

Meeting Minute Principles

One of the biggest reasons we dislike taking minutes is that people expect them to be something they aren't. Once we get minutes to behave the way they are supposed to, they become a lot less painful. Here are the principles talked about in the lesson, "The Four Questions Minutes Must Answer."

Minutes are not a transcript

A transcript is a written record of exactly what was said in a meeting. Transcripts have their place—Trials have a stenographer who writes down everything that everybody says. Oprah's TV show was important enough that you could order a transcript of each episode.

If the things said at your meeting rise to the level of Oprah, you should have a transcription made—in addition to the minutes.

Here are the disadvantages of turning your minutes into a transcript:

- They are really long—This makes them incredibly hard to read and writing them takes forever. If your group wants a transcript, they will have to wait weeks or months after the meeting to get the minutes, and then they will never read them because they don't have time.
- They are hard to use—Your meeting should be about actions and decisions; the important stuff. Transcripts take the important stuff and bury it in a sea of words.
- They are controversial—Someone is bound to feel like they were misquoted and all you'll hear about the minutes is, "I don't think that is what I said."
- They keep you from getting involved—The level of detail you need to get into in taking notes for a transcript will prevent you from participating in the meeting.
- They are unnecessary—The people in the meeting already heard everything that was said; they don't need to read it.

Here are the advantages of turning your minutes into a transcript:

- None.

Minutes are not a substitute for being there

If the purposes of your meeting can be accomplished by people reading about it, you didn't need to have the meeting.

Minutes are the official record

Basically, your minutes are a legal document that demonstrate just the facts of what actions were taken and why. They can be subpoenaed if the matters covered in the meeting are ever litigated. They should be short and should not include opinions, color, or jokes.

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The Four Questions

Meeting minutes must answer just four questions.

1. What actions were taken at this meeting?

This is the meat of any meeting. What did the group decide to do?

2. Why were those actions taken?

The group should exercise diligence in deciding what to do. Your minutes show this by recording (at a high level) what issues were discussed, alternatives considered, pros and cons raised, and questions asked.

3. Who took the action?

This question is answered by documenting who made the motions that led to the action, by documenting who was present and perhaps how individuals voted.

4. What follow-up does this meeting require?

This question is answered by documenting assignments to take certain actions such as preparing a report, making a filing, or sending a letter.

How to answer these questions is covered in Section 3.