

# GUIDE TO MINUTE TAKING

**This Guide should be carefully studied by all members of the Secretariat on joining the Cabinet Office and consulted regularly thereafter.**

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"An abridgement which shall retain everything that is relevant, and reject what is not; which shall arrange the facts and elements of a case in their proper sequence, throwing them out in prominent relief or reducing them with a light touch, according to the proportions of their significance, and thereby leading necessary to the conclusions which a just judgement would suggest such an abridgement is indeed useful, for it transacts the business from beginning to end; but he who makes it must have the hand of a master, and should be called a statesman and not a précis-writer".

(From *The Statesman* by Sir Henry Taylor)

## I. General

1. A good minute of a meeting will be:

- i. brief but intelligible;
- ii. self-contained;
- iii. in the main, impersonal; and
- iv. to the full extent that the discussion allows, decisive.

2. *Brevity* should be sought in two ways. First, a minute should be selective. It is not a substitute for a verbatim record, and should not attempt to reproduce, however summarily, what every speaker said. It should record only the essence of the discussion, picking up the main threads which led to the conclusion. The temptation is always to make minutes too long. Second, the points selected for inclusion in the minute should be recorded as briefly as possible. Make use of any striking phrases used in the discussion: this will help to reflect the tone of the meeting. But do not attempt to set out the course of the arguments as they were developed by the speakers, for this will usually lead you into an unnecessarily diffuse style. You will find it easier to be concise if you dictate or write your minute without following too closely the rough notes taken at the meeting.

3. A minute should normally be *self-contained*, so that it is intelligible without reference to other documents. In applying this principle you should, however, take account of the nature and standing of the particular committee and the purposes which the minute will serve. The minutes of the more important committees, including those official committees directly concerned with the formation of policy, are designed as a basis not only for current action but also for permanent record; for this purpose they are much more valuable if they can be understood without reference to other documents. Moreover, self-contained minutes save the time of the many busy people who may have to read them.

4. These considerations do not apply so strongly to the minuting of the committees and working parties (usually of officials) which are concerned with preparatory work on policy documents, approval of briefs for international conferences and the like. In such cases it is legitimate to give only the briefest description of the document under discussion. The extreme case is where a committee is engaged in revising a document; here the revised document itself is, in a sense, the record of the committee's decisions and the minute can confine itself to recording the fact that the document was revised and where necessary the reasons for amendments of special significance. The amount of compression permissible must be a matter for individual judgement in the particular circumstances. Avoid, however, the kind of minutes

which seek to achieve brevity by an excessive use of reference back to other documents, either in the text or in footnotes.

5. To the fullest extent practicable, a minute should be *impersonal*, i.e. it should not attribute views to individuals. This applies particularly to the recording of points raised in discussion, and is dealt with fully in paragraphs 14 and 18-19 below.

6. Make your minute as crisp and *decisive* as you can. This is especially important for the conclusions (see paragraphs 21-28 below). But it applies also to the record of the discussion. Get down to the essential core of the discussion and record that as briefly and as clearly as possible.

7. The drafting and circulation of minutes is the responsibility of the secretariat of the committee; the contents are a matter for their judgement and (save in the circumstances mentioned in paragraph 21 below) suggestions that they should be shown in draft to the chair (or, still more, to members) are to be discouraged. Members of committees sometimes ask that something they have said should be "on the record". It is usually right to meet requests of this kind by some means or other but not if the result would be to distort the record of the discussion as a whole. Similarly, some discretion is permissible in deciding on the recording of remarks which a chairman may introduce with some such phrase as "the Committee records that ...".

## **II. Structure of a Minute**

8. The first purpose of a minute is to set out the conclusions reached so that those who have to take action will know precisely what they have to do. The second is to give the reasons why the conclusions were reached.

9. A minute should, therefore, fall clearly into the following parts:

- i. statement of the problem;
- ii. discussion;
- iii. chair's summing up (where appropriate);
- iv. conclusion.

10. It is a good rule to think out the sequence of a minute before you begin to write or dictate it, working backwards from the conclusions. Keep the conclusions clearly in your mind to help you to decide how much of the discussion needs to be recorded and in what order it can best be arranged. To produce a good minute, you must get clear, before the start, the framework around which you are going to

build, i.e. the essential points leading up to the conclusion. You will not get the same result if you first try to summarise everything that was said and then consider what you can afford to miss out.

### **III. The Statement of the Problem**

11. Begin your minute by recording the memorandum or memoranda under discussion, giving the number and origin of each. Thus:

"The Committee considered a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (LP(01)4) about the Outworking Bill."

or where there are several memoranda,

"The Committee considered memoranda by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (EA(PC)(00)3) and by the Minister of State, Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions (EA(PC)(00)4) the potential restructuring of the water industry."

or

"The Committee had before them the following memoranda on capacity building in Macedonia:

Memorandum by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (ODOP(CP)(01)14);  
Memorandum by the Ministry of Defence (ODOP(CP)(01)15)  
Memorandum by the Department for International Development (ODOP(CP)(01)16).

