



AUA The Association of
University Administrators

Just a minute?

A guide to committee servicing

Jean Grier

*promoting excellence
in HE management*



JEAN GRIER

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Just a minute?

A guide to committee servicing

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Introduction

Committees are a major feature of university life, and few administrators escape servicing a committee at some point in their career. At its best, servicing a committee can be an interesting, stimulating and even entertaining task. At its worst, it can be frustrating, demoralising and fraught. This Guide looks at the processes involved, in an attempt to ensure that as many meetings as possible fall into the former category.

All institutions have a hierarchy of committees, from Court, Council, Academic Board or Senate, down to Faculty Boards, Exam Boards etc, all of which operate with different degrees of formality, and all of which need to be serviced and managed. The Guide provides a practical introduction to all aspects of committee servicing, from preparing the agenda to writing the minutes and taking the final follow-up action. It aims to:

- clarify the roles of the committee secretary and the chair;
- demonstrate how problems can be avoided by adequate preparation;
- help the new committee secretary through the first few meetings;
- suggest ways in which the committee secretary can develop the role.

Committees: the theory

Before looking at the practicalities of committee servicing, it is worth looking at the context. Who needs committees? Why do we have so many of them in higher education? What do they do? Who is on them?

Who needs them?

Universities tend to be fairly democratic organisations - or at least, would like to believe that they are. They therefore tend to be much more heavily 'committeed' than commercial organisations. Inevitably, many of the committees in universities will deal primarily with student administration, as in the examples in this Guide, but the principles apply equally to committees in other areas, such as human resources, estates or finance.

A well-managed committee is good at the following:

- democracy – ensuring wide participation in decision-making and policy formulation;
- sharing responsibility;
- achieving consensus and/or ownership of the decision;
- combining expertise in different disciplines;
- taking difficult or unpleasant decisions;
- stimulating ideas and promoting discussion;
- team building and improving morale;
- disseminating information.

Committees are not so good at taking swift, decisive action – and therefore tend to exist in smaller numbers in commercial organisations, where decisions are more likely to be made by the individual.

Committees differ in size, shape, and scope. Their main functions tend to fall into the following categories:

- democratic decision-making – for example, attempting to allocate funds fairly between a number of departments;
- think-tank or brainstorming – for example, 'how can we improve our international student recruitment?';
- debate – for example, 'to what extent should 'green' issues become a part of every undergraduate degree?';
- advisory – for example, 'what are the practical and financial implications of a merger with the agricultural college down the road?';
- working party - short term (probably fixed term) – perhaps to respond on one very specialist item, or on an issue over which the main committee has got bogged down;
- steering committee – to ensure that the practical aspects of a particular project are attended to correctly;
- statutory – for example, the university's ordinances may specify that each faculty must have a Faculty Board;
- to fulfil external statutory requirements – for example, ensuring that Health and Safety legislation is implemented.

Who's on them?

'A committee should consist of three men, two of whom are absent.'

Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree.

Whilst Sir Herbert's dictum undoubtedly has its attractions, most of us will find ourselves working with a rather larger group than his ideal. A committee is a collection of people chosen for any of the following reasons:

- expertise in different areas – for example, finance, knowledge of biochemistry, experience of student recruitment in the USA;
- representative capacity – for example, a member from each department;
- statutory requirement – for example, lay representatives, student representatives;
- 'ex officio' members – ie members who attend by virtue of the office they hold, rather than in an individual capacity. If Professor Charles is Dean and is a member 'ex officio' of a certain committee, when she resigns as Dean she will be replaced on the committee by the new Dean. (Note that some committees may be made up totally or largely of ex officio members.)

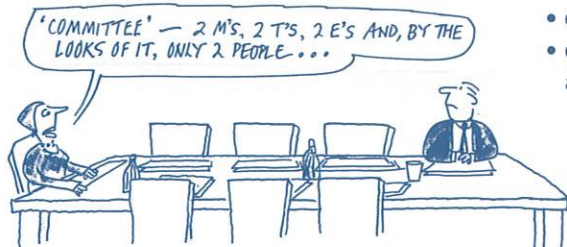
A committee requires a chair and a secretary, and between them, the chair and secretary will define much of the committee's business and the way in which it is conducted. New administrators may feel intimidated by the seniority of the chair, but getting to know him or her is important, as it is vital for the secretary and chair to work together as a 'team' to a common purpose.

