Unit 3

Techniques for Preparing Minutes

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Be an efficient Minute-Taker with OneNote in any type of meeting.
- ✓ Be able to prepare and maintain a minute book.

Unit 3

Techniques for Preparing Minutes

Top Techniques

While formal and informal meetings are conducted differently, and their minutes appear in different formats, your job remains the same: to prepare an accurate account of the decisions and actions at a meeting.

To be a good Minute-Taker, you should:

- Understand company jargon
- Have background knowledge of the topics being discussed
- Know meeting participants or at least the spelling of their names
- Be familiar with past minutes
- Have good communication skills

Before the Meeting
Using OneNote's tag functionality you can very quickly create and use a checklist. A very simple way to make sure you are prepared for every meeting is to create a checklist in the Forms and Checklists section of the example workbook and to print this checklist before each meeting, using it to ensure that you have done everything you need to do before the meeting. As you continue to be a Minute-Taker you may want to use and customize the following list to your unique circumstances.

Here is a checklist of things to ask before the meeting:

- Are you taking notes for someone else to transcribe or will you do it yourself?
- Are there previous minutes to examine?
- When are you expected to have the first draft prepared?
- What is the purpose of the meeting?
- Are you permitted to voice your own comments in the meeting or is your function simply to take notes?
- Will you be expected to have certain information on hand?
- What is the parliamentary authority used by the organization? How familiar should you be with it?
- Has an agenda been sent out to all the participants?
- Are you supposed to call the participants and remind them of the meeting?
- Are you responsible for booking the room and room setup?

At the meeting, if room setup is part of your job, try to arrive early to ensure everything has been prepared. Some things you will want to prepare for include:

Seating

You as Minute-Taker should sit on the left hand side of the chair. The position to the immediate right is reserved for special guests. The Minute-Taker should be able to see all the members. At some more formal meetings the seating location of each meeting participant is important and pre-determined. If this is the case for a meeting you are attending as a facilitator you should consider creating a seating plan (this may or may not be appropriate for you to do depending on your role).

Using OneNote it is very easy to quickly draw simple diagrams using the Drawing Tools toolbar. It allows you to draw simple shapes like a rectangle representing a boardroom table, for example. You can quickly prepare a seating chart in OneNote (you might want to do this on a page in the Today's Meetings section) with a drawing of the table and people's names in the places where they are to sit. This can be printed and placed on the table as a reference for meeting participants to use as they arrive.

Reading the minutes

If minutes are distributed ahead of time, they are not read aloud. However, at a general meeting where the entire membership is invited to attend, it is common practice to read the minutes aloud. The Minute-Taker usually reads the minutes in this case. If this is the case, have them unofficially approved by the executive group ahead of time so you don't have to worry about mistakes. You should also practice so you can read smoothly.

Corrections

Make sure you have a system for noting corrections to past minutes.

Computer systems need power!

If you are using OneNote to record minutes, make sure you have all the equipment necessary, including access to an electrical outlet to keep your computer working correctly during the meeting. Although battery life is improving all the time for laptops it is often not possible to get through a longer meeting without "plugging in".

After the Meeting

If you don't have time to prepare the minutes immediately after a meeting, at least reread your notes to ensure they are sufficiently detailed so you can interpret them later.

According to memory studies conducted at the University of Minnesota, immediately after you listen to somebody else talk you can only recall 50% of what was heard. After a week, this percentage drops to about 10%. As Minute-Taker, you can't afford to depend on your memory to recall important decisions!

Writing Minutes

Rough Draft
Your drafts should be labeled “Rough Draft” or written in an area of the OneNote template clearly designated as a meeting notes area (in the included templates the formal report template is at the top, with meeting notes and other draft copy placed below it). Be sure that the ideas you want to express are clear in your mind before you begin to write.

In formal and semiformal minutes, always write in complete sentences using the past tense and the third person. Never use abbreviations; type a person’s name in full. In action minutes, point form is acceptable.

In formal minutes, words such as “Committee,” “Board,” “Department,” or “Division” are capitalized, as well as titles: “Secretary” and “President.” In informal minutes, these words are not capitalized unless they are accompanied by a specific name. For example, in “the committee wishes…” use lowercase “c.” However, in “the Education Committee wishes…” use capitals.

Use a straightforward narrative style and simple words. If the group is concerned only that the minutes be intelligible to them, you can be brief in your comments. If the minutes are a means of communicating with others, then your summaries should be in essay style.

Headings or subheadings should not be left dangling at the bottom of a page; they should be followed by at least two lines of text or moved to the next page.

Circulate the rough draft to as few people as possible or it will take forever to get the minutes written as everyone will have his or her own version of what occurred.

Use subheadings for individual topics in the body of the minutes. Each item on the agenda can become a separate heading.

Double check all figures, dates, and spelling of names.

Always keep your notes of the meeting until the minutes have been formally approved by the group. Once the minutes have been formally approved, they are accepted by the group as truth and your notes are no longer required.

Please see the section above for printing and e-mail information.