12. Next, set out the problem for decision or subject for discussion. Where possible this opening statement should make the record of the subsequent discussion intelligible without reference to other documents (see, however, paragraphs 3 and 4 above). But where this cannot be done with reasonable brevity, do not attempt a full summary: state the subject and leave the subsequent reader to refer to the memorandum itself.

13. Most discussions begin with a statement by the author of a memorandum, who either summarises or enlarges upon it. Try not to include in the minute both a summary of the memorandum and a record of the author's opening statement. If the speaker adds nothing

to what was in the memorandum, confine yourself to a summary of that; if he or she enlarges upon the memorandum, omit the summary and put into his or her mouth a statement covering both the essence of the memorandum and the supplementary points he or she brought out. There is, however, no need for the summary to cover every point mentioned. The essential thing is to indicate clearly what the speaker is asking the committee to authorise, with sufficient material from his or her remarks or the circulated memorandum to make your account clear and self-contained. Sometimes a memorandum for discussion will not be from an individual member of the committee but, for example, an interdepartmental report circulated under cover of a note by the secretaries. In such cases it will usually be possible, if a member of the committee makes a substantive opening statement, to include in the record of it sufficient reference to the content of the memorandum itself. Otherwise it will be best to have a separate paragraph describing the memorandum briefly, introduced by some such phrase as "The memorandum recorded that..." or "The Working Party had been asked to consider x report; their conclusions were ...". As indicated in paragraph 4 above, only the briefest description may be needed of the documents under discussion by some (mainly official) minor committees and working parties.

#### **IV. The Discussion and Summing Up**

14. The ideal minute, after stating the problem for decision or matter for consideration, will proceed to a concise summary of the important points made in discussion, followed where appropriate by the chair's summing up of the discussion. To the fullest extent practicable, this part of the minute should be impersonal, i.e. should not attribute views to persons. There are several reasons for this rule:

- i. it makes for brevity - a point can usually be recorded more concisely in an impersonal form;
- ii. a point raised by one speaker will often be taken up and developed by others - in an impersonal minute you need record it only in its final form but if you attribute it to the original speaker you will have to add the comments and restate it;
- iii. it is often convenient to weld together into a single paragraph a number of points made by various speakers;
- iv. the impersonal style avoids giving a misleading impression that the discussion was carried on solely by those speakers named in the minutes;

- v. it also tends to avert suggestions for amendment of the minutes - departments naturally look with special care at paragraphs which attribute statements to their representatives and tend to ask for additions and modifications which are not strictly necessary for the purpose of a minute.

15. The record of the discussion may be cast in the form of one or more longish paragraphs developing the arguments on either side into a coherent whole, or as a series of short lettered paragraphs listing the points made; or on occasion it may be convenient to set out the main argument in continuous paragraphs and then to add supplementary or subsidiary points in a lettered series ("In further discussion the following additional points were made..."). Which of these methods is chosen will depend largely on the nature of the discussion and of the topic. The use of longish paragraphs has the advantage that it shows the development of thought towards the conclusion more clearly than a series of individual points, and makes it easier to weed out irrelevancy and achieve the impersonal style. Do not use the "points made" device to save thought about the construction of the minute. If lettered paragraphs are used, the series should be consecutive as described in paragraph 48.

16. Whichever method of recording the discussion you use, it is often inexpedient to reproduce the points in discussion in the order in which they were made. Look forward to the conclusion, and arrange the points in the logical order in which they lead up to it.

17. Do not hesitate to discard the irrelevant and the inessential. Much said in a discussion need not be recorded. And much that was relevant to a certain stage in the discussion may, in retrospect, be found unnecessary to the conclusion eventually reached.

18. There are, of course, occasions on which it is necessary to attribute views to individuals. One example is when a specifically departmental point of view has been put forward, or a suggestion has been made to safeguard a departmental interest. A conflict of interest between two departments usually means that the views expressed on each side must be attributed to their representatives. (In the minutes of official committees attribution to a department rather than to a named individual is usually more appropriate.) Another example is where a speaker reserves his position or registers dissent. Where a junior Minister reserves the position of his or her senior Minister, the reservation should be reflected in the conclusions, for example:

"The Committee -

Approved, subject to confirmation that the Secretary of State for Social Security was in agreement, the proposals in..."

Except in this circumstance, where there is dissent in a Ministerial Committee the constitutional doctrine of collective responsibility requires that a Minister who maintains his dissent after the discussion should ask for the matter to be referred to the Cabinet (or a superior Ministerial Committee); and the minutes should make this clear. Dissent in the Cabinet itself (at the stage of the conclusion) should be recorded only if the dissenting Minister indicates that he intends to resign. (In such a case it may well be necessary to postpone issuing the minutes until the position is clarified, since unless the Minister does resign, he is still bound by collective responsibility and dissent should not then be recorded.)

19. While there may sometimes be special reasons for indicating when opinion is divided, which speakers supported which view (or what was the numerical opinion on each side), it is normally undesirable to do so. As a rule it is preferable to make an impersonal record on the lines: "On this question there was some difference of view. Some members of the committee considered that... Others took the view that...". Or the discussion may conveniently be recorded on this basis: "In support of this proposal, the following arguments were used... On the other side, it was pointed out..."

