

Tips on techniques for Recording Clerks (Eden Grace, 1997)

On writing and reading back minutes during the meeting:

I am a strong believer in composing and reading back the minutes during the meeting, rather than waiting until the next meeting. Very often the process of hearing the minute on a just-completed action can bring to light that the meeting was not yet in unity, or alternatively it can deepen the sense of unity and commitment to the decision taken. Recording Clerks might feel overwhelmed at the idea of exposing their work to scrutiny as they go along. Clerks might worry that reading the minutes will take up too much time in the meeting. It has been my experience, however, that the consideration of the minutes becomes a time of particular blessing in the meeting, as Friends reflect on the unity reached, and as the Recording Clerk is upheld with prayer for his/her work. Some practical suggestions I would make include:

- Don't be reluctant to ask the Clerk for time if you need it.
- Compose routine minutes ahead of time, if possible. This gives you a breather during the meeting.
- You don't need to read back minutes which are utterly straightforward (i.e. opening, closing, roll call, etc.)
- Speak slowly, clearly and with a loud voice.
- Don't be surprised if your minute seems to stir up new confusion or discussion. Hearing a minute can sometimes make the meeting aware that it wasn't in unity after all.
- Don't get into a position of defending a minute once you've read it back. Keep an open heart to changes which are suggested.
- Be willing to read an almost-finished minute and ask the meeting for help, if you are feeling stuck.
- In very prolonged and complex items, I tend to focus on writing down the substance of each message as it is spoken. Most of this material will not become part of the final minute, but this note-taking relieves me of the need to keep it all in my head, and helps me listen attentively to each speaker over a long period of time. If the meeting comes to unity at the end of the discussion, I make sure to minute the unity clearly and read it back for approval, but I ask the meeting's indulgence to compose the preliminary paragraphs after the meeting.
- Factual details which are not available during the meeting (exact money amounts, dates and minute numbers of previous actions, etc.) can be filled in after the meeting and needn't hold up the process of approving the substance of the minute during the meeting.

Elements of a good, clear minute:

Not every minute requires all these elements, but this is a checklist to keep in mind:

- pertinent background information
- citations of past action, including date and minute number
- salient points of the discussion which help explain the rationale for the decision taken (but not a summary of the whole discussion or a narrative of how the meeting reached its decision). Do not use names when summarizing the discussion, unless a Friend requests to be minuted as holding a certain opinion.
- the decision in clear language
- who is responsible for following up or taking next steps, and when a further report is expected back to the meeting.

On language and style:

- Use familiar, formulaic "Quakerese" language rather than trying to phrase things in new and creative ways.
- Avoid adverbs when expressing unity or clearness. To say that a couple was found "abundantly clear" for marriage implies a hierarchy of clearness that undermines our commitment to seek God's will in all matters.
- My personal style is often to phrase a minute with more reference to God than was necessarily present in the discussion. I find this helps deepen the unity reached, and serves as a subtle reminder to Friends of the faith basis of our business.
- Some meetings retain use of traditional Quaker dating language (First Day, Fifth Month), and others have given it up. The important thing is to be consistent with the usage of your meeting.

Tidy minute-taking for historical purposes:

As you write the minutes, imagine two groups of people looking over your shoulder: historians/archivists/genealogists decades into the future; and the meeting in future session needing understand its past action. Here are some technical suggestions for making your minutes history-friendly:

- Date each set of minutes.
- Clearly identify the body which is meeting, and the names of the Clerk and Recording Clerk.
- If practical, include a list of those who attended.
- Number each minute. (The best numbering system, in my opinion, is to start in January with minute 97-1 and continue through December with minute 97-xx. This means that every minute of the meeting has a unique number, and future reference and indexing becomes easier.)
- Title each item in such a way that the title is brief and easy to spot visually.
- When using names, use full first and last name, not nicknames.
- Each page should have a header or footer with the name of the meeting, date and page number.
- The closing minute of a meeting should indicate when the next meeting will be held. If a meeting is canceled or the date is changed for some reason, the opening minute of the next meeting should mention that fact, so that someone trying to track a sequence of meeting minutes will not wonder if they are missing the minutes of a particular date.
- Send minutes to the Yearly Meeting Archives once a year. They will provide acid-free paper to meetings upon request. (Refer to the brand-new Guide to the Archives, available from the YM Office, for more information on what records to send to the Archives.)
- Take responsibility for the meeting's permanent record of minutes. Organize it if you find it in disarray. Be prompt about putting your minutes into the record. (In some cases the meeting's Statistical Recorder has responsibility for the permanent records. If this is true in your meeting and it is functioning well, terrific. If you find no one is taking care of the records, consider it your role to do so.)
- Communicate regularly with the meeting's Recorder to make sure actions on memberships and marriages are correctly noted in the statistical records of the meeting.

On attachments:

I am of the opinion that attachments are dangerous things. I realize this is not a universally-held opinion, and some middle ground is probably called for. In reading past minutes of the meeting, I have seen too many instances in which the attachments are no longer attached to the permanent record. A minute which reads "Ministry and Counsel Committee presented the attached proposal for changing our First Day morning schedule. After discussion, Friends approved the proposal with gratitude for the Committee's work." is most unhelpful if the proposal is no longer attached. My personal guideline is as follows: Certainly anything which is approved by the meeting belongs in the body of the minutes, not as an attachment. Things which will be attached should be summarized in the minutes. Whenever I attach a document I assume it will go missing at some point, and I write the minute so that the action taken by the meeting is clear without needing the attachment. Here are some technical points on attachments:

- Be sure to note in the body of the minute that something relevant is attached.
- At the end of the minutes include a list of the attachments.'
- Make sure each attachment is dated and identifies the committee which submitted it.
- In the top corner of each attached page, give the date of the meeting, the page number of the attachment in the whole packet of the minutes, and the minute number to which it relates.

Ask for help:

- Don't be afraid to ask the meeting for clarification if you are confused, lost, or not following the discussion. Often if you are confused, so are others, and a pause for clarification will be helpful to the meeting as a whole.
- Don't be afraid to ask the clerk for time.
- Offer your help to the Clerk if you feel that reading what you have written would be useful at any point.
- Remember always to put yourself in the hands of God and anchor your recording process in prayer for guidance. Devise means for reminding yourself of your dependence on God throughout the meeting. I've seen Recording Clerks who pencil in a short prayer or Scripture verse at the top of each sheet of notepaper.