

## How to take and write minutes

### Good practice guide

#### A. Introduction

##### About this guide

1. Good minuting is an important element of an effective 21<sup>st</sup> century university, although it can be a deceptively difficult and time-consuming task. In a civic university such as Leicester, which is publicly accountable for its actions to the Office for Students and the taxpayer, effective minuting plays a critical role in capturing and recording institutional risks, issues and decisions. At the University of Leicester, it is recognised as a professional task, usually undertaken by the professional services.
2. There is no 'one size' fits all approach; minutes are context-sensitive, with each committee and chair having their own preference. Nonetheless, adopting a consistent approach to minuting is beneficial for the University. It helps for audit purposes, ensures decisions and actions are captured clearly and consistently, and helps new secretaries unfamiliar with the process. The purpose of this guidance is just this – assisting secretaries in undertaking one of the most fundamental tasks: taking and writing minutes.
3. This resource outlines the purpose and structure of good minutes and provides advice on the minute-writing process, from taking notes at the meeting to the seeking of approval of the final minutes at the next committee meeting. Lastly, this guide provides information on style and terminology. It can be read in conjunction with the University's committee servicing guidelines, which cover more broadly the holistic practice of servicing a committee.
4. For easy and quick reading, a list of 'top 10' tips is provided at [section K](#).
5. For the purpose of this guide, the term committee secretary is used as a 'catch-all' term for Clerks, minute-takers and note-takers. Similarly, the term committee is used where it might also be applied to board, group or meeting.

#### **Purpose of Minutes**

Record decisions made by the committee, and possibly  
and briefly the reasons for them

Note action required, by whom and by when

Provide a record of those present at the meeting

Communicate information to people who weren't there

## **B. Minutes style and content**

### General

6. A good minute of a meeting will be:
  - a. brief, but intelligible;
  - b. self-contained;
  - c. written in the past tense;
  - d. formal in style and tone;
  - e. impersonal; and
  - f. to the full extent that the discussion allows, decisive.
7. Minutes should represent an accurate summary of relevant discussions and decisions taken by the committee. *Brevity is key.* Secretaries should avoid minuting lengthy exchanges between members and repeating content contained within the reports – instead, they should be selective and only pick up the relevant, main threads. The final minute should summarise the main points of a discussion, leading logically and clearly to any decisions or outcomes.
8. *The minute of a discussion should be self-contained* so that any reader, including those not present at the meeting, can understand easily what was discussed and the outcome.
9. Minutes should be written *in the past tense*, so that future generations can review decisions taken.
10. The names of individual speakers should not be recorded. *Minutes should be impersonal* and provide a summary of the discussion rather than a detailed account of every individual contribution. Personal pronouns should not be used. An exception may be where a member will explicitly request to be named in the minutes.
11. Minutes should be *as decisive and unambiguous as possible*, especially where they pertain to decisions or actions (section E refers).

## **C. Taking notes**

### Taking notes during the meeting

12. Good committee secretaries will be experienced at taking notes whilst also participating fully in a meeting.
13. The most important skill in taking notes is listening and engaging carefully with what is being said and mentally sorting out the important information from the unimportant, thinking early about themes and the framework through which the minute of the discussion will be recorded. Secretaries should avoid writing down everything that is said at the meeting, as they will quickly lose track of discussions. Of course, a lot of what is being said can either be redundant or repetitive. Secretaries should try to note down the main, substantive points, any decisions made and future actions that have been agreed. If they are well prepared and understand the issues being discussed, this becomes easier. If in doubt, secretaries should err on the side of caution and make a note and then decide later whether it needs to be included. Not everything contained within the notes will make it into the final minutes.
14. Initials of speakers should be used, as far as possible, to identify who made the point. While names will not usually be used in minutes, secretaries may occasionally wish to refer back to a

speaker for clarification of a point made. It can also be useful if there is any dispute later over who said what.

15. In some committees, the secretary may be accompanied by a suitably skilled minute taker. This enables the secretary to focus on the discussion and contribute as appropriate whilst also ensuring that minutes are recorded appropriately. Such arrangements should be discussed and agreed with the Chair in advance.
16. A good secretary will have the confidence to ask for clarification during a meeting – e.g. if in doubt about a point, jargon or acronym. Equally, if unsure about a decision, the secretary should always seek clarification during the meeting.