20. When the chair has summed up the discussion it is usually convenient to record this as a formal summing up; and often when the chair has not specifically summed up it may be helpful to weld some of his or her remarks into a summing up paragraph. This is helpful in recording the sense of the meeting and will often make it possible to avoid excessively long conclusions. But there is no need to include a short summing up paragraph which merely reiterates discussion points or says little more than the conclusions do. A summing up paragraph calls for special care since much attention will be paid to it. It is right to make it as firm as the consensus reached will allow; but this must be done with complete integrity and any temptation to ascribe more than is justified must be resisted. The formula for introducing the summing up paragraph is as follows:

"THE LORD CHANCELLOR, summing up the discussion, said..."

Where there has been a summing up paragraph, the conclusions may, if appropriate, refer back to it as in the examples given below in

paragraphs 23, 25 and 26. Where a discussion falls into two or more sections, it is sometimes convenient to insert summing up paragraphs section by section, as follows

"THE LORD CHANCELLOR, summing up this part of the discussion..."

## **V. The Conclusions**

21. A minute should end with conclusions which are clear and precise. The chair will sometimes have summed up the discussion and indicated the conclusion reached. But, if he or she has not done so, it is the duty of the secretary to draft a set of conclusions which fairly express the sense of the meeting. There are many occasions on which the members of a committee are not altogether clear what has been decided until they see the minutes. It is a proper function of a secretary to clarify, as well as to record, the results of a meeting. Do not shirk this function. But do not frame conclusions which go beyond what is implicit in the general sense of the discussion; remember that, if in doubt, you can consult the chair by showing him or her the minutes in draft.

22. Where action is required, the conclusions should place the responsibility firmly upon the department or departments which are to carry it out. Thus, never say "Agreed that a memorandum should be prepared..."; instead say "Invited the Minister for X to prepare a memorandum...". If several departments are concerned, it is best to name them all, being careful to indicate with whom the initiative is to rest; thus, "Invited the Chancellor of the Exchequer, in consultation with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and the Lord Privy Seal, to prepare a memorandum...". Do not use the phrase "Invited the Ministers concerned..." unless it is quite clear who they are. But if the conclusion of a discussion is that members of a committee generally should take certain action, it may be permissible, provided that there is no ambiguity, to say simply:

"Invited members of the Committee, in preparing guidance for their representatives at the Conference, to be guided by the points made in the Chair's summing up..."; or

"Invited members of the Working Party to send comments on the draft report to the Secretaries by..."

Remember also that responsibility for executive action should never be placed upon a committee or its secretariat (except responsibility for drafting a report or making procedural arrangements).

23. In drafting conclusions it is essential to be precise, since departments have to base their action upon them. It is also important (so far as is possible without sacrificing precision) to be brief. Whenever possible, indicate a clear course of action in the conclusion itself. This does not mean that the conclusions need spell out at great length what the course of action is. For example it is often sufficient, when a memorandum containing specific proposals for action has been approved after discussion by a committee, to say in the conclusion:

"The Committee-

Approved the proposals in HS(D)(00)9 on competitive tendering for the operation of a new drugs remand centre."

It is not necessary to add such words as

"and invited the Minister of State, Home Office to open negotiations with..."

provided that it is clear from the minute that approval of the proposals in the memorandum carries with it approval of the consequential action. On occasion it may be a legitimate means of shortening the conclusion to say:

"Approved the proposals in HS(D)(00)9 on competitive tendering for the operation of a new drugs remand centre, subject to the points made in discussion/in the summing up of the Minister for the Cabinet Office."

But do not adopt this last mentioned formula if it leaves any room for doubt what action has been approved.

24. There will of course be discussions which will require a good deal more than this by way of conclusions. When a committee's conclusion is complex, it often makes for clarity to divide it into its constituent parts, making a separate paragraph of each. In doing so, carry the action forward to the full extent of the committee's decision and take care to retain a logical sequence. Thus:

"The Committee-

1. Invited the members of the Committee to send to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by 15th January any comments on the draft White Paper on Employment Strategy (9EA(WW)(00)3).

2. Subject to conclusion 1 above, approved the draft White Paper for publication on 22nd January.

3. Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary -

- i. to arrange for instructions to be sent to the Ambassador in Washington on the lines indicated in the Prime Minister's summing up;
- ii. to give further consideration to... and to bring further proposals before the Committee in due course.

Avoid a single strung-out conclusion linking together several different pieces of action.

25. Convention governs the formulae used in conclusions to indicate different kinds of action. The convention is not arbitrary, but reflects the constitutional position of Ministers as individually responsible for matters covered by their department while sharing in the collective responsibility of members of the Government. The conventional formulae also distinguish the respective positions of the chairman of a committee and of its secretariat. Thus, we say

"The Committee-

1. Approved [a memorandum].
2. Agreed [on a course of action].
3. Agreed to resume their discussion...
4. Instructed the Secretaries...
5. Invited the Chancellor of the Exchequer [or the Treasury in the case of an Official Committee] to... (do not say "authorised").
6. Took note that the Chancellor of the Exchequer [or Treasury] would...
7. Took note.
8. Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's [Chair's] summing up of their discussion [and invited the Ministers concerned to proceed accordingly].

