BEST PRACTICES IN MINUTES AND REPORT WRITING

A PAPER PRESENTED AT A TWO-DAY TRAINING WORKSHOP FOR SELECTED SENIOR ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICERS IN THE FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, OWERRI,

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BEST PRACTICES IN MINUTES AND REPORT WRITING

BY
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It is my great honour and privilege to welcome the distinguished participants to this important two-day interactive workshop on "Best Practices for Minutes and Report Writing. The work of a career Administrator is centered on clerking of minutes of meetings among other things. In order to achieve the goal of the organization, emphasis is laid on staff development to enable staff meet the innovative challenges of modern administration and on this note, I commend the University Management for organizing this workshop for its staff. The art of writing minutes of meeting is a skill, and like all skills are learnable and it is made up of a series of methods and techniques. It is a skill set that you can learn, practice, and master with determination and repetition. You therefore need these skills and experiences for the day to day solution of practical problem. Acquisition of the writing skill demands for logical reasoning which helps to organize and allow for the flow of the minutes of the meeting.

The more competent, capable, and productive you feel, the higher your self-esteem as a professional administrator and it is largely predicated on the development of your full potential. Recent surveys reported of a growing consensus among business executives that many staff in recent times does not have the communication skill to face the challenges on the job and this will not only waste valuable time and effort but will also discourage team effort and coordination. Good communication is essential in business and it is hoped that at the end of presenting this paper, participants shall be able to:

- Define the term *Meeting Minutes*.
- List the steps required and the best practices to write good meeting minutes and report writing.
- Name the characteristics of good meeting minutes.
- List tips for good writing.
- Describe the functions and Characteristics of meeting minutes and report.

Definition of Meeting Minutes/Minutes of Meeting

Meeting minutes is an official written statement of the motions and resolutions taken in a meeting. It is brief but a complete record of all discussions held in a meeting and needed to be approved by the participating members of the meeting. Meeting minutes serves as a permanent record of the topics considered, conclusions reached, actions taken, and assignments given and are usually distributed not only to all those who attended the meeting but also for those who were unable to attend. The minutes should follow the framework set up by the agenda and are generally written in the simple past tense.

According to Rajendra Pal and Korlahalli, "Minutes are the official records of the proceedings of meeting." Meeting activities and decisions are recorded in many different ways as formats can vary according to group and co-operations. Some offices have standard templates for recording important meetings, and formal meetings have historical documentation models that must be followed.

Types of Meeting Minutes

A. Notes of meeting

The minimum requirement would

be the date, a list of attendants, what was being discussed and what actions need to be done as a result. Each action proposed or reported is laid down by a numbering system.

B. Narrative or Verbatim Minutes

It requires a maximum narration of meetings, a more informative transcription of a meeting.

Narrative minutes get to the heart of the matter but preserve how decisions were reached. The person who gives important contributions must be indicated. It must show the decision making process, including the names of proposers and seconder and the exact wording of what is proposed; views for and against the proposition and the decision reached. It also includes a summary of information passed on in the meeting.

C. Resolution Minutes

In contrast to narrative minutes, resolution minutes, only the decisions are recorded, without mentioning how these decisions were reached. No information on the contributors was presented.

D. Action Minutes

The most important information presented in an action minutes is on who will carry out the decision and when the action will be taken place. It is usually written in two or three columns.
These minutes often act as a reminder or memorandum to all concerned.

FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF IGBA, IGBA LAND
ACTION SHEET FROM 305TH MEETING OF THE 290TH GOVERNING COUNCIL HELD ON DECEMBER 15, 2050 AT THE COUNCIL CHAMBER

S/N	ITEMS	DECISIONS	ACTION BY	REMARK
1	Construction of Hostel Z	Council approved that Messrs Kenny Construction limited be awarded the Construction of Hostel Z at the cost of N34million Naira only.	Vice- Chancellor DVC Administration Bursar Director, PP&D Unit	
2	Procurement of 32 -Seater bus for Staff School	Council approved the procurement of 32 -Seater bus for Staff School	Vice- Chancellor DVC Administration Bursar Director Estate & Works Headmistress, FUI	