#### Immediately after the meeting

17. It is useful to meet with the chair as soon as possible after the meeting to go over notes to get clarification over a topic that was discussed, or seek confirmation as to the information to include or exclude from the minutes. It may also be necessary to contact other members to clarify any issues raised during the meeting.

#### Retention of notes

18. Notes should be destroyed once the minutes for the meeting to which they relate have been approved. This is because any such notes could be 'discoverable' under the Freedom of Information Act. The approved minutes form the only legal record of the meeting and should express the singular version of truth for regulatory, legal, audit and other requirements.

### **D. Writing the minutes**

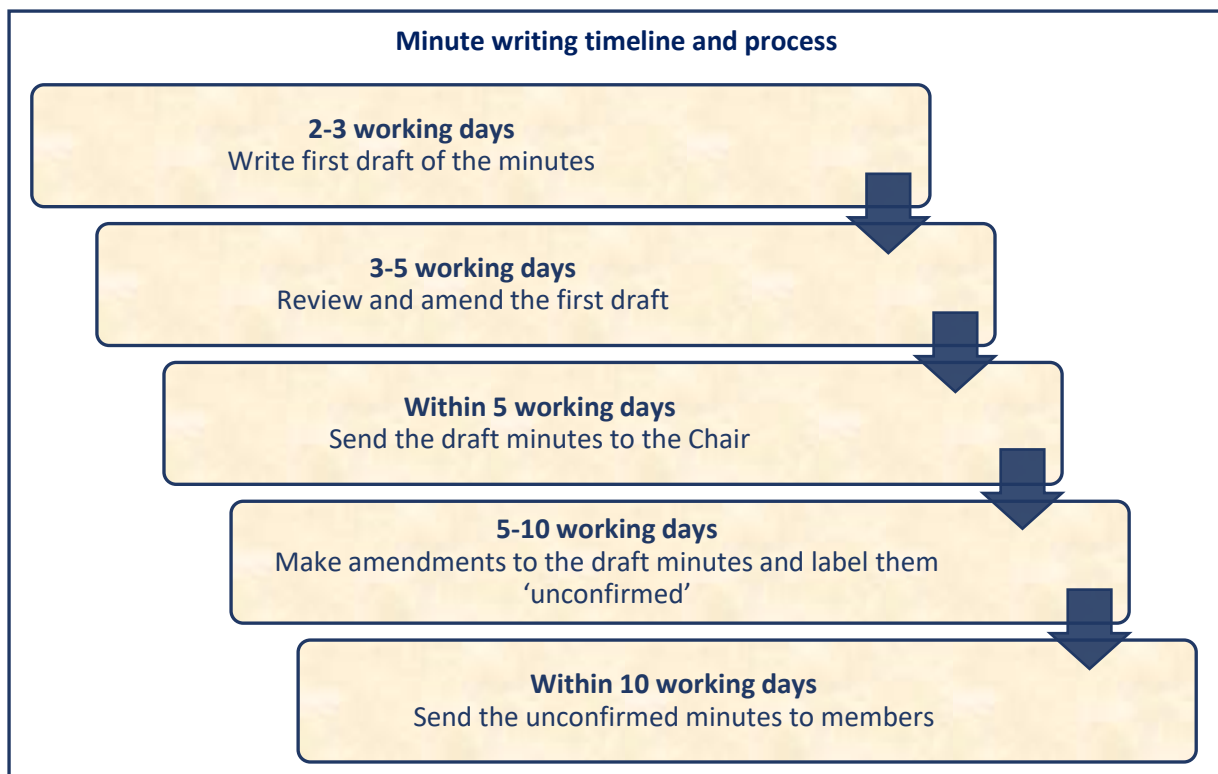
19. Good minute-writing can be a much misunderstood and under-appreciated skill, and it often surprises those new to the task how long the process can take. The exact amount of time needed to write minutes varies a lot, depending on the nature of the business and on the secretary's level of experience. However, if dealing with complex issues on which there was substantial debate, a good rule of thumb is that writing the minutes will take a reasonably experienced secretary about twice as long as the discussion lasted. For new secretaries, it could take considerably longer.