26. Caution is needed in the use of the phrase "took note". Example 6 above has a proper and precise meaning. Example 7 is legitimate where a memorandum or oral statement is for information only and no collective decision is required, but should be avoided where the Committee has discussed a proposal involving a recommendation for action. Particular care is necessary over the use of Example 8 which can be both slack and less than fair to departments at the

receiving end. On the other hand it is a useful tool on occasions, e.g. when the discussion is not entirely conclusive, or where alternative courses of action have been identified, the choice depending on the course of external events or the obtaining of further information. It may also have special significance on occasions when the summing up contains a major statement of policy. It should not however be used indiscriminately and itemised conclusions are always to be preferred. The phrase should never be used as a ritual in addition to itemised conclusions unless the whole, or an important part, of the summing up is not the subject of a separate conclusion. When an item consists of a number of reports from which no action arises, for example under Current Events or Foreign Affairs at Cabinet, it is customary to put "The Cabinet - Took Note" at the end of the whole item but it may be appropriate to insert it also at the end of the record of a discussion of a particular subject, especially if the discussion is substantive or includes a statement of policy.

27. The conclusions will normally be set out at the end of the minute. If, however, the minute falls naturally into a number of different sections, the conclusions can conveniently be interspersed with the record of the discussion instead of being brought together at the end. In that event each separate section should end with the relevant conclusion, inset in the text and serially numbered for the whole minute.

28. If a Minister is absent from a meeting of a committee to which he or she belongs and is represented by a subordinate Minister from the department, the conclusion should invite the Minister actually present, not the Minister who is the member, to take action. There is however, no objection to naming in conclusions Ministers absent from and not represented at a committee (special steps may, of course, need to be taken by the secretariat to ensure that the department is aware of the committee's decision).

## **VI. Tricks of the Trade**

### *The Front Page*

29. The first page of a set of minutes should set out the names of all who attended the meeting, distinguishing between:

- i. the members of the committee ("Present");
- ii. others invited to attend, including persons deputising for members ("The following were also present"); and

- iii. the secretaries, whose names (if there is more than one) are best put under a heading "Secretariat".

The distinction between "Present" and "Also Present" does not arise when a committee is composed of departmental representatives and not named individuals. For Ministers, the name as well as the office should be stated, thus "The Right Hon. Fred Bloggs, MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer". For officials give the name and department but not the rank, thus "Adam Smith, Home Office."

It is customary to give the titles "The Right Hon." and "The Hon." and to add "QC" and "MP", where appropriate, but decorations are not added.

30. The names of Ministers are set out (within each group "Present" and "Also Present") in order of Ministerial precedence. Up to date precedence lists are available from the Assistant Private Secretary to the Secretary of the Cabinet. Parliamentary Secretaries are shown under their respective departments and on front pages take the precedence order of their Ministers.

31. There is no firm rule about the order in which the names of officials should be given. The normal practice is to arrange them in accordance with the order of precedence of the Ministers in charge of their departments. Under this rule the Treasury is the senior department, as the Prime Minister is First Lord of the Treasury, and members of the Cabinet Office staff attending meetings other than as secretaries should as a matter of courtesy (not of departmental precedence) be listed after representatives of other departments.

32. Where both Ministers and officials attend a meeting, the list of officials present follows the list of Ministers, each list being marshalled as described above. Where Chiefs of Staff are present at a meeting of Ministers they should be listed (in the order of their seniority on the Chiefs of Staff Committee) after Ministers but before any officials who may be present. Similarly Chiefs of Staff who are present in person at meetings with officials may be listed before officials; but officers deputising for the Chiefs of Staff should be listed as "Also Present" (where the distinction is made) and grouped with other Ministry of Defence representatives, whether civil or military.

33. Occasionally members of the Privy Council who are not Ministers (e.g. former Ministers now serving as Ambassadors) attend meetings with officials. They should be listed immediately before officials. Otherwise an official serving abroad e.g. in an Embassy or High Commission should normally be listed with officials of the department to which he or she belongs.

34. When a Minister or official is present only for part of the meeting, this should be shown on the front page by adding after his name a note indicating for which item or items he or she attended, thus "(Items 1-3)". Similarly if a Minister or official takes the chair for part of a meeting, the front page will show it as follows:

The Right Hon. Lord Irvine QC,  
Lord Chancellor (In the Chair for Items 1 and 2)

The Right Hon. Margaret Beckett, MP,  
President of the Council (In the Chair for Items 3-5)

### *Ministers' Titles*

35. In the body of the minutes Ministers should be mentioned by title not by name. The Chair should also be mentioned by title, thus "The President of the Council said..." not "The Chair said...". In minutes of meetings of junior Ministers this rule may sometimes be relaxed in order to avoid a wearisome repetition of long titles. (Chairs of official committees are referred to as "The Chair" throughout.)

