover how to organise or conduct a meeting, but it will improve your ability to produce minutes that support action and accountability. The key points to remember when writing minutes are:

- Minutes are an essential part of a meeting. If it is worth having a meeting, it is worth taking minutes.
- There is no single format for the minutes of a meeting. Formats and level of detail should be chosen to suit the nature of the meeting.
- Regardless of format, minutes should clearly describe what was decided, what is to be done and who is responsible for doing it.

Preparation

The person taking minutes at a meeting is called the secretary. Anyone attending the meeting may be asked to be the secretary.

If you are the secretary, prepare for the meeting by doing the following:

- Get the agenda (you might also be responsible for preparing the agenda).
- Check attendees and get their names and appointments right.
- Speak to the chair to confirm the purpose of the meeting and how they want the minutes prepared.
- Take a spare pen and plenty of paper!

General points

All the normal requirements for writing a document apply to minutes:

- **Plan – think – write – review.** Minutes are almost never a simple transcript of what was said at the meeting. You should plan your document and think about what needs to be said before you write the minutes.
- **Purpose.** Check with the chair about the purpose of the minutes. Will they be comprehensive or a short version capturing key outcomes? Knowing the purpose will guide the level of detail you need to record.
- **Key messages.** The key messages of an agenda item might be buried in a long discussion. Good minutes get to the point.
- **Call to action.** Your minutes must record decisions and directed actions. Check with the chair if you're not sure what these decisions and actions are. **Do this during the meeting.**
- **Plain English.** We don't talk the way we write. Discussions at a meeting might ramble on or use language that only made sense if you were in the meeting room. Unless your minutes are for a very high-level meeting, you should paraphrase speakers and use plain English.

Agendas

An agenda outlines the items to be discussed at a meeting. It may also detail the order of that discussion and who will lead the discussion. There is no single format for an agenda, but the standard sections are:

- opening
- purpose
- previous minutes
- reports
- business items (or new business)
- other items
- close.

Agendas may also have supplementary material that supports agenda items. These might be papers, briefs or reports. They are listed at the end of the agenda, and are sent to attendees with the agenda.

Content of minutes

The key messages in the minutes of a meeting are what was said, who said it, and what actions were agreed. Simple meetings might be a 'lap around the table' in which case, your minutes need only contain a summary of the issues discussed at the meeting and any decisions and actions.

Longer meetings need more structure. For these meetings, the most common headings in minutes (and agendas) are the following.

Attendees

The chair of the meeting is listed first. The secretary is listed last. All other attendees are listed in order of seniority by their initials and last name. Military attendees have their rank included.

Observers and other non-core attendees may be listed separately after the secretary.

Under the heading 'apologies', list the names of anyone who notified you they could not attend, or whose apology was presented at the meeting by someone else.

Opening

Write down the time the chair declared the meeting open, and any welcoming remarks made by the chair.

Previous minutes

If the meeting is part of a series of meetings, the next agenda item is usually to confirm the accuracy of the minutes of the previous meeting. Write down any changes directed by the chair and write down who proposed and seconded accepting the minutes.

The chair will then lead discussion about any actions arising from the minutes of the previous meeting. Write down the key discussion points and actions as for any other agenda item.



Take spare copies of the minutes from the previous meeting with you.

Reports and business items

Reports and business items may be grouped together on the agenda, or they may be separate agenda items. Reports are where attendees brief the meeting on their area of responsibility. Not every meeting has reports as an agenda item, and not every attendee has to make a report.

Business items are often the main part of a meeting. This agenda item is sometimes called 'new business'.

For both reports and business items, you should write down discussion points and directed actions for each agenda item in the order they are discussed. Use the discussion order even if the chair deviates from the order of business items in the agenda.

There are up to four parts to a report or business item that you should write up in the minutes:

- Write a brief description of the subject. This might be the same heading used in the agenda.
- Write a summary of the discussion. You can use sentences or dot points to capture the discussion, but don't try to write down a word for word transcript. The discussion can be summarised in the order it occurs, or in any other order that will make sense to the reader.
- Write down a short conclusion of the item or write down the decision taken by the meeting.
- Write down any actions directed by the chair (see below for more detail about recording actions).

Closure

The last agenda item is closure of the meeting, where you write down the chair's closing remarks. This includes the time and date for the next meeting (if relevant).

In short meetings, the chair may use their closing remarks to summarise decisions and actions.

Signatures

The chair and secretary normally co-sign the minutes after they have been reviewed by attendees. For some meetings it is only the chair who signs the minutes.

Notetaking

It is not necessary to audio record a meeting in order to write good minutes. Audio recordings should only be used for high level meetings where word for word transcripts will be produced.

For most meetings it is enough for the secretary to take notes. These notes should concentrate on important points and actions. You should not attempt to write down every word that is said.



*If the discussion was long and complex,
ask the person who tabled the agenda item for a copy of their notes.*

Decisions and actions

Decisions and actions arising from a meeting must be accurately captured. This includes the name/appointment of the person tasked, a description of the required action, and details of when the action is to be completed.