#### Where to write the minutes

20. Most secretaries find it very helpful to be able to write their minutes in one sitting, away from interruptions. If possible, minutes are best written a place where there are no interruptions.

#### When to write minutes

21. Subject to the length of the meeting and the complexity of its subject matter, secretaries should aim to finish the first draft of the minutes within 2-3 working days of the meeting. Experience tends to show that the longer they are left after that the poorer the recall (and therefore the minutes) will be. Secretaries should bear in mind that having the task of writing the minutes (especially of a long complex meeting) hanging over them for any length of time can have an adverse impact on their other work.



#### Format

22. A minute template is provided [here](#).
23. The order of items in the minutes should correspond to that set out in the agenda. Where items have been taken out of order (e.g. an item was taken early to allow a member to leave), it is still useful to record the item in the original place in the minutes as included on the agenda. An item may be moved into a different section of the minutes if, for example, it becomes apparent that an unreserved item is actually of a commercially sensitive nature and needs to be recorded in the reserved minutes. Guidance on reserved and unreserved business can be found in the [Committee Servicing Guide](#).
24. Each item should be numbered and have a heading. Minutes are numbered from the start of the *calendar* year and continue in sequence through all the meetings in that year. The minute is prefixed with the year, e.g. 18/M1, 18/M2 etc., to ensure consistency and to allow a reference to 'minute 18/M27', rather than 'minute 4 of the meeting held on 6 July 2018'.
25. When an item relates to a previous minute, this should be referenced within brackets at the end of the sentence – e.g. “The Committee received and noted an update on the USS valuation (minutes 18/M31 and 18/M47 refer)”.
26. When capturing a committee’s discussion under matters arising on the agenda, this should be recorded in the minutes under the ‘matters arising’ heading only if it can be recorded with a short statement. Otherwise, particularly where a committee will have had a long discussions, it should be included as a separate numbered minute with its own heading.
27. If the minutes require sub-sections, use a., b., c. etc. for the first level and i., ii., iii. etc. for the second level.

28. Items raised under 'Any other business' should be recorded under a numbered heading reflecting the specific item. The heading 'Any other business' should not appear in the minutes.

### Tense

29. Minutes should be written in the past tense and in the third person.

Past tense – examples	
Instead of:	Write:
The Committee agreed that the paper <i>will</i> be submitted [...]	The Committee agreed that the paper <i>would</i> be submitted [...]
The College <i>is</i> looking to make a number of changes to [...]	The College <i>was</i> looking to make a number of changes to [...]
The changes <i>are</i> due to take place [...]	The changes <i>were</i> due to take place [...]
The Committee agrees to revise the proposal	The Committee <i>agreed</i> to revise the proposal
Other tenses	
For things that happened <u>before</u> the meeting the equivalent sentence (to above) would read: 'The Committee noted that at its previous meeting it <i>had agreed</i> to revise the proposal.'	
For things that were planned to happen <u>after</u> the meeting the equivalent sentence would read: 'The Committee approved the revised proposal which the Chair <i>would</i> outline to Senate.'	
For things that the committee decided to recommend for approval by a higher body the equivalent sentence would read: 'The Committee <i>agreed</i> to recommend that the proposed policy <i>should</i> be implemented.'	

### Structure of a minute

30. Each minute is usually structured as follows:
- Introduction.
  - Summary.
  - Record of decisions made / conclusion / actions required.
31. When faced with a particularly complex item, secretaries should establish a logical framework for the minute along the lines of the above structure. Focus should be placed on the conclusion and key discussion points should be arranged in the logical order in which they lead up to it. Often, a discussion at the meeting may be relatively untidy, perhaps with pros and cons for a proposal scattered throughout the notes. Different speakers may have made much the same point, perhaps with a slight variation in each case. Secretaries can tidy up and re-order the points made, as long as they accurately reflect in the summary the gist of the main points made and they lead logically to the conclusion reached by the committee. It is not necessary to capture very single point made.
32. Sometimes this will involve amalgamating points made by different speakers, and often it will involve bringing together points made at different times in the meeting. That's fine. Secretaries

should remember that the minutes are a summary. They are not required to give a blow by blow account of precisely what was said at each stage. Secretaries can use their own words if they better convey the gist of a point made in slightly different words at the meeting.