36. Though titles should always be given in full on the front page, the minutes themselves will read more smoothly if some of the longer titles are abbreviated. In the body of the minutes, therefore, the following short titles should be used:

Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary  
Home Secretary  
President of the Council  
Chief Whip  
Chief Whip, House of Lords

37. Otherwise, Ministers should be given their full titles as shown in the list circulated in the Cabinet Office, e.g. do not abbreviate "Chief Secretary, Treasury" to "Chief Secretary".

### *Headings*

38. Each separate subject discussed at a meeting should be recorded in a separate minute; and each minute in a set of minutes should be consecutively numbered and should be given its proper title-heading.

39. The choice of a heading needs some thought. Do not copy slavishly the title which the department has given in its memorandum. There is an index to Cabinet Conclusions and each of the main Ministerial Committees and the proper criterion in choosing a heading

is how the minute will be entered in the index. Decide first the main subject under which the minute should be indexed; then if necessary add a short description of the special topic, within that general heading, to which the minute relates. Below that add a reference to the last occasion on which the same topic was discussed in the format Committee symbol(Year)(Meeting)(Minute). Thus:

"French Beef Imports (Previous Reference: CC(00)34.2)

If the subject has been discussed before, use if you can the same heading as was used in the earlier minute.

40. It is bad practice to include a number of miscellaneous topics in a single minute headed "Matters Arising from Minutes of Previous Meeting". This makes difficulties for the indexer, and even greater difficulties for any one who has to search for earlier references to a subject before an index is available. If, exceptionally, several subjects have to be included in a single minute (e.g. on Foreign Affairs) a separate paragraph should be given to each, and any previous reference should be inserted against it in the margin.

#### *Previous Reference*

41. Always quote the previous reference if there is one. This assists indexing and subsequent reference to the minutes as a permanent record. The reference will normally be to an earlier discussion by the same committee, i.e. an earlier minute in the same series. There is no rule against quoting a reference to a minute in another series and this is sometimes helpful, for example when a question is referred from one committee to another. However in general it is best not to quote Cabinet and Ministerial Committee references in Official Committee minutes, and vice versa.

42. The reference to be quoted should, as a rule, be the last previous record of the particular topic under discussion i.e. in the example given above, the last discussion on French Beef Imports. But when this would involve going back a long way, it may be more convenient to refer to the last discussion on the general subject i.e. in the example, the last discussion on food imports. On occasion it may be useful to quote two references.

43. If a previous reference has been quoted in the heading, there is no need to repeat that reference in the body of the minute. Other references should, where necessary, be quoted (in brackets) in the minutes.

## *Contents Table*

44. The headings (excluding the "Previous References") of the various minutes in a set of minutes should be brought together into a table of contents which should be set out between the list of those present at the meeting and the first minute. Thus:

### CONTENTS

| Item No. | Subject                | Page |
|----------|------------------------|------|
| 1.       | PROCEEDS OF CRIME BILL | 1    |
| 2.       | ADOPTION BILL          | 4    |
| 3.       | EXPORT CONTROL BILL    | 6    |

The inclusion of such a table of contents makes it easier to navigate a series of minutes: and it is specially valuable during the interval before the index becomes available.

## *Description of Papers*

45. To facilitate subsequent identification a Committee paper is described as a "Memorandum" (or a "Note"), and when referring to such papers in the minutes the reference number should usually be inserted after the name of the author; thus, "The Committee considered a Memorandum by the Home Secretary (EA(PC)(01)7) on...". If it is a short paper covering a memorandum, and it is desirable so to describe it, it should be called a "note": thus, "a note by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary (DOP(A)(00)7) covering a memorandum prepared in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office". (The Joint Intelligence Committee uses slightly different terminology.)

46. The traditional opening phrases for a minute are "The Committee considered..." or "The Committee had before them...". The first of these is the better because it is shorter; but it is convenient to ring the changes between the two, partly to avoid monotony and partly because it is not always appropriate to say that a committee "considered" a memorandum. It is best to reserve "had before them" for items where the memorandum was the occasion, rather than the basis for the discussion.

## *Notation*

47. Conclusions should always be numbered consecutively. The conclusion is the part of a minute which is most often quoted and it is convenient for that purpose to have a uniform system of numbering. Thus "EA(PC)(00)3rd Meeting, Minute 1, Conclusion 3".

48. Arabic numbers being used for conclusions, points in discussion should be lettered *a, b, c*, etc. This lettering should be carried on consecutively throughout the minute. Thus, if a series of points has been set out as *a* to *d* a second series later in the minute should not begin with *a* over again but should continue from *e* onwards. This may seem odd at first sight, but it will be found to be a convenience in subsequent references to the minutes. If Minute 1 contains more than one point numbered *a*, it may be necessary to use such clumsy descriptions as "the first paragraph *a* on page 2". For other enumerations, e.g. in summarising memoranda under discussion, Latin numerals should be used *i, ii, iii*, etc.

### *Collective Nouns*

49. Grammatically it is a matter of choice whether such words as "Government" and "Committee" are treated as singular or plural; but it is irritating to find this choice exercised differently in successive paragraphs of the same document. Words such as *Government, Committee, Meeting, Department, local authority, Army, Navy, Air Force*, when used in a collective sense, should be treated as plurals. Thus, "The Government have decided...", and "The Committee consider...", but "The Government is composed of...", and "The Meeting was adjourned...".