If a decision was made by voting on an issue, the minutes should record who proposed the issue for decision, who seconded the issue, and the result of the vote.

Actions may be written as the last part of each business item or they may be written as a separate table in an attachment to the minutes. Ask the chair for their preference.



*Check with the chair **during the meeting** if you are not sure what action was agreed.
Ask them to summarise the action in words that will be easy to write.*

Reviewing minutes

It is good practice for all attendees to review the minutes before they go to the chair for their review/signature, but this isn't always possible. Check with the chair about how they want the draft minutes to be reviewed.

During the review, attendees may ask you to replace your choice of words with their own, even if this isn't exactly what they said during the meeting. For low-level meetings this is acceptable provided the essential messages, decisions and actions don't change. Ask the chair if you are not sure how flexible you should be with these changes.

Formats and style

The ADF Writing Manual provides a suggested format for minutes, but you may use any format that complies with Defence style conventions and that meets the needs of the chair. The suggested format in attachment A is from the ADF Writing Manual, but many minutes use much simpler formats.

Agendas and minutes have the same peripheral items of other workplace documents. These include file references, protective markings, address groups and signature blocks.

Level of detail

The minutes should contain enough detail so that someone who was not at the meeting could understand the reasons for decisions and actions taken at the meeting. Minutes should be self-contained—readers should not need to refer to other documents to understand the minutes.

Don't record a discussion as if it were a simple conversation. It is more important to capture the key messages, decisions and actions. For example:

avoid

'A said ... B replied ... then C pointed out ...'

prefer

'the meeting discussed ... and agreed to ...'

You should, however, record individual appointments to capture critical points made by a speaker, especially if they disagree with the wider meeting. For example:

'the Director of People Policy noted several problems with the project, but the meeting agreed to recommend extra project funding be approved by the delegate.'

Many minutes use a shortened format. This records the business item, decisions and actions. The discussion is kept very short or left out completely. Ask the chair if they prefer shortened minutes.

You may attach annexes and enclosures to the minutes, but as with attachments to any document, these are not always read. The minutes should make sense to the reader without them having to read the attachments.

Conclusion

Good minutes support action and accountability. They are official documents and will be easier to write if you think about purpose, key messages and calls to action in the same way you would for any other document. In particular:

- Confirm the purpose of the meeting and of the minutes with the chair before you start writing.
- Don't try to record everything which is said during the meeting. Focus on key messages, decisions and actions.
- If you don't understand something said during the meeting, get clarification before the meeting moves on. Ask the speaker to re-state their point or ask the chair to clarify what they would like recorded in the minutes.

Attachment:

Suggested format for minutes of a meeting (taken from ADF Writing manual)

MINUTES OF A MEETING: FORMAT AND LAYOUT NOTES

PROTECTIVE MARKING(S)¹

Page 1 of ...²

Copy ... of ...³

Committee or file reference

See distribution⁴

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF [COMMITTEE],
ON [SUBJECT],
HELD AT [LOCATION] ON [DATE]

Attendees:⁵

<Rank/title> <Initials> <Family name> <Position/Appointment>Chairperson⁶

.....
.....
.....
.....

Meeting secretary

Apologies:

<Rank/Title> <Initials> <Family name> <Position/appointment>

.....

ITEM 1: OPENING

1. Opening of the meeting and introductory remarks by the chairperson, which might include welcomes, introductions and guidance on how the meeting is intended to be run.

2.

ITEM 2: CONFIRMATION OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING'S MINUTES

3. Record any discussion about the accuracy and the meeting's acceptance of the minutes of its previous meeting (reference details provided).⁷

ITEM 3: MATTERS ARISING

4. Include anything significant related to the content of the business of the previous meeting that has arisen since that meeting, excluding matters that are covered in business items later in the minutes.

PROTECTIVE MARKING(S)¹

PROTECTIVE MARKING(S)¹

Page 2 of ...

ITEM 4: BUSINESS ITEM 1—SUBJECT HEADING

- 5. For each item, state the problem or issue, the important points of discussion, considerations and conclusions. Group and paragraph headings may be used.
- 6. **Decision (or recommendation).** State the output from the discussion.
- 7. **For action.** Where required, include the appointment or name of the individual with the task, the nature of the task, and any time frame or completion date.

ITEM 5: BUSINESS ITEM 2—SUBJECT HEADING

Group heading (if appropriate)

- 8.
- 9.
- 10. **Recommendation(s) and/or decision(s)**
.....
- 11. **For action**.....
- 12. **Further action**.....

Closure. Details here might include a summary of main points, remarks from the chairperson and, if appropriate, details of the group’s next meeting.

Name
RANK (for military)
Chairperson

Name
RANK (for military)
Meeting secretary

Feb 10⁸

Feb 10⁹

Enclosures:¹⁰

- 1.
- 2.