33. Each minute must conclude with the final view or explicit decision of the committee about the item of business, which should always be expressed in one of the following forms:
  - a. Approved.
  - b. Endorsed.
  - c. Noted.
34. Secretaries should record a committee's decisions in bold to make it more visible to readers. The decision should be located at the end of the minute, for example '**The Committee approved the policy.**' Multiple decisions should appear in separate paragraphs with the decision located at the end of each paragraph.

#### Writing the first draft

35. When feeling stuck, secretaries should not try to capture every minute perfectly in the first draft – this can delay and frustrate. Secretaries should try to capture the key information from the notes and move on to complete the first draft in full. It is always easier to edit/review a completed draft than it is to come up with a perfect set of minutes first time.
36. It can be useful to print the first draft in hard copy, and in double line spacing, to do a 'red pen' review. By looking at the draft minutes in a different format (i.e. not on a screen) errors are more likely to be found. It can also allow secretaries to think more creatively about how to capture complex discussions.
37. Many secretaries find it useful to ask a colleague to review their minutes and vice-versa. A second pair of eyes is more likely to find mistakes, particularly spelling errors.
38. As a rough estimate, minutes are likely circa 2 pages long for every hour of the meeting. However, this is only a rough estimate and the exact length is likely to vary significantly between different committees.

### **E. Actions**

#### Capturing actions

39. The minutes should record clearly the nature of the action, the timeframe for delivery of the action, and the person taking the action forward. Where the person proposed to take forward the action did not attend the meeting, it is good practice for secretaries to notify them immediately after the meeting. Decisions need to be recorded in a clear and concise manner, and should be written as decisions of the committee rather than those of individuals.
40. Responsibility for such action should be indicated in capital letters and in square brackets, for example: '**The Committee approved** the new policy and requested that the Secretary of the Personnel Committee prepares a progress report for the next meeting. [ACTION: JOANNE SMITH]'
41. The secretary must ensure that the need for any follow-up action is communicated to the relevant individual(s) immediately after the meeting. This is particularly important for individuals who were not present at the meeting, and who may have to take action

straightaway. A copy of the relevant minute (once approved by the Chair) should be provided to them.

42. For some matters the follow-up action may involve a specific requirement for some or all members of the committee to play an active role in conveying, explaining and promoting the decision of the committee to the wider University community. In order for them to do this effectively, members may find it helpful to be provided with a separate note on the “key messages” that they are expected to convey, as this is likely to involve additional or more detailed information than would be included in the minutes.
43. It is the secretary’s responsibility to engage with action holders and ensure that the committee receives updates from action holders on how they have implemented their follow-up actions. Usually, the committee will receive updates in writing or orally under the matters arising heading on the agenda.

#### **Allocating responsibility for actions**

When capturing an action, it is important that responsibility for carrying out a decision is placed firmly upon a member of staff or function area. Thus, Secretaries should never say:

“The Committee agreed that a report on [...] should be written.”

Instead they should write:

“The Committee *agreed that the Head of College would write* a report on [...]”

If several members of staff are concerned, it is best to name them all, being careful to indicate with whom the initiative is to rest; thus:

“The Committee *agreed that the Head of College, in consultation with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Students, would write* a report on [...]”

#### Action summary

44. A separate action summary table should be produced alongside the minutes. All actions should be extracted from the minutes and documented therein, including minute reference. A template attached is attached [here](#).
45. The action sheet will then be submitted to the next meeting of the committee, alongside the previous minutes, and considered under matters arising, where questions and brief progress updates on these items can be discussed.

#### **F. Confirmation and circulation of the minutes**

##### Checking of the minutes

46. The initial version of the minutes must be labelled ‘draft’ in the header of every page and be completed within three to five working days. Secretaries should submit their draft minutes to the chair and within five working days of the meeting. With particularly complex matters, a meeting with the chair will enable secretaries to check thoroughly specific issues raised within the minutes.