50. The first person plural "we" can sometimes avert cumbersome repetition of "the United Kingdom Government", but it can also be a source of ambiguity, and the collective to which it refers can change in mid-sentence, without the reader or perhaps even the writer noticing it. It should be used very sparingly, and then with strict regard for consistency and only when there can be no doubt to whom it refers (e.g. whether to the Committee, the Government or the country).

### *Proper Names*

51. Though Ministers in the United Kingdom Government should always be described by their titles, a minute will often read more easily if other persons are mentioned by name rather than title, e.g. M. Delors, Mr Clinton or Herr Kohl. Remember, however, that minutes are written not merely for current use but for permanent record; 20 years hence a reader may be baffled by a name which, though now a household word, may not then be so familiar. It is therefore a good rule to give, at the first mention, both name and title: thus, "the United States Secretary of State, Mr Bloggs, had said..." and only thereafter to use the proper name alone.

## Capital Letters

52. When a remark is attributed to a particular speaker his or her name (or title) should be typed in block capitals. The purpose of this is to enable the reader to see at a glance what was said by a particular speaker. It follows that block capitals should not be used for other references to persons. Thus, "THE LORD CHANCELLOR pointed out that...", but "The Lord Chancellor had set out in his memorandum the reasons...". It is also unnecessary to use block capitals for subsequent references to the same speaker in the same part of the Minute, thus "THE LORD CHANCELLOR said... The Minister went on to explain...".

53. In general, block capitals should be sparingly used in the body of the minute. If the page is peppered with them, their effectiveness for emphasising a subject-heading or the name of a speaker is spoiled. It is unnecessary to write "THE COMMITTEE" either in the course of the minute or in setting out the conclusions.

54. Initial capitals should also be sparingly used. It is preferable to write *Bill, Committee, Services and Armed Forces* (when the reference is to our own Navy, Army and Air Force) and "*Civil Service*" (though *civil servants*). And there are special reasons for writing in official documents *Ministerial discussion, Parliamentary procedure and Members of the Commonwealth*. But such terms as *local authorities, military authorities, police, courts of law and interdepartmental* should be written without initial capitals. Nor should capitals be used in referring to the papers under discussion; thus, "The Committee had before them a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Health (HS(D)(00)6)...".

55. The general rule should be, when in doubt, do not use capital letters.

## Abbreviations

56. If you are going to refer to an organisation by its initials in the course of a minute, introduce the initials by spelling out the title in full the first time it occurs and adding the initials in brackets, e.g. "the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)". The full version should be used the first time the organisation is referred to in each item in a set of minutes because individual items may be extracted. In the minutes of official committees this rule may be relaxed, at discretion; but bear in mind its reason - records will be consulted in the future by people to whom the initials might mean nothing. Watch that abbreviations do not get out of hand e.g. "North Atlantic Council" is more correct than "Council of NATO". Do not in general use initial abbreviations for nouns describing Government departments: but "ECGD" for "Export Credits Guarantee Department" and DETR for Department of the

Environment, Transport and the Regions are legitimate exceptions to this rule (provided they are spelt out in full on first use). Some discretion is permissible when initials are used adjectivally, e.g. "DTI officials...".

57. Bear in mind also that a verbal abbreviation may be preferable to an initial abbreviation e.g. "the Commission" rather than the "CC" for "the Competition Commission" on second and subsequent occasions.

58. European Union institutions should be referred to (and, after their first use, abbreviated) as the European Commission (the Commission), the European Parliament (EP) and the European Court of Justice (ECJ). Council formations should be identified as e.g. the Agriculture Council, the General Affairs Council. The Office of the United Kingdom Permanent Representative to the EU may, after their first use, be abbreviated to UKRep, and the Committee of Permanent Representatives to COREPER. References to Treaty Articles should make clear which Treaty is concerned, e.g. Article 251 TEC, or Article 6(2) TEU. Figures quoted in euro should take the form "800 meuro" or "6 beuro".

#### *Reference to Committees*

59. For preference, refer to other committees in minutes by their full titles. If you need to refer to a committee frequently, use the current symbol as an abbreviation, introducing it in the usual way. In the case where a Ministerial Committee has a related Official Committee (or vice versa) one may be referred to in the minutes of the other eg "The Official Committee" provided that this causes no ambiguity. Always use the definite article before "Cabinet" and before the titles of committees.

60. Where possible, preserve the fiction that "Committees" in the MISC series are ephemeral by referring e.g. to "the Ministerial Group on Rural Affairs (MISC 8)". The minutes of such meetings should normally begin "The Meeting had before them" and the conclusions should say "The Meeting...".

#### *Reference to the Sovereign*

61. It is correct to use a capital "T" in "The Queen" but wrong to use a capital for "her" or "she". Initial capitals should, however, be used in "Her Majesty", which as a matter of style, is better not placed immediately before "The Queen", but used separately in place of "she" or "her". The same applies to "His (or Her) Royal Highness". Speeches on the Opening of Parliament are traditionally filled with capitals and are an exception to these rules.

