• What. A description of the item under discussion; the problem, the ramifications, the goals, suggestions given.

• How. The action decided on. What steps will be taken, what they will accomplish.

• Who. Who's responsible for what steps. Who reports to whom, what is expected.

• When. Due dates, check-up dates, work-in-progress deadlines.

Taking meeting notes organized this way rather than randomly ensures that the substance of the notes will be predictable and well organized. It will also make for a consistent continuum from meeting to meeting.

Assign Visual Charting

In addition, you should assign one person to take notes on a flip chart in front of the room so they are clearly visible to all and completely documented. These chart notes can then also be converted into notes for circulation.

People agree to lots of things at a meeting, since the due date seems so far away, etc. Watching the record being made causes people to become much more realistic about promises and to consider more carefully what they agree to do. This makes the final consensus much more dependable as people troubleshoot the problems right at the meeting *before* they agree to go on publicly recorded record.

Circulate the Notes

Ask the note taker to send the notes around to everyone for approval and/or corrections, giving everyone the same complete record of what happened.

Make Discussions Visual

Suggest to your presenters (if any) that they explain their subjects with visuals or at the board or flip chart. Handouts should be a back-up, to be given at the end of the meeting for personal study later. At the meeting, keep the format public. (For more about visual aids, see Chapter 5.)