

Writing Minutes

These notes are intended to help and support anyone who is called upon to take the minutes of a meeting. This might be as part of a Committee role you have agreed to do or perhaps as a one-off to cover someone who would normally do it or for an occasional big meeting such as an AGM.

The purpose of a set of minutes is to record the decisions that were made at a meeting and who took them. Once a meeting is over they are the only lasting evidence of what happened. Generally, if it's not recorded in the minutes then effectively it didn't happen.

The minimum set of information that minutes should contain are ...

- Name of the body and what kind of meeting
- Date, Time and Place of the meeting
- Those present
- Decisions made.

The first two can be taken care of in the heading something like this ...

“MyTown IVC Committee meeting held on 25th December at 8:30pm at Janes house.”

Note that the place can be abbreviated for confidentiality.

There should be a list at the top of the minutes, under the headings, of all those present at the start of the meeting. If it is a general meeting or otherwise has a lot of attendees then you can list the Officers present and then say “... and the members listed at the end of these minutes”. If anyone arrives late or leaves early, or is absent for any part of the meeting that should be shown. You can show the time of arrival and/or departure of individuals but what is most important is that you should be able to see from the minutes who was present for each discussion and decision.

Minutes should record the start and end times of the meeting.

Styles of minutes do vary and can be a matter of taste. The tone of the minutes should be utterly neutral and the tense should be third-party. It should be as if written by a completely disinterested observer. It is a mistake to use any emotional language or to seek to continue or win an argument by what is written in the minutes. Use simple plain English, avoid slang, keep it business like. Follow the structure of the agenda in the structure of the minutes.

The minutes should record what actually happened at the meeting. You can add content that did not happen but only if you make it quite clear that that is the case. For example you might say “Treasurers Report: No report available at the meeting but one was circulated by email shortly afterwards” or perhaps “... the following was circulated after the meeting”.

The same goes for corrections. You might say “The Treasurer reported that the Current Account Balance was £1200.00 (corrected after the meeting to £1400.00)”.

In other words please don't try to re-write history. Just report what actually did happen.

During the meeting, if there is anything that you are not sure about then don't hesitate to ask for clarification. You will need to keep good notes. You might like to consider recording the meeting (with the consent of those present). Don't rely on technology though as a recorder that you later find out didn't record will put you in a very difficult position.

The purpose of minutes is to record decisions, not every twist and turn of the debate that led to the decision. You may decide to record the main issues raised in the debate and the main reasons for a decision. Keep it brief. The more you say the more careful you have to be to keep it balanced, fair and neutral.

You should clearly record decisions and if someone is given an action it should be clearly shown what the action is and who is to do it. You can have a running "Actions List" which records all the outstanding Actions, who owns them and when they were created. If you do this then do have regular clear-outs and dispose of Actions that are never going to happen.

It is not necessary to record the number of votes cast at a meeting (unless the vote is a Poll). A motion or proposal is either agreed or it is not. It is up to the people at the meeting to challenge any decision which they think has not been declared correctly by the Chairman.

Motions are carried ...

Unanimously – if everyone who could vote voted for it.

Nem Con (without contradiction) – if there were no votes against.

Overwhelmingly – if only a small number of votes against

If formal motions are being decided, such as at a General meeting, then the minutes should always record the exact wording of the final agreed motion so that it is quite clear what was decided. You may want to also record the original motion and any amendments along the way but they are of lesser importance.

It is normal to record who Moved (Proposed) the motion and who seconded it if anyone. Same for amendments.

The minutes of a meeting belong to the people at that meeting. Preparing them is a service to the meeting. Minutes should be approved by the next meeting of that body. For example, the minutes of any General Meeting should be approved as a true and correct record by the next General Meeting of any kind.

In the case of General Meetings the minutes should also be approved by the next meeting of the clubs Committee after they have been prepared. This is so that an authoritative version of the minutes is available as soon as possible and can be acted on with confidence.

The minutes should be prepared as soon as possible after the meeting while memories of the minute taker and others are still fresh. They should be sent to the Chairman of the meeting for a sanity check and as a guard against any undiplomatic language or obvious mistakes. The draft minutes should be available to those present at the meeting as soon as possible to give them time to read them over and raise any issues.

It is suggested for Committee meetings that the minutes should be written up and sent to the Chairman of the meeting within three days and sent to the meeting attendees with seven days.

Members of the meeting are at liberty to ask for their dissent from a decision to be recorded in the minutes. This avoids putting anyone in the awkward position of being caught up in a decision that they do not want to be associated with.

It is good practice in any democracy that the minutes of meetings are available to the members so that they can be informed and challenge decisions if they want to. It is normal to wait for the minutes to be approved before doing so to ensure their validity.

Making minutes available, especially of Committee meetings, can raise issues of confidentiality. If you are at all concerned about this then such entries should be anonymised before circulation to other than those present at the meeting. One way of doing this is to refer to the first such person as "Person A", the second as "Person B" and so on and then have an Appendix which decodes who each of these people are. This Appendix should be confidential to the people at the meeting. Like everything in IVC, the minutes should not be used as a way of being unkind to people.

There are a number of web resources and some books you can buy. I found the following Sunday Times book to be quite worthwhile, it also covers setting the agenda and how to organise a meeting.

Taking Minutes of Meetings by Joanna Gutmann.
ISBN 978-0-7494-5657-3

Hope you found this useful and interesting.