Steps Required in Developing Minutes of Meeting

STEP 1: Pre-planning meeting minutes:

In preparing for a meeting, the Secretary liaises with the Chairman to plan effectively for the recording of minutes by making sure that the agenda and meeting are well thought out, it makes minute taking much easier if the secretary understands what is expected to be included in the meeting minutes using the rules and procedures of the organization. At the very least, it's important to get a copy of the meeting agenda and use it as a guide or outline for taking notes and preparing the minutes – with the order and numbering of items on the minutes of meeting matching those of the agenda. In addition, the agenda and/or meeting notice also provides information to be included in the minutes, such as the type of detail he/she expects in the minutes. For example, if the Board or Committee will be dealing with motions, or voting on items/issues, be clear on whether you need to offer names of those making motions, seconding, etc. If you will be dealing with this type of procedures, you (and your Chairman) may want to refer to Robert's Rules of Order – (see attached Appendix 1 - "Introduction to Robert's Rules").

STEP 2: Record Taking: - Characteristics of Good Minutes

One of the guiding principles of effective minute–taking is ensuring that your recording 'tool' (paper, pen, attendance sheet, necessary referral documents etc) is in order. Before you start taking notes, it's important to understand the type of information you need to record at the meeting. As noted earlier, your organization may have required content and a specific format that you'll need to follow, but generally, meeting minutes usually include the following:

- Name and address of the organization
- Name of the meeting, Date, Time and Location (indicate those present and absent)
- Name and signature of participating members: Names of the meeting participants and those unable to attend (e.g., "regrets"). Check-off attendees as they enter the room - if you know the meeting attendees, you can check them off as they arrive or circulate an attendance list they can check-off themselves.
- Serial Number: To help the readers find their way through minutes, headings should be inserted and lines numbered for ease of reference. The numbering of minutes starts from when the committee was inaugurated and continues increasing indefinitely. (Begins October 1 and ends on September 30 of the next year).

Minutes are numbered in 3 parts viz:

(i)	(ii)	(iii)
· APSAPC	08	A.24

where : i = Abbreviated name of the Committee

ii = The year in which the session begins: This 08 is in use from October 1, 2008 up to September 30, 2009

iii = Agenda for the 24th meeting. Papers for meeting are numbered as for Agendas but with "P" instead if 'A'

APSAPC/08/P.21

- Adoption of previous Meeting: Acceptance or corrections/amendments to previous meeting minutes.
- Decisions made about each agenda item, for example (Matters Arising from the previous minutes): Actions taken or agreed to be taken.
- New business: Communication from the Chairperson and other departments.
- Any Other Business.
- Next meeting date and time.
- Time of Adjournment, the proposer and seconder
- Closing and Provision for Chairman and Secretary's signatures and date.

STEP 3: The Minutes Writing Process

Once the meeting is over, it's time to pull together your notes and write the minutes. Here are some tips that might help:

- Try to write the minutes as soon after the meeting as possible while everything is fresh in your mind.

- Review your outline and if necessary, add additional notes or clarify points raised. Also check to ensure all decisions, actions and motions are clearly noted.
- Check for sufficient detail: For Board of Director's minutes, an Association Trends article (by lawyers Jefferson C. Glassie and Dorothy Deng) suggests the following for Board minutes:
  - include a short statement of each action taken by the board and a brief explanation of the rationale for the decision
  - when there is extensive deliberation before passing a motion, summarize the major arguments.

STEP 4: Distributing or Sharing Meeting Minutes

As the official "minutes-taker" or Secretary, your role may include dissemination of the minutes. However, before you share these, be sure that the Chairman has reviewed and either revised and/or approved the minutes for circulation.

The method of sharing or distribution depends on the tools that are available to the organization. Since minutes and other documentation can create a pile of paper, it's great if you can use a paperless sharing process. For example, if you are using a word processing tool (e.g., Microsoft Word) that doesn't offer online sharing, you might want to create a PDF (Portable Document Format) of the document and send this and the other attachments or meeting documentation via email. Alternately, if you are all using Google docs – for meeting invitations, agenda and additional document sharing – you can simply "share" the document with that group once it has been finalized. Committee or Board members can simply read the documents online.