47. For routine meetings, there should only be minimal changes to the minutes. It is however not realistic to expect minutes always to be 'right first time', particularly when dealing with highly sensitive or complex matters in the course of a lengthy meeting. Opinion will often vary on how certain points should be expressed; this may simply be a matter of emphasis or nuance, but getting this right is important particularly if the minutes will be shared with a regulator or third party – such as auditors. Editing by committee members, who are ultimately responsible for the accuracy, should not be regarded as a failing on the part of the committee secretary, but instead as a sign that responsibilities are understood and taken seriously.

#### Circulation of the minutes

48. Once the minutes have been approved by the chair, and after any necessary amendments have been made, they must be labelled 'unconfirmed' in the header of every page. The unconfirmed minutes should normally be circulated to members by email no later than ten working days after the meeting. Minutes should be summarised as reports and be submitted to the next meeting of the parent committee. A template for a report of a committee meeting is available [here](#).

#### Formal approval of the minutes

49. The minutes of a committee are not approved formally until they have been approved at that committee's next meeting. A master copy of the minutes should be prepared for the chair without the 'unconfirmed' label in the header. Once they have been approved in the meeting, the chair must sign off the minutes. The minutes can then be filed electronically. Senate, Council and standing committees of Council will require hard copies of the minutes to be signed by the chair and then be stored securely.

#### Confidentiality

50. Secretaries should be mindful of the confidentiality of minutes, particularly when they discuss a named individual, and should circulate with caution to relevant members only. If a meeting deals with both confidential and non-confidential matters, the minutes must be separated so that the section dealing with confidential issues cannot be viewed by a wider audience, particularly in the case of student representatives. Secretaries should also be aware of [General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\) legislation](#).

### **G. Other issues of which to be aware**

#### Understanding the issues on the agenda.

51. One of the first steps in preparing for a meeting is in preparing the agenda, seeking approval from the chair and circulating papers. The best secretaries will seek a full understanding of the issues on the agenda when they are working with the Chair to agree sequencing, timing and appropriateness of the agenda. *Secretaries who have created the agenda from a basis of full understanding of the issues have few problems following the discussion at the meeting, understanding the points made, and then writing their minutes.* Secretaries should read the papers fully before the meeting, discuss any questions in advance with authors or the chair and anticipate, where possible, how discussion at the meeting is likely to take place.
52. There should be a cycle of business for every committee that secretaries should use to inform agenda creation.

#### Discoverability



53. Minutes of committees should be written in the understanding that they are formal documents which are often open to external verification, audit, Freedom of Information (Fol) requests, and *something* of the future. For example, auditors may look to minutes for evidence that a particular proposal has been scrutinised and that available options were appraised appropriately before a decision was taken. Regulators may look for evidence that the University has complied with regulations, such as the [UK Quality Code](#). Fol requests can be made for a number of reasons, including to examine whether appropriate governance processes were followed when considering contentious proposals. Secretaries should keep in mind that the majority of Fol requests are made by journalists who want to file a good story.

'To consider' and 'to note'

54. The university uses two distinct terms to describe what a committee is expected to do as part of each agenda item. Items that are 'to consider' require an active decision being made by the committee and are usually accompanied by a specific recommendation. Items that are 'to note' do not require a decision to be taken and are usually presented to the committee for information. Secretaries should make sure that the minutes capture accurately what the discussion was meant to have achieved.

**H. Style Guide**

55. Minutes can be very tedious to read if the same verbs are used over and over again. Secretaries should make a habit of looking for alternatives to the words which immediately spring to mind. For example, if "the Chair stated [...]" has already been used, then the next time "It was pointed out that [...]" could be used.
56. General style points:
- a. Avoid abstract nouns when verbs or adjectives can be used instead.
  - b. Prefer the active form of phrase to the passive.
  - c. Prefer short words to long, and Anglo-Saxon to Latin words.
  - d. Avoid excessive use of adjectives.
  - e. Use the past tense.
  - f. No personal pronouns.
  - g. Short sentences are better than long ones.

h. Beware of clichés.