Final Draft
As minutes are normally filed in binders, use the bound manuscript format – 1.5 inches on the left margin and 1 inch for the right, top, and bottom if you are transferring your final minutes to Microsoft Word for printing (you can also set these print preferences in OneNote for printing but it is not as good as Word for this final copy).

The heading lines should begin 1 inch from the top of the paper and each heading line should be centered. The words can be typed in uppercase and lowercase letters or in capitals, depending on the organization's office style.

If the minutes are brief, double space the body and triple space between items. If they are long, single space them with a double space between paragraphs. Indent paragraphs ten spaces unless you are using subheads. (If you are, it is not necessary to indent.) Place the subhead directly above each paragraph.

Use bold face for subheads and to highlight dates and names.

The final copy of the minutes should be designated as such and distributed to the meeting attendees as part of this last step.

Editing Minutes

Spelling

People are either good or bad spellers. Most of us have a few words that we regularly forget how to spell. However, that doesn't mean we can't produce letters, memos, and reports that are word perfect.

Here are some tips for making your documents perfect:

- **Use a dictionary.** It doesn't matter which form you use, but it is important that you be consistent.
- **Use spell check in OneNote, but don't rely on it totally.** In the case of the English language, make sure you have selected the proper language type: English (US) or English (UK)
- **Use an online information service or telephone book to check spelling of names and addresses.** However, there are sometimes errors in telephone directories too. Ideally, you will have some type of e-mail communication from the meeting participants and possibly will have documents mentioning the other names recorded in the minutes. Use these sources to verify all names, places, and technical terms are spelled correctly.
- **Proofread your work,** and when possible have someone else proofread your work.
- **Learn some little tricks to help you remember words** that you use frequently but still spell incorrectly, like, "i before e, except after c."

Make up a list of your most common spelling errors and learn how to spell those words correctly. Keep that list posted so you can refer to it when you need to.

Proofreading

Proofreading carelessly can spoil a writer's best efforts. Proofreading is classic evidence that writing looks different to the writer and to the reader.

To the writer, typographical or spelling errors don't mean all that much. *So what if your finger slipped, or you always put two t's in "commitment"?* Well for the reader, an unfixed typo can transform the writer from a smart guy into a careless writer in an instant.

It is impossible to read about "fist class work" or "shot meetings" without breaking up. It may be unfair that proofreading matters so much, but it does. If you can put yourself in the reader's position, you'll proofread obsessively, gripped by the fear that a mistake will turn you into a laughingstock!

Proofreading errors is different from looking for punctuation or spelling or usage problems, and you fix them differently.

Punctuation, spelling, and usage are knowledge problems, and you fix them by learning. Proofreading problems are usually a matter of seeing, and you fix them by learning to look.

Ironically, the better you read, the worse you'll proofread, unless you consciously are aware of what you are doing. Good readers and fast readers guess what the words are, and they just check in now and again to see if they are right. The more they can guess, the less they have to look and the faster and better they read.

To be a good proofreader, you have to go back to being a child again, looking at every word as it comes along. Here are some principles to guide you:

- **Ignore content.** As soon as you start paying attention to what the text is saying, you'll start assuming and stop looking.
- **Assume there's at least one typo.**
- **Forget what you meant.** Read the minutes as though you never saw it before.
- **Read backwards.** This destroys comprehension, and your eyes can't trick you as easily. You might be surprised how many more typos you can pick up using this method!
- **Don't try to do something else when you proofread.** Stop tinkering with the thing and look for errors.
- **Take your time.** When you hurry, you guess and skim, and that usually doesn't work.
- **Proofread a second time, paying attention to content.** This is where you find those things spell check and reading backwards did not catch, such as, “The little cap pulls off it you put enough effort into it.”
- **Read it out loud.** It is more difficult, but still not impossible, for your eyes to skip over errors when you read aloud.
- **Try to have someone else proofread your work**, particularly if the document is important or going public.
- **Make proofreading a game.** Score points for yourself when you find an error!

Taking Minutes in an Interactive Meeting

The traditional style of meetings discussed so far is not particularly suited to informal problem solving, collaboration, or for working out complex, interdependent issues. Nowadays, progressive organizations are cutting meeting time with interactive meetings. Interactive meetings can be considered a mix of the traditional meeting, brainstorming, and troubleshooting and take to heart the old saying "bringing people to the table."

In conventional meetings, the chair normally has the most authority. The chair controls how the meeting proceeds, talks more than anyone else, and is responsible for the final decisions. This can affect group participation and morale and can result in poor decision making.

The Role of the Facilitator
In the interaction-style meeting, the chair separates procedural and decision-making responsibilities and appoints someone to handle a new role: that of the facilitator. This enables the chair to sit and listen fully to the opinions of the group.

The facilitator's job is to accomplish a specific set of tasks. The facilitator must solicit opinions from the entire group, ensure that everyone feels comfortable with the process, and keep the meeting on target.