In some organizations, minutes are shared manually by packaging the hard copies of documents for the meeting in an envelope, sealing, addressing it with the proper reference. This usually is recorded and dispatched accordingly.

In the University, Management in order to minimize the cost of production and paper work that is involved in Senate meetings has evolved a Microsoft Word Process of sharing minutes electronically. By this method, only the Deans and Directors of Academic Units receive hard and soft copies of meeting minutes while other members receive the soft copies only. Though this system saves costs, it may impede proper filing, storage and retrieval of the documents as the primary activity in the management of e- records is maintaining the systems. It is necessary that electronic records are periodically refreshed and migrated in order to ensure their long-term accessibility.

STEP 5: Filing/Storage of Meeting Minutes

Most Committees and Boards review and either approve or amend the minutes at the beginning of the subsequent meeting. Once you've made any required revisions, the minutes will then need to be stored for future reference. Some organizations may store these online (e.g., in Google docs or SkyDrive) and also back these up on an external hard drive. You may also need to print and store hard copies.

Functions of Meeting Minutes

Board meetings are both internally and externally significant to any organizations. They provide record keeping mechanism that creates useful institutional memory.

Externally, minutes are often used as in audits, investigations and court cases. Minutes are tangible records of the meetings for its participants and a source of information to those at the meeting, and those who are interested with the outcomes of the meeting but were unable to attend. In some cases, meeting minutes can act as a reference point, for example:

- Constitutionally, Board approved minutes serve as a record of proceedings and are often legally required and are admissible as evidence in court.
- Executively, minutes often provide basis for action.
- They serve as basis for evolving new policy when a meeting's outcomes impact other collaborative activities or projects within the organization
- minutes can serve to notify (or remind) individuals of tasks assigned to them and/or timelines
- To be used as a means of linking the meeting with other processes in the organization, including other meetings
- To provide a continuum and make sure a committee stays on track over a certain period of time.

Tips for Good Note-Taking

In minute writing, some items must be very fully recorded and these include: resolutions (Decision), and direction about action to be taken. During most of the discussions, the secretary must summarize what is said as it is being said.

The following hints may help you.

- Relate Minutes items to the agenda items.
- Keep it simple. Do not try to impress, rather try to communicate. Keep the sentences short and to the point. Do not go into a lot of details unless it is needed. Make sure every word contributes to the purpose of the report.
- Use simple past tense in writing minutes of meeting. It uses fewer words than the passive voice and gives impact to the writing by emphasizing the person or thing responsible for an action. Write in the same tense throughout (Be consistent).

  Good grammar and punctuation is important and cannot be compromised. The secretary is always advised to have the dictionary as the companion. Remember that the computer cannot catch all the mistakes, especially with words like "red, read" or "there, their" and therefore having someone proof-read your work is a good idea to ensure brevity and clarity, so the minutes are easy to read, impartial, balanced, and objective.
- Try to avoid mentioning people's names. Minutes are business document, not about who said what. The only time a speaker's name is mentioned in minute writing is when:
  - When someone is introducing a subject, or moving, seconding or formally opposing a motion.
  - A person is making a point in an "official" capacity e.g. Chairman, Secretary etc.
  - Where it is necessary to introduce the speaker to make the discussion more intelligible.
  - Where the speaker specifically requests that his observation (usually dissent from some decision) be recorded.
- Avoid inflammatory or personal observations. The fewer adjectives or adverbs you use, the better.
- If you need to refer to other documents, attach them in an

appendix or indicate where they may be found. Don't rewrite their intent or try to summarize them.