### *Reference to the United Kingdom*

62. Remember that Great Britain comprises England, Wales and Scotland and is not the same as the United Kingdom, which additionally comprises Northern Ireland. "United Kingdom" and not "Great Britain" should be used except in the relatively rare context where Great Britain is meant. "Britain" is used, e.g. at Commonwealth Conferences to denote the United Kingdom; do not so use the term in minutes. "British" may, however, be used in the customary sense as the adjective corresponding to "United Kingdom"; but note that in a few contexts e.g. "British nationality" the reference of "British" is Commonwealth-wide and it may be necessary, in order to avoid ambiguity, to use "United Kingdom" as an adjective. "United Kingdom" may only be abbreviated to "UK" if it has been spelt out in full first (as detailed in paragraph 56). The use of the term "the United Kingdom" is preferable to "we" or "our".

63. Avoid the phrase "Her Majesty's Government". In a domestic context "The Government" will usually suffice. In a Commonwealth or other context where some qualification is needed, say "the British Government" or "the United Kingdom Government", for Her Majesty has other Governments within the Commonwealth.

64. Similarly, "Her Majesty's Ambassador" is not strictly correct; it is also needlessly formal in minutes. It will usually suffice to say "Our Ambassador/High Commissioner" or "the Ambassador in Washington". A more formal and less ambiguous form, where this is required, is "the British Ambassador/High Commissioner".

### *Reference to the Commonwealth*

65. It is incorrect to write "Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to inform Commonwealth Governments", for the United Kingdom is itself a part of the Commonwealth and this phrase should run: "Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary to inform other Commonwealth Governments". Similarly, "the Commonwealth" (e.g. "safeguarding the interests of the Commonwealth") should not be used if the reference is to the Commonwealth countries other than the United Kingdom (i.e. "safeguarding the interests of other Commonwealth countries") but only if it is intended to refer to the Commonwealth as a whole, including the United Kingdom.

### *Reference to the United States*

66. The phrase "The Americans" is a convenient but inexact alternative phrase, and care should be taken in using it. For precision say "United States Government/Administration/authorities".

### *Members of the Privy Council*

67. Privy Counsellors, and not Councillors, is the correct description.

### *Omissions from Minutes*

68. It is unnecessary to record purely domestic matters mentioned in committee, for example words of welcome to new members and valediction to those departing except on those occasions when a formal tribute is paid to a joining or departing member, for example a senior Minister resigning from office. On occasion it may be appropriate to note briefly words of welcome to "outside" visitors to a committee e.g. "the Chair, welcoming the British High Commissioner in Zambia to the meeting, invited him to describe...". Procedural arrangements can often be omitted: for example it is unnecessary to say "the Chair proposed that the Working Party should consider the Report section by section"; all that is needed is "in discussion of the Report the following points were made". Discussion of arrangements for future meetings can usually be omitted, the results simply being embodied in a Meeting Notice.

### *Corrections to Minutes after Issue*

69. If an error is detected after the minutes have been issued, a range of options are open to you. If it is a minor typographical error, it should be sufficient to amend the Confidential Library and Bound Volume copies. Where the error is more substantive, it may be worth sending a corrigendum note or a letter correcting the point to those present at the meeting. In some cases it will be more appropriate to issue a revised set of minutes. Proposals from departments for the correction of the substance of minutes require careful handling, and should not be too readily accepted. If a suggestion for amendment is made more than 24 hours after circulation of the minutes, you may cite paragraph 14 of the Ministerial Code (which sets this deadline) in resisting it. Mistakes of fact arising from misunderstanding of what was actually said at a meeting should be corrected if there is any substantial risk that they will mislead the reader. If your record is challenged in other respects in particular in respect of conclusions reached or of any undertaking given in discussion or if you are asked to make amendments to the record to accord with what the speaker

should have said, you should not, except on the Chair's instruction, accept them contrary to your own notes and recollection of what occurred (though it is easier to refuse a misguided correction to the general body of the minute than to an attributed statement). In the latter case it is sometimes expedient to ask the person seeking the amendment to put his or her point in writing, sending copies to others who were present. This applies particularly to amendments that may be controversial. Written proposals for amendment of the record should be accepted only from those present at the meeting (or, in the case of Ministers, their private secretaries): this deters departmental zealots. In the last resort the Chair is the arbiter of any dispute of this kind; but he should not lightly be troubled with them.

## **VII. Circulation of Minutes**

70. Minutes should normally be circulated within 24 hours of the meeting. If, however, a Committee meets in the afternoon, it is usually sufficient to circulate the minutes on the 8.00am distribution on the next day but one. Weekends are ignored in reckoning the 24 hours.

71. There are occasions when minutes have to be circulated more quickly than this or where other means have to be found of ensuring that immediate action is taken. Thus it is sometimes desirable to send an advance copy of a particular item to the department or departments which have to take action, or necessary for the Secretary to tell departments by telephone as soon as the meeting is over what action they have to take.