The role of the chair

Before looking at the role of the secretary, it is worth looking briefly at the role of the chair. He or she should be well informed and impartial, and should also ensure that the meeting starts on time, that the agenda is followed (or that deviations from it are agreed by the members), and that the meeting finishes on time, especially where a finishing time has been specified.

The chair's role also includes the following:

- facilitating discussion;
- ensuring everyone has a say where appropriate (i.e. that no-one is excluded or marginalised);
- steering the committee towards a decision;
- providing background detail;
- keeping the peace;
- working for consensus;
- ensuring decisions are reached;
- ensuring responsibility for action is allocated appropriately and recorded.



Committees: the practice

Let's assume you have inherited a committee. Where do you start your task of servicing that committee?

First steps

The first things to establish are:

- the committee's remit or terms of reference – ie for what purpose it was established, and what are the limits of its authority;
- its membership (and if there are vacancies on the committee, the mechanisms for filling these);
- whether there is a quorum for meetings. (Note that a quorum may just be specified as a proportion of the membership – eg 'a minimum of half the members' or may require that certain members are present – '...including the Director of Accommodation and at least one student representative'.)

If you haven't yet met the chair of your committee, it might be wise to do so now, before doing much further work on the papers you have inherited.

- how much experience does the chair have of this committee? if you are lucky, she or he will have a clear idea of what is to be done, of what the current issues are for the committee, etc;
- how is the committee run? as a very formal affair? is the work to be done divided between little sub-groups, etc?

- are you the expert, or is the chair? for example, are you expected to know the undergraduate admissions regulations by heart, or is the work sufficiently discipline-specific that much of the information will stem from the committee members themselves?

The agenda

'What's this paper?' said Jiglad Wert, of the Hoodwinkers, waving the document that had been left in front of him...

'It's an agenda, Jiglad,' said Trymon, patiently.

'And what does a gender do?'

'It's just a list of the things we've got to discuss. It's very simple, I'm sorry if you feel that -'

'We've never needed one before!'

'I think perhaps you *have* needed one, you just haven't used one,' said Trymon, his voice resonant with reasonableness.

Terry Pratchett, *The Light Fantastic*

An agenda is simply that: 'a list of the things we've got to discuss'. Whilst there can never be an 'absolutely right' agenda for any meeting, there are good and bad ways of putting one together. For your first meeting, you will need to look at:

- any guidance from your institution on house style, numbering systems, etc. (If there is a house style, stick to it. If there is not, consider the appropriate style and whether a unique numbering system would be helpful – more on this below);
- the agenda, papers and minutes for the previous meeting to establish style and likely content; from the papers you may establish that there is always, for example, a slot on the agenda for 'Chair's report' or 'Report by Vice Dean (Admissions)';
- establish whether the agenda (and/or specific papers) need to be designated 'confidential' or 'strictly confidential'; whilst there has been a move towards more open governance and greater transparency in decision-making, some items still need to be handled confidentially;
- consider whether you need to make provision for 'reserved' (or 'restricted' or 'confidential') business, which may be discussed by only certain members of the committee. The most common example of this is where a committee has student members who are present to discuss issues of policy etc., but

who should not be present during discussion on, for example, individual students. If your committee is of this type, you will need to ensure that the agenda is split, with the 'reserved business' on a separate page, so that the reserved business is only notified to the non-student members;

- consider whether to include 'Any other business' (AOB), sometimes labelled as 'Any other competent business'. Some committees have a policy of not allowing AOB on the agenda, but it can be useful. It should be used only in emergencies and members should be encouraged to raise items with you in advance so that they can be put properly on the agenda. It is up to the chair to decide whether an item raised at the meeting under AOB should be discussed, or perhaps deferred for a future discussion.





