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9 ways to improve your meeting minutes

Meeting minutes serve as a permanent record of vital information. They state the decisions made at the gathering – what actions must be taken, by whom, and when. However, despite their importance, handling meeting minutes is often a dreaded task. After all, it's hard to catch what everyone says, and even harder to determine what's important and what isn't.

However, meeting minutes aren't going anywhere. So if you're responsible for handling meeting minutes, your best option is to make the process smoother for yourself, while also working to produce a succinct, accurate document.

Fortunately, these two things go hand in hand. With the right process and tips, anyone can be a meeting minute pro.

Use a template

Why reinvent the wheel every time you put out minutes? A template saves time by organizing material for you. When you use the same setup consistently, readers get used to the presentation. This familiarity aids them in locating pertinent information.

“I would strongly recommend creating a template for meeting minutes by making a structured procedure that can be filled out in each meeting,” says Veronica Miller of VPN Overview. “If there are a lot of notes floating around, consistency in minutes will save a lot of time. Because of the normal and easy-to-use template, anyone reading the meeting minutes can quickly jump to a particular section without needing to know where it is written. I simply write down the basic essentials that must be registered to create a good template, and as the requirement grows, I keep adding more points. I would suggest not to be overly complicated. Your template should be brief, to-the-point, and concise."

Include basic information

Be careful not to overlook simple details. A permanent record of what goes on should include the meeting's date, time, and location. When listing attendees, be certain to use full names. This action avoids confusion if the office has two employees with the same first name. Realize, too, that including a last name helps readers down the line who might not recognize "Mary" on the list.

Condense

Replicating conversations word for word proves time-consuming and ineffective. Evaluate what to include. If debating, ask yourself whether it will matter in a few days, a few weeks, or a few years. If the answer is "yes," put it in.

Watch, however, that efforts to keep things brief do not cause confusion. Spell out acronyms on the first use before shortening elsewhere. Don't abbreviate material in ways that future readers might not understand.

Be specific when it really counts

Certain types of information demand careful, specific treatment. For instance, the minute-taker should record motions as actually stated. If the group makes a major decision, include a synopsis of the discussion's debates and conclusions rather than a vague account.

"All financial decisions or approvals must be included in the notes," reminds Jay Berkowitz, founder of Ten Golden Rules. "This is critical. If a client approves an increase or decrease to a budget, this must be documented to avoid future problems."

Focus on the action

Produce minutes that remind everyone what needs to happen next. Record decisions made and who will do what by when. Make it easy for people to know what got accomplished in the meeting. Draw action steps and deadlines to the attention of readers by underlining, using bullets, or bolding keywords.

"Write meeting notes for someone who was not in the meeting," Berkowitz suggests. "If the CEO or VP can pick up the notes and understand exactly what was discussed and decided, even if she/he was not in attendance, then you wrote great notes!"

Keep emotions out of the minutes

Don't interject your own feelings or interpretations into the meeting minutes. Likewise, avoid commenting on how something was said. You might read John raising his voice as anger. Someone else might label it as passion.

"Just the facts," says James Idayi, CEO of Cloudzat. "It is the duty of the individual taking notes to know the difference between someone's viewpoint and a straightforward reality. Meeting minutes do not have personal opinions, but only all information that remains constant and can be readily checked. Sticking to the facts not only ensures steady progress but also prevents ethical conflicts."

Consider including photos

No law exists that minutes need to contain text only. When a picture is worth a thousand words, use it!

“A lot of material is drawn on boards in meetings for quick clarification and debate. Simply take a picture of it and paste it into your papers. Others would enjoy that, and they will be able to obtain an incredibly detailed context of the conference conversation,” says Will Cannon, CEO of Uplead.

Create a draft promptly

When the meeting ends, the sooner the minute-taker can compose a document the better. Act while information is fresh — it’s natural for details to start fading as time progresses.

Finalize with care

The completed document should represent two things — an accurate account of the meeting and your professionalism. To that end, ask the meeting’s leader to review a draft of the minutes before you send it out to attendees. Minute-takers often double-space their document so that handwritten corrections can be easily and clearly inserted.

Before distributing to all, proofread the minutes. Be sure to include any attachments.

And since people often lose minutes among their e-mail, also upload the final version to a shared space. This action keeps minutes in one central place for easy retrieval later on.

Additional resource: How to take notes faster with speedwriting.