

11 questions you probably have about taking minutes

You feel you've *almost* got minute-taking down, but there's still that tiny flutter of apprehension going into a meeting. See if our Q&A soothes your mind:

1. The chairperson tended to talk really fast and sometimes I had trouble keeping up with him. What if I had really lost track of what he was saying?

It's totally appropriate to put up your hand and ask the person to repeat what was just said. It will be helpful to lead off with "For the minutes...", which is a subtle way to remind attendees that the proceedings are being transcribed and they may have to sometimes move at a slightly slower pace.

2. What's the longest I should wait after a meeting to turn my notes into the chairperson?

24 hours is a good rule—beyond that, you have to rely too much on memory for accuracy.

3. What exactly qualifies as a motion?

Anything that requires an agreement by those in attendance is considered a motion. These are usually a product of more formal meetings.

4. At one point two attendees really started going at each other about a contentious issue. It got pretty heated! Is there any way to document arguments in meeting minutes?

You should just write "There was discussion" or "discussion ensued."

5. Why do I want to avoid using terms like *we*, *you*, *they*, *them* or *their* as much as possible?

Minutes are not personal, but are a reporting of what happened. You want to achieve a detached voice, as if you are an outside reporter.

6. In the middle of the meeting, someone corrected another's calculation of some figures. Should I have made a note?

Generally, no, it's not a good idea or especially useful to note when an attendee corrects another.

7. When a speaker is detailing steps of a plan, do you list each one?

Preferably, yes. The same is true when attendees are brainstorming—you want to get all the good ideas down. (In the case of group brainstorming, remember it's not important to list who said what specifically; it's considered a unified discussion.)

8. Someone had to leave the meeting. Should I have made a note of it for the record?

If someone leaves the meeting permanently when there is still meeting business to be achieved, or is absent during an important vote, yes, it's good to note that. Temporary departures, though, don't really need to be noted.

9. If a whole other matter came up when a different agenda item was being discussed, how would I have noted that?

Make it a subsection under the scheduled agenda item. This puts it in the proper context.

10. What if someone gives a presentation?

This is common. Summarize in a long paragraph the presentation's essence and some details.

11. I can't just write "Supervisor Jones said..." again and again; it'll start to seem ridiculous, right? When can I start to use a more informal method of referring to people?

Take some time to establish what sort of formality your organization is going for before you think about abbreviating too much, and remember that your minutes may be reviewed by people unfamiliar with the group. But at some point, if you know for a fact that a person's initials won't be confused with anyone else, it's likely fine to go with those after a few full-name references at the beginning of your notes establish definitively who you're referring to.