For all meetings, you will also need to look at:

- the previous minutes to build up a shopping list of 'Matters arising'. Depending on the type of committee, you may find that this takes up much of the agenda. A useful rule of thumb is that matters discussed at the previous meeting should only appear as 'matters arising' if they can be dealt with swiftly and cleanly – perhaps by reporting that 'following the meeting, the secretary wrote to Professor Faisal, who confirmed that our understanding of the position had been correct'. If there were going to be significant discussion, it would be preferable to have those matters as separate items on the agenda in their own right, in which case you might head your matters arising item as 'Matters arising not covered elsewhere on the agenda';
- the agenda and papers for the corresponding meeting last year - you may find that, for example, the Committee always deals with its annual allocation of hardship awards at the February meeting;
- the 'pending' file of items raised since the last meeting.

Having done this, consult your chair for items he or she may wish to add.

An agenda might look like this, though many other house styles exist:

File 1207

Strictly confidential

UNIVERSITY OF ARDEN FOREST**FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES
POSTGRADUATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**

The next meeting of the committee will be held on **Wednesday 30 November 2001 at 1.00 pm** in Room 239, Lakeside Building. The agenda and papers are as shown below.

Ms J Shakespeare

Secretary to the Committee (email *****; tel *****)

AGENDA**PAPERS**

- | | | |
|---|--|-------------------------------|
| 1 | MINUTES OF MEETING OF 12 OCTOBER 2000 | previously circulated |
| 2 | MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES | |
| | <u>2.1 Vincent Dunley Scholarship Fund (minute 20.5)</u> | |
| | <u>2.2 Review of taught courses (minute 21.4)</u> | |
| 3 | ANNUAL REPORT ON SCHOLARSHIPS OFFERED IN 2000-01 | Paper 01/PG/01 |
| 4 | SCHOLARSHIPS 2001-02 | |
| | <u>4.1 Financial statement</u> | Paper 01/PG/02
(to follow) |
| | <u>4.2 Consideration of applications</u> | Paper 01/PG/03 |
| 5 | REPORT OF REVIEW PANEL FOR MLS | Paper 01/PG/04 |
| 6 | ANY OTHER BUSINESS | |
| 7 | DATE OF NEXT MEETING | |

A simple 'headings' agenda like this might be adequate, or it might be helpful to flesh out each item a little, perhaps by flagging that this item is 'for noting' rather than 'for discussion'. There are various ways of laying out an agenda, and if your institution does not have a house style you might like to discuss with your chair whether it would be helpful to 'star' the items for discussion, or to set out the formal items first with a note that they are formal, and the 'for discussion' items later. The important points in any agenda are that:

- it is designated appropriately – for example, as 'strictly confidential' if dealing with individual staff or student cases;
- the date, time and location are clear and that, if appropriate, a finishing time is stated. Whilst a stated finishing time can be a mixed blessing – it is frustrating to cut a potentially productive discussion short because of a pre-stated finishing time – it is usually good practice to mention one. Specifying a finishing time enables members who are travelling to a meeting to make appropriate arrangements, and also enables 'locals' to plan the rest of their day;
- adequate time is allowed for members to read the papers in advance of the meeting;
- members know whom to contact regarding the meeting – for example, to submit apologies for absence;
- members know whether there is a paper for the item – and if so, whether it is enclosed or will follow;
- the items are ordered logically – for example, using the sample agenda above, the committee has to know how much money is available before allocating it to students, therefore the financial report has to be considered before the scholarship applications are considered;
- if appropriate, include a prompt on the agenda for the date of the next meeting rather than trying to fix it by telephone or email later.

Practical arrangements

Agree with your chair where the meeting should be held. Book the room, and arrange catering as necessary. Check whether any special equipment will be needed (for example, overhead projector) or whether an accessible venue is required.

Papers for circulation

As committee secretary, you may find that you are responsible for drafting most of the papers which the committee will see, or your role may be to chase others to produce papers for you.