Useful verbs		
• accepted	• felt	• queried
• acknowledged	• informed	• questioned
• advised	• noted	• rejected
• agreed	• objected	• reported
• argued	• observed	• stated
• believed	• outlined	• summarised
• commented	• pointed out	• suggested
• complained	• proposed	• supported
• considered	• put forward (the view that)	• told
• explained	• reiterated	• took the view that
• expressed (the view that)	• reminded	• voiced

Active Form

57. A sentence will usually be shorter and more direct if it is constructed with its verb in the active rather than the passive voice. For example:

“The Committee considered proposals to increase the number of student placements.”

Is better than

“The Committee considered proposals under which the number of student placements would be increased.”

Latin and “Genteel” words

58. Though official documents should have a certain dignity, this is not achieved merely by using long words. It is a good rule not to use a long word when a shorter one would do as well, or a word of Latin origin when an Anglo-Saxon word will do instead. Thus, secretaries should use buy, try, pay, instead of purchase, endeavour, remuneration. Minutes are there to form a factual record of the business conducted at the meeting and are not a romanticised version of the truth.

Adjectives

59. Many adjectives can be dispensed with. There can be a tendency in recording discussions at meetings to preserve the exaggeration of the spoken word. Secretaries should try to avoid doing this. For instance, “it is of vital importance” usually means no more than “it is important”.

Acronyms and abbreviations

60. Word contractions should be avoided, and where abbreviations or acronyms are used they should be defined in brackets following the first example. For instance: “University Leadership Team (ULT)” at first use, thereafter “ULT”.

### Sentence structure

61. Minutes will be more enjoyable to read if a varied sentence structures is used. Here are a few examples of the many different ways in which sentences might be introduced:
- a. The Chair introduced the item by
  - b. While acknowledging the importance of ... a member argued that
  - c. Given that the budget was very tight this year
  - d. Although the point made had some validity
  - e. After outlining the background to the item, the Chair
  - f. In summary, the Chair made the following main points
  - g. Having outlined the rationale for the proposal, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor then
  - h. In response, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor explained
  - i. In answer to a query, the Head of School stated
  - j. In reply, the Head of School summarised
  - k. Asked to explain the background, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor outlined

### **I. Bibliography**

Cabinet Office, Guide to minute taking (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-taking-minutes>)

De Montfort University, Committee Servicing Guidance

ICSA, The Governance Institute, Guidance note: Minute taking

The University of Western Australia, Governance, How to take and write minutes  
(<http://www.governance.uwa.edu.au/committees/principles/meetings/preparation/minutes>)

University of Leicester, Committee Servicing Guide (September 2018)

## J. Top ten tips

### 1. Purpose of Minutes

Record decisions made by the committee, and possibly (briefly) the reasons for them

Note action required, and by whom

Provide a record of those present at the meeting

Communicate information to people who weren't there

### 2. Good minuting takes time

Allocate time after the meeting to write the minutes. Writing the minutes can take a reasonably experienced Secretary about twice as long as the discussion lasted.

### 3. Minutes should be brief

Avoid minuting lengthy exchanges between members and repeating content contained within the reports – be selective and only pick up the relevant, main threads. The final minute should summarise the main points of a discussion, leading logically and clearly to any decisions or outcomes.

### 4. Minutes should be self-contained

Any reader, including those not present at the meeting, should be able to understand easily what was discussed and the outcome.

### 5. Minutes should be impersonal

Names of individual speakers should not be recorded, instead minutes should provide a summary of the discussion.

### 6. Minutes should be decisive

Minutes should be as decisive and unambiguous as possible.

### 7. Minutes are discoverable

Keep in mind that minutes are formal records of proceedings and can be open to external verification (by auditors or regulators) and be subject to Freedom of Information requests.

### 8. Minutes are written in the past tense

Instead of "The Committee agrees that [...]", write  
"The Committee *agreed* that [...]"

### 9. Structure of a minutes

Every minute is usually structured as follows:

- a. Introduction.
- b. Summary.
- c. Record of decisions made / conclusion / actions required.

### 10. Minute template

The University uses consistent templates for minutes and action summaries, which are available from the Governance Office.