The facilitator is assisted by the recorder, who ensures that all the members' main points are written on large sheets of paper taped to the wall in front of the group. In this way, everyone has a clear and immediate understanding of what is being said and can see that all statements are accurate. All ideas are considered to come collectively from the group, not from individuals, so the names of the originators of suggestions are not recorded.

Both the facilitator and the recorder must remain neutral and refrain from voicing their opinions or editorializing. If either one feels the need to make a personal statement, he or she must ask the group's permission to temporarily step out of the assigned role.

An ideal situation would have all the members of the group taking turns to act as facilitator and recorder. In fact, the facilitator and recorder may even be invited from an outside department or group.

Interactive meetings have the potential to be highly creative and productive. Members feel less intimidated and have equal opportunity to participate in brainstorming and problem-solving sessions. They leave feeling heard, validated, and energized. They have specific tasks to accomplish.

Taking Minutes at an Interactive Meeting
If you are appointed recorder at an interaction meeting, remember that your role is always to support the facilitator and the group.

As a recorder, you must have:

- Good listening skills.
- Legible hand writing.
- An understanding of the group's jargon.
- Confidence to ask the group to slow down if you fall behind in the recording.
- A nonjudgmental expression

It is important that you, as recorder, not put words in the mouth of a slow-thinking participant. Be quiet. Talk as little as possible. Defer your questions to the facilitator. You are his or her teammate and support person.

When listing the group's comments, use as much space as you would like in OneNote – whitespace often makes for more easily understandable notes. Don't worry about your spelling. You can use abbreviations, highlight key words, or use arrows (created with the drawing tools). Use the highlighting tool to highlight ideas or place a custom OneNote tag next to them to denote them as important. Get the members to restate any points you have missed or misrepresented. The meeting members share the responsibility for accurate recording.

As discussed earlier in this book, you can create audio recordings directly in OneNote if you want to be 100% sure you have accurately recorded what was said. In some organizations this is the norm as then there can be no question of what was said and by whom.

It is very easy to store images and other electronic media in OneNote so once a meeting is concluded (or during the meeting prior to erasing a whiteboard, for example) take digital photos of the various whiteboards and other presentation aids that were used by attendees so that these can be stored in OneNote along with other meeting minutes notes.

The Minute Book

Official copies of approved minutes are kept by the recorder in chronological order, usually in a three-ring binder set up for that purpose, or in an organized, electronic format. The cover page may indicate the period the minute book covers, such as, “The minutes of the Birdwatchers Society, from January 1, 2000 to December 31, 2002.”

You can use OneNote to organize your minutes and keep your own final copy but you will still need to comply with your organizations best practices in terms of the Minute Book.

The Minute-Taker normally has custody of the book, minutes, and all official documents. However, every member has the right to inspect the minutes, and certain minutes can be turned over to a committee if they need them to perform their duties. The Minute-Taker is also responsible for storing committee reports and documents submitted at meetings. Before filing this material note on the covers the dates they were received and state any further action that was taken.

An index is an alphabetical listing of all the main items discussed at meetings. Along with the topic, list the date it was discussed and the page number where the information can be found in the minutes. Indexing the minutes will take a few minutes but it will go a long way toward building your professional image. As Minute-Taker you are also the group historian.

Maintaining an archive of Meeting Minutes in OneNote makes it very easy to search the minutes and view them in a number of other ways. Under the View menu there are two menu options that can be used very effectively for this:

- **Pages sorted by date** – opens a sidebar showing all the pages sorted by the date they were created, or by the title, or by the section they are in. You can use this sidebar and the various sorting/filtering options to quickly find minutes, notes, or other material for a given dare in the past.
- **All tagged notes** – opens a sidebar showing all the tagged notes in a notebook and has similar sorting/filtering options. This sidebar is very useful if you use OneNote tags to designate motions, action items, etc. If you wanted to quickly find all the action items for a given committee over the course of a month’s weekly meetings you could probably do so faster this way than by pulling up the meetings minutes individually and reading through them, assuming you used tags to designate the action items.

Groups who don’t make a lot of motions may prefer to use a motions book rather than an index. The motions book contains all the motions and amendments ever made by that group, with the dates they were made. If this is the case for your organization, consider creating a Motions section in your notebook for tracking these motions and using the same procedure you use to print minutes for inclusion in the Minutes Book to prepare your entries in the Motions book.

The Minute-Taker should also have all the rules that the group use to govern itself by, such as the constitution and bylaws and procedures.

These should be combined into one book that the Minute-Taker brings to each meeting. These should be included in your OneNote notebook in a Section dedicated to them. This will make these easily searchable if there are questions about the rules or regulations during a meeting.

Further Reading:

- ✓ Effective Minute-Taking: Tips to Improve Your Meeting-Recording Skills by Joan Burge http://www.wildapricot.com/articles/how-to-write-effective-meeting-minutes http://www.effectivemeetings.com/meetingbasics/minutes.asp
- ✓ Mina's Guide to Minute Taking, Eli Mina Consulting Vancouver, BC, Canada
- ✓ Minutes for meetings ,Second edition published in 2019 Printed on recycled paper by Footprint Workers Co-operative