72. Conversely sometimes no harm might be done if the minutes were circulated three or four days afterwards; but the 24 hour rule ought to be observed wherever possible. Memories (to supplement written notes) fade quickly; departments may be embarrassed by delay on points of which even the Committee Secretary may not be fully aware. Moreover the reputation of the Cabinet Office for the rapid circulation of minutes is a tradition in which we can not only take pride but which is also of value to our standing. If pressure of work is making this impossible it is your responsibility to seek assistance. Tell the Deputy Secretary concerned so that relief may be provided.

73. The 24 hour rule cannot however be observed if Secretaries take 23 hours out of the 24 for their own work and expect Reproduction and Distribution Sections to do all their part in the remainder. The latter must be allowed good time for their share.

## **VIII. "Outside" Appointments to the Secretariat**

74. The appointment of one Secretary from the department with the leading interest in a committee's subject matter is sometimes suggested and is occasionally desirable to provide a point of contact or source of specialised knowledge. It is not however a practice which Ministers like; other departments are often suspicious; and the "outside" Secretary is usually unpractised in speedy and reliable minuting. Such appointments should therefore be restricted to committees which are technical or specialised, unless there are special tactical considerations in favour of an "outside" appointment. Where one is made, the "outside" Secretary should not normally be asked to assist in minute taking. Where they do give assistance, their work should be subject to supervision by a Cabinet Office Secretary and not lead to any delay in the circulation of minutes.

## **IX. Use of English**

75. Minutes of meetings, like other official documents, should be so expressed that they can be read quickly and easily. This applies particularly to the minutes that we issue from the Cabinet Office, because they are intended for reading by busy people with a mass of paper to cope with. There can be no doubt that clear, limpid prose is much less tiring to read, and consequently has greater impact, than long involved sentences over-laden with jargon.

76. But the task is not an easy one. Our minutes have to be cast, as far as possible, in an impersonal form and a neutral style; increasingly their subject matter is technical with its own specialist terminology; they must maintain high standards of accuracy of language, which often makes for complicated drafting; and they are produced at speed and under pressure. All these factors make it harder to produce minutes that are good English, and increase the need for vigilance in what we write.

77. There are no short cuts to the habit of writing straightforward English: it is acquired by conscious effort and practice. Some simple and well-tried rules are as follows:

Avoid abstract nouns when verbs or adjectives can be used instead.

Prefer the active form of phrase to the passive.

Be careful about introductory prepositional phrases.

Prefer short words to long, and Anglo-Saxon to Latin words.

Refrain from elegant variation and elegant periphrasis.

Avoid excessive use of adjectives.

Beware of clichés.

Some brief comments on these summary rules follow.

### *Abstract Nouns*

78. Much woolliness of expression is due to the unnecessary use of abstract nouns. For example:

*Enquire whether they are willing and suitable to be appointed.*

is better than

*Make enquiries as to their willingness and suitability for appointment.*

### *Active Forms*

79. A sentence will usually be shorter and more direct if it is constructed with its verb in the active rather than the passive voice. For example

*Proposals to increase the number of universities.*

is better than

*Proposals under which the number of universities would be increased.*

### *Prepositions*

80. Phrases such as *in this connection*, *arising out of*, *with regard to* and *in connection with* cannot be wholly avoided, but should be used sparingly and with caution.

### *Latin and "Genteel" Words*

81. Though official documents should have a certain dignity, this is not achieved merely by using long words. It is a good rule not to use a long word when a shorter one would do as well, or a word of Latin origin when an Anglo-Saxon word will do instead. Thus, use *buy*, *try*, *pay*, instead of *purchase*, *endeavour*, *remuneration*.

### *Elegant Variation and Periphrasis*

82. In minutes, which record what was said, there is no harm in the frequent use of the word *said*, and no need to drag in, merely as variants, alternatives such as *pointed out* and *observed*; these may have a different shade of meaning which should not be blurred by using them merely to ring the changes. Long-winded prepositional phrases like *in view of the fact that* should be replaced by single words like *because*.

### *Adjectives*

83. Many adjectives can be dispensed with. Check in particular the tendency in recording discussions to preserve the exaggeration of the spoken word; thus, *it is of vital importance* usually means no more than *it is important*.

### *Clichés*

84. Official language is vulnerable to the use of clichés and catchphrases, some of them bad in themselves, others useful for a time as a kind of conversational shorthand, or acceptable for the purpose for which they were originally devised, but now misapplied or done to death. They are generally the creatures of passing fashion or habit, and may thus lose their power to convey meaning once the fashion is past. Such expressions should be avoided in papers and minutes which are intended to have historical value as well as immediate significance. Avoid clumsy noun phrases such as *hardware solution*, *balance of payments implications*. In using clichés which have become such common currency or so indispensable as virtually to have lost their metaphorical significance such as *ceiling* and *target* take care not to juxtapose words which, by violating the dormant metaphor, awaken and draw attention to it: as in *there was no intention on the part of the Treasury of fixing an unrealistic ceiling which could not be held*.

### *Bibliography*

85. Fowler's *Modern English Usage*, revised by the late Sir Ernest Gowers, is a valuable work of reference on specific points, e.g. the use of singular or plural verbs with collective nouns, and the consistent spelling of derivative words.

86. Sir Ernest Gowers' *The Complete Plain Words* was written specially for the Civil Service, and all secretaries of committees should own a copy and use it.