- Summarize discussions. Record decisions or notes on action items in your outline as soon as they occur to be sure they are recorded accurately. Do not try to capture it all – you cannot keep up if you try to write down the conversation verbatim, so be sure to simply (and clearly) write just the decisions, assignments, action steps, etc.
- Between the introduction of a topic on the agenda and its conclusion, you need not to write anything except:
  i. The introduction of new matters' that are relevant to conclusion especially as it affects change in recommendation earlier reach.
  ii. New policies where agreed on and should be recorded for future reference.
  iii. Cases where record of decision may be useful in future.
- Ask for clarification if you are not clear on decisions reached or if the group moves on without making a decision or an obvious conclusion, ask for clarification of the decision and/or next steps involved.
- Develop draft minutes for Chairman's vetting preferably 24-48 hours after meeting.
- Fair the vetted copy and circulate to all members whether present or absent at the meeting preferably a week before the next meeting.
- Take a follow-up action immediately e.g. Communication from 21st meeting of ..... Committee held on Date.
- **Record it** – literally. if you are concerned about being able to keep up with note taking, consider recording the meeting (e.g., on your smart phone, iPad, recording device, etc.) but be sure to let participants know they are being recording. While you do not want to use the recording to create a word-for-word transcript of the meeting, the recording can come in handy if you need clarification.

Common Mistakes in Taking Minutes - These include:

- Failure to document quorum
- Ambiguous description of Board actions
- Including information that could harm the Board in a legal sense.
- Lengthy delays in providing minutes after a meeting
- Delays in approving minutes from the past meetings –missing mistake
- Failing to file and manage documents
- Failing to get documents signed so that they serve as official and legal document

Profile of Decisions are summaries of decision reached in a meeting. It facilitates the implementation of decisions reached at meeting and it is usually produced within 24 hours of having the meeting. This is in line with the concept of Total Quality Management (TQM) or the concept of Bi-Focal Double Focusing - looking back and forward at the same time.

REPORT WRITING

According to **Oxford Dictionary**, report means *"a record of ascertained facts."* The formal report is the collection and interpretation of data and information. It is often an accurate, reliable and objective written account of a problem or project. While good information will not necessarily guarantee good decisions, bad information will almost certainly result in bad decisions. *The Free Dictionary.com* states that it is made with specific intention of or recounting certain events in a widely presentable and scrutinized form. The two most common forms of report writing are news report writing and academic report writing. Report writing is different from other forms of writing because it only includes facts, not the opinion or judgment of the writer (https://www. refence.com).

Good writing style for reports and other long documents is essentially the same as that for other kinds of writing however, it places demands on writers that are not always present in other communication situations. The information contained in reports is often more complex than that in other messages. Also, because reports almost always go up the chain of command, those higher in the organizational hierarchy typically use them as a basis for making judgments about the writer's competence. It is not always easy to write accurate, reliable, and objective reports.

Our own biases may tempt us to alter or omit information that would influence the decisions of management. Also, our perceptions are often less than perfect. In preparing even the simplest informational report, you should ask yourself whether you have included all the pertinent facts, or if you have mentioned only those facts that fit certain preconceptions of yours.

The problem of accuracy and objectivity is compounded in analytical reports, for which the writer must not only present the facts, but also interpret them and provide conclusions and recommendations. All of us have certain biases that interfere with our objectivity. For example, when things go wrong, we usually prefer to believe that someone else is responsible. It is easy for us to overlook facts when they go against our prejudices or wishes.

Preconceptions ("Don't confuse me with the facts; my mind is already made up.") can cause a writer to ignore some facts and to overvalue others, and, if the writer desires a particular outcome, he or she will be tempted—consciously or unconsciously—to slant the facts so that they lead to the desired conclusion. To achieve accuracy and objectivity in your reports, pay particular attention to the following guidelines:

1. **Identify—for your reader and for yourself—statements of fact, inferences based on fact, and value judgments.** You can use natural personalized language and still convey objectivity and believability by telling your reader when you are drawing a conclusion, and when you are stating an opinion. Make sure that you have sufficient evidence to warrant your conclusions, and include this documentation in the report. Avoid hasty generalizations and unsupported opinions.
2. **Use accurate, reliable, and objective sources.** Books and articles quickly become dated. Information on the Internet may be unsupported by external verification. Use recent sources, and avoid over-reliance on a single source. Compare information in one source with that found in other sources. Note, too, that people used as sources for questionnaire, survey, or interview data may be uninformed or prejudiced. Check the accuracy of all sources.
3. **Use analogies (comparisons) to explain and illustrate, but *not* to prove.** Because no two things, however similar, are exactly alike, no analogy can be complete enough to constitute proof. False analogies are a form of deception.
4. **Examine all cause-effect statements for completeness and accuracy.** Might the effect have more than one cause? Can you identify the specific cause of the effect with certainty? Or might you be dealing with a concurrent

effect (one that happens at about the same time and seems related to the main effect) rather than the cause?

5. **Be specific.** Avoid unnecessary modifiers and conditional clauses. Too many adjectives and adverbs make your argument seem emotional rather than logical; too many conditional clauses weaken your argument. Use concrete nouns rather than abstract ones. When possible, use people rather than ideas as the subjects of your sentences.

6. **Provide adequate documentation.** Cite your sources and clarify your methodology so that your reader will be able to estimate your accuracy and objectivity with some confidence. Be sure to use a method of documentation acceptable to your audience.

The Features or Characteristics of report include the following

1. **Complete and Compact Document**: Report is a complete and compact written document giving updated information about a specific problem.
2. **Systematic Presentation of Facts**: Report is a systematic presentation of facts, figures, conclusions and recommendations. Report writers closely study the problem under investigation and prepare a report after analyzing all relevant information regarding the problem. Report is supported by facts and evidence. There is no scope for imagination in a report which is basically a factual document.
3. **Prepared in Writing**: Reports are usually in written form. Writing reports are useful for reference purpose and it serves as complete, compact and self-explanatory document over a long period. Oral reporting is possible in the case of secret and confidential matters.
4. **Provides Information and Guidance**: Report is a valuable document which gives information and guidance to the management while framing future policies. It facilitates planning and decision making. Reports are also useful for solving problems faced by a business enterprise.
5. **Self-explanatory Document**: Report is a comprehensive document and covers all aspects of the subject matter of study. It is a self-explanatory and complete document by itself.
6. **Acts as a Tool of Internal Communication** : Report is an effective tool of communication between top executives and subordinate staff working in an organization. It provides feedback to employees and to executives for decision making. Reports are generally submitted to higher authorities. It is an example of upward communication. Similarly, reports are also sent by company executives to the lower levels of management. This is treated as downward communication. In addition, reports are also sent to shareholders and others connected with the company. It may be pointed out that report writing / preparation acts as a backbone of any system of communication.
7. **Acts as Permanent Record**: A report serves as a permanent record relating to certain business matter. It is useful for future reference and guidance.
8. **Time Consuming and Costly Activity**: Report writing is a time consuming, lengthy and costly activity as it involves collection of facts, drawing conclusion and making recommendations.

Template for Writing a Report

One of the common formats for presenting reports is **IMRAD:** Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion. Reports are not required to follow this format always. Find below the template usually adopted in writing non academic report:

- Cover Page
- Name of the Organization & Title of the Report

1.00 Preamble/Introduction – Stating the background information for the report
1.01 Membership of the Committee
1.02 Terms of reference
1.03 Duration
2.00 Methodology/ Modalities
3.00 Findings/Observation –take each term of reference as a sub-section, indicate your findings/ observations/ recommendations under each term of reference discussed.
5.00 Conclusion
6.00 Appreciation

- Signature lines for all members of the Committee
- Appendixes

Conclusion: "Practice" they say, "makes perfect". The lectures act as guide in developing one's writing skill but the true teacher is the Practice of what is learnt. Your talent means nothing without consistent effort and practice. With these guides you can be one of the best professionals. Thank you for listening.

PRESENT

Sir Leo Lion - Chairman
Mr. Harry Hippopotamus - Member
Mr. Cheshire Cat - Member
Lord Thorough-Bred Equine - Member
Mr. D. O. Z. Dormouse - Member
Mr. Baskerville Bloodhound - Member
Mr. Silas Sheep - Secretary

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