Clarify who is responsible for any papers, and advise them of your deadlines and any specific format to be followed (for example, a paper reference number, or 20 copies, or information to be provided on disk or by email attachment).

Draft any papers for which you are responsible. Put the draft agenda and papers to the chair for comment/approval. Finalise the agenda and papers within the appropriate deadline for circulation.

Circulation

Make sure that 'reserved business' items are circulated only to those who should receive them (see above). It is also important to check whether there is a statutory requirement to circulate papers a specified time in advance of a meeting, for example '14 working days'. If there is not, it is good practice to allow members a clear week in which to receive and read the papers. Ensure that you have the up-to-date circulation list, and send out the papers.

Electronic circulation

Is electronic circulation feasible or appropriate? Some institutions now rely on this quite heavily, but make sure that you know how to ensure that anything you transmit is kept appropriately secure within your system. Can all members receive documents electronically, and do they all have access to printers? Most members will need to print out hard copy of papers before coming to the meeting, and you may find

that there is understandable resentment at the time taken to do this – and at the effective shifting of resource requirements from your 'administrative' area to their 'academic' one. It is also more cost effective across the institution as a whole, and ecologically less unsound, to photocopy a large batch of papers in one central location than to ask 30 committee members to laser-print individual sets.

The meeting

Briefing the chair

Does your chair want or need notes?

Producing notes for your chair may seem like an additional task, but is well worth doing for all but the simplest of meetings. Well-written notes can often form the backbone of your minutes, and will keep the chair on track, providing valuable background information and flagging up points where, for example, a decision needs to be reached.

Draft the notes before your briefing meeting with the chair, but be prepared to revise them in the light of that meeting. In the briefing meeting, you should cover the objectives of the meeting – what needs to be got out of it? Plan the sequence in which you are taking each item, and allocate rough times to each. There are various different ways of producing chair's notes, but one which works well is to expand the agenda, perhaps putting your chair's notes in italics, as shown:

File 1207

Strictly confidential

UNIVERSITY OF ARDEN FOREST

FACULTY OF SOCIAL STUDIES
POSTGRADUATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

CHAIR'S NOTES

The next meeting of the committee will be held on **Wednesday 30 November 2001 at 1.00 p.m.** in Room 239, Lakeside Building. The agenda and papers are as shown below.

Ms J Shakespeare

Secretary to the Committee (email *****, tel *****)

Apologies have been received from Dr Barnstormer and Professor Holmes.

Welcome Dr Jennifer Okefield to the meeting. Dr Okefield convened the review panel for the MLS whilst she was still a member of the committee, and is kindly attending the meeting to present the report of the review panel. As she has a teaching commitment at 2.00 pm, suggest to the committee that we deal with item 5 first.

AGENDA

PAPERS

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 | MINUTES OF MEETING OF 12 OCTOBER 2000 | previously circulated |
|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------|

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 October 2000 have been circulated. Are they approved as a correct record?

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 2 | MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES |
|---|----------------------------------|

2.1 Vincent Dunley Scholarship Fund (minute 20.5)

To report that Faculty on 26 October approved our recommendation that this fund be used to support studentships, rather than as a hardship fund.

2.2 Review of taught courses (minute 21.4)

With regard to the MSc in Metallurgy and Metaphysics, Mr Hollywood has written to query whether this review is necessary, given that he will shortly be bringing forward proposals to split this degree into two separate degrees. He has therefore suggested that any review should be deferred until the new MScs have been running for a period of three years. We have, however, checked with our academic audit office and they have advised us that the review must be carried out this year to comply with our normal audit procedures.

A lot of work clearly goes into producing briefing notes of this type, but they are invaluable in keeping the chair properly informed and on track, and can save a lot of time at the minute-writing stage – a few changes of tense, and the minutes are virtually written, certainly as far as the straightforward and largely formal items at the start of the meeting are concerned.

