

Taking Minutes

Being a secretary for your organization is not a job to take lightly. The following criteria are important when considering who will best fulfill this role:

- Is this person reliable? Does he/she keep appointments?
- Is this person well organized? Does he/she complete tasks in a timely manner?
- Is this person a good listener? Is he/she able to be objective, not to make his/her own interpretation, and hear both sides of an issue?
- Is this person on top of what is going on? Is he/she able to appropriately weed out the trivial information and record the important facts for the record?

As you can see, the role of a secretary is more than "just taking minutes".

The secretary, in effect, is the historian. What he/she records will be referred to by current members as a reminder of finished and unfinished business, what needs follow-up, and what actions were taken. It will also be kept for future members to read to gain an understanding of where the organization has been and why. Many organizations make it the secretary's responsibility to notify the membership about upcoming meetings (time, date, location), as well as any important items to be discussed. The secretary should be present at all meetings. If he/she is unable to attend, a substitute person, preferably with the characteristics defined earlier, needs to be appointed. It is also helpful for the secretary to prepare himself or herself before each meeting.

A secretary should be sure to read the minutes of previous meetings, paying attention to style and format, and review the agenda and any attached documents. If the organization has agreed upon a standard format for minutes, a standardized form can be used and fill in discussions, etc. as they occur. If your organization has a structure that includes committees, be they ad hoc or standing, there always needs to be a secretary present to accurately record what transpired. It is not necessary to take down everything unless someone requests that the remarks be entered for the record. It is necessary, however, to take complete notes.

Motions and resolutions do need to be taken down verbatim and should be read back during the meeting to make sure they have been accurately recorded. There are several ways to take meeting minutes and each organization needs to choose the most appropriate method for them. A practical option is to record a summary of debates, agreements, and disagreements with a succinct explanation of the character of each. The second method is to take action minutes when decisions are reached and responsibilities are assigned.

In either case, make note of the following:

- The names of the people proposing any action or stating an option of a motion.
- Take down word-for-word any motions, resolutions, amendments, decisions or conclusions.
- Who seconded the motion.

- Whether or not a motion was withdrawn and what assignments were made and to whom. It is often helpful for both minute taking and for those attending the meeting if the chair or the secretary summarizes decisions that are reached. The summarizer should be most careful in clarifying those points of greatest controversy. It is the secretary's responsibility to signal the president or chairperson and ask questions regarding the subject being discussed if unsure.

A secretary should not wait until the meeting has been adjourned to get clarification; individuals can lose their perspective, issues can become less important, and one's memory can alter what actually occurred. Immediately after the meeting, the secretary must go over the notes while everything is still fresh, checking his/her notes for the following information:

- Type of meeting (executive, standing committee, etc.)
- Date, time, place
- List of attendees and those absent
- Time of call to order
- Approval and/or amendments to previous meeting minutes
- Record of reports from standing and special committees
- General matters
- Record of proposals, resolutions, motions, seconding, any final disposition and a summary of the discussion; also record of vote
- Time of adjournment

Once the minutes have been transcribed into draft form, they should be submitted to the chair for review and/or correction.

Finally, once they are returned, they need to be prepared in a formal form (preferably agreed upon beforehand) for final approval at the next meeting. These minutes should be sent out to all members within 3 or 4 days of the meeting. This allows members time to read the minutes for accuracy before the next meeting and while the previous meeting is still fresh in their minds.