'Pack' for the meeting

You need to take with you the agenda and papers, a notebook and pen (plus a spare!), but what else? Looking back at previous minutes should give you some indication; you may also need:

- papers from previous meetings;
- an attendance book or signing list;
- background correspondence;
- rules and regulations, for example, the University Calendar;
- a copy of the committee remit or terms of reference and membership;
- minute book or copy of the minutes for signing/approval;
- a calculator;
- a grid, eg for recording marks for students;
- voting slips if there is likely to be a vote.

You may also be tempted to take spare copies of committee papers for members who have forgotten them, but think twice about doing this. It would be much better to train your members to remember their papers in future!



At the meeting – who's who?

A good chair will introduce you to the members and introduce the members to you at your first meeting. If he or she doesn't volunteer this, ask for help. Verbatim reporting is not usually required or desirable, but there are times when you need to know who said what (at least in your rough notes), so make the chair help you with knowing who's who at the start of the meeting. Some suggestions for this are given below. Have a list of the committee's membership to hand – committees vary in formality, and some will refer to 'Professor Ferguson', while others will refer to 'Tony'. It is therefore helpful to have a list which shows members' initials or, preferably, first names. It is also useful to see members in context too – if you know Professor A Ferguson's first name and that he is from the Department of Chemistry, this might explain why the person called Tony is getting so agitated about the closure of the Department of Chemistry. Options for identifying who's who include the following:

- open the meeting with a quick round of introductions;
- draw a quick map of the table and get your chair's help in putting names to faces round it;
- use place cards – either asking members to put their card in front of them, or by pre-arranging cards at seats;
- in a very large meeting, consider whether speakers should be asked to stand and give their name at the start of their first contribution.

Taking notes

Essentially, the more you know about your committee and its work, the fewer notes you need to take, though this advice is obviously of little consolation if you are just taking over a new area of work. However, knowing what type of minute you will be expected to produce should enable you to take appropriate notes at the meeting.

Aim to jot down each new point raised, and who raised it. You won't necessarily put all the points into the draft minute, and are unlikely to attribute points to individuals in the minute itself, but noting that information at the time is helpful afterwards, especially if there are any points which you feel you need to check later with the chair for accuracy.

Chair's notes (see above) take time to prepare but can be invaluable in steering you and the chair through much of the business, and in reducing your need to take copious notes at the meeting.

Keeping up with proceedings

This is probably the most nerve-racking aspect of minuting a meeting. How do you ensure that you record the salient points? Like many aspects of committee servicing, this is something that comes with practice, and is easier the better you know the work of your committee. Depending on the type of committee, there may be a great deal of 'kite flying', of wild ideas which come to nothing. Usually, with a bit of practice, you can see whether those particular kites are going to go

anywhere, and in many cases they will not get more than a few inches off the ground. It is often sufficient to say when you produce the minute, 'After [wide-ranging] discussion, the committee agreed that Dr Finch should be asked to develop his proposals for X for discussion at the next meeting'.

If you find you are getting really lost, don't panic. Do your best, taking fuller notes than you might normally do, and explain to your chair afterwards that you think you missed the point about Z. In any case where you feel you have missed the decision itself, take this up at the meeting. It can be very useful to say to the chair, 'I'm sorry, can we just clarify please what the decision is here?'. If you

are confused, it is quite likely that members are too, and that they will welcome the clarification which follows. It can also be useful to do this if a speaker is using a lot of jargon or acronyms – it may be the case that some members are lost too.

Sometimes, a member will speak for ten minutes from a prepared paper, and you have no chance of keeping up with what is said. Speak to the person after the meeting. Ask for a copy of the paper, so that you can précis it for the minutes. It may even be appropriate to attach the paper to the minutes as an appendix, but check first with the person who produced it that she or he has no objections to this.



The minutes

Do your homework first – before even getting to the meeting, it is worth spending some time thinking about what style of minutes will be required and how much will need to be recorded, for whom the minutes are intended, and for how long will they be valid.

Styles of minutes

Bear in mind that the style of minute may vary from committee to committee, and even, depending on the purpose of the meeting, from one meeting (or item) to the next. There are three basic types of minute:

- **verbatim reporting** can read almost like the script of a play, with a precise record

of who spoke and what they said, word for word. Verbatim reporting is not usually used in universities, though occasionally verbatim reporting may be required in a formal legalistic setting, such as an appeals meeting;

- **summary minutes** are the type most commonly used, and may need to contain a record of the background as explained to the meeting, the pros and cons expressed by members, detail about the consensus decision eventually reached, and some reasons for that decision. Any action to be carried out also requires to be recorded, with a note of who will take it forward;
- **action minutes** are often very brief – perhaps little more than a series of bullet points.



Why do we need minutes?

- to make sure an accurate record exists of any decisions made;
- to record discussion/reasons for a particular decision;
- to ensure that a note of action required is kept;
- to communicate information to people who weren't there.

Who will make use of them?

Think about this when writing minutes. Some committees barely need minutes. For example, the Board of Studies may have decided that the undergraduate marking scale needs to be revised, and the minutes will need to record the reasons for that decision. However, the working party set up by the Board of Studies purely to revise the undergraduate marking scale might have as its sole function the production of the revised marking scale, and will need little in the way of minutes other than the new scale to be adopted.

Some committees (for example, a Faculty Board) have a far bigger membership/circulation than actual attenders. The minute of such a committee is important to inform the non-attenders about the discussion which preceded the decision.

For how long will they be valid?

Think about how long the minutes are likely to be of use or interest. Policy matters may be valid for a long time, perhaps well beyond the life expectancy of the average administrator. The minute may need to record the rationale behind the decision, as well as the decision itself. Other minutes contain shorter-term decisions, eg 'which student should receive the prize in Geophysics?'. All that is needed in such a case, assuming no major policy issues arise, is a simple note of the student's name.

Producing the draft minutes

How you choose to produce the minutes will depend to a certain extent on your personal style, the facilities available to you in terms of secretarial support and computing, and your own typing ability. Do produce the draft minutes as soon as possible after the meeting. The longer you leave it, the more difficult you will find it to make sense of your notes and to remember what went on.

The minutes are a record of discussion which took place in the past, and should therefore be reported in the past tense; you should say 'Dr Tate reported that the department was (past tense) seeking to appoint ...' even though at the time of writing you may know that the department is (present) still seeking to appoint.

You will find yourself using various stock phrases again and again, and some of these are given below.

Having prepared draft minutes, they need to go to your chair for approval. Technically, minutes are 'unconfirmed' until they have been approved by the committee at its next meeting, but the chair should give them initial approval before you circulate them. This is the point at which you can seek clarification on any points about which you are not confident. Put a note in the margin – 'George – I am not sure whether this is correct?' or 'George - please can you check this acronym' – to flag up anything on which you need advice.

When you get the minutes back from the chair, make amendments as appropriate, and then circulate them to the members. Depending on the frequency of meetings and the follow-up action required, it may be useful to circulate the minutes now, or it may be sufficient to hold onto them and circulate them with the next agenda. However, if a committee is working well, members need the formal record as soon as possible.

It may be necessary or desirable to make the minutes available electronically, perhaps to a wider audience than just the committee members. Make sure that you know the

procedures for this within your institution, and particularly what you need to do to ensure the appropriate level of security.

Standard items to be included

If your institution has a house style, follow it. If not, think about developing a style, making sure that the following items are included as standard:

- classification – 'strictly confidential' or as appropriate;
- file reference – not essential for members, but helpful for you;
- name of the committee;
- 'Minutes of the meeting held on [date] at [time] in [location]';
- Present: [a list of those present, annotated with 'representing...' or 'as alternate for...' as appropriate];
- In attendance: [you as committee secretary, plus anyone who had been invited for that meeting only (eg to present a specific item, in which case you could put 'Dr J Young (for Minute 01.73 only)') or who was not actually a member of the committee];
- Apologies for absence: [a list of those members who told you they were unable to attend this meeting];
- headers and footers, including page numbers.

Styles

Layout is important. The order of the items in the minutes should normally follow the same order as the agenda. Where an item has been taken out of order, perhaps because a non-member was invited to the start of the meeting to present that item, it is still useful in the minutes to place that item in the order in which it appeared on the agenda. If the meeting has been particularly rambling, you might need to re-group parts of the discussion into a logical order.

Each item should be clearly numbered and have a heading. If there were any papers relating to that item, or if you are referring back to the minutes of a previous meeting, this should be mentioned in the heading.

Think about numbering methods if your institution does not have an established house style. The most obvious one is to start the minutes for each meeting at item 1.

However, some committees have different reference systems, and you may find it helpful to adopt a unique numbering system. One system is simply to start numbering the minutes at 1 and continue upwards, meaning that in twenty years' time the minute numbers may be into four digits! Another system is to start at the beginning of the academic year (or financial or calendar year, if more appropriate to the work of your committee) and number up from there. An extension of this is to prefix the number with the year, eg 01.1, 01.2 etc.. Whatever style you adopt, be consistent. There are advantages in using a unique numbering system - you can then refer simply to 'minute 01.27.3', rather than 'minute 2.3 of the meeting held on 10 November 2001'.

If developing a numbering system, think about how you want to cope with sub-headings too, perhaps by using different typefaces:

29 Main Heading

29.1 Sub-heading

29.1.1 Sub-sub-heading

'Action minutes' may have a separate column, perhaps a wide right-hand margin, in which the initials of the person expected to take any follow-up action appear. A useful alternative is to include action in the text, perhaps in the following format:

Dr Black undertook to speak to the external examiner regarding her availability for a further meeting. [*for ACTION by Dr Black*]

Appendices

Where a neat paper exists, it can be useful to attach it to the minutes as an appendix, rather than repeating the contents within the minutes. If you do this, make sure that the minutes point to the fact that the appendix exists.

Stock phrases

Committees **receive** and **consider** papers and reports, which they may formally **note**, **approve** or **recommend** action on to a superior committee. They may formally **resolve** that something be **accepted** or **adopted**, may **report** the decisions made to another body and, less frequently, **refer back** a paper should they not agree what was **proposed**. These words will crop up frequently.

It is usually unnecessary, and may be unwise, to record the tennis-match of 'he said... then she said... then he said...'. If the discussion is lengthy, it is usually adequate to summarise the main points, perhaps by using a phrase such as 'During [full/lengthy/detailed] discussion, the following points were raised...'. Rather than listing the points in the chronological order in which they were raised at the meeting, group them into 'broadly in favour of' and 'broadly against' the proposal.

On any matter where there is widespread agreement round the table there is no need to record in the minutes who made that initial comment – everyone agreed with it, and you can record that agreement by using a stock phrase such as 'Members noted that...'.

Remember that one of the functions of a committee is to share responsibility. For this reason, assigning a comment to an individual should be done only where there is a good reason for doing so – for example, where the individual is speaking in a formal or representative capacity, or where a member clearly disagrees and asks for that disagreement to be noted. Usually it is sufficient to say 'Members were generally in agreement with...' or 'A majority of the committee felt that...' and leave the disagreement unsaid, but when opposing views are strongly held, you may need to use expressions like 'The committee agreed by a substantial majority that... Dr Green requested, however, that his opposition to this proposal be recorded'. If comments are assigned to individuals, changes to the minutes are much more likely to be requested - Dr Lyle may have said forcibly at the meeting 'I'm absolutely appalled that...' but in the cold light of day when the committee

meets six weeks later, he may want to tone this down to 'Dr Lyle expressed slight misgivings...'

Reports

Most committees are required to report to another committee in the hierarchy, and deadlines for this can often be quite tight. To prepare the report, you need to know what authority your committee has to make decisions, and on what items it can only 'recommend'. For example, there will be certain decisions which are within the authority of a faculty committee, such as the granting of a particular type of concession to a student. There are other decisions which can only be made by a superior committee, such as the Academic Board. The *recommendation* that Sam Smith be exempted from a core course might therefore require to be included in the report to the higher committee.

All reports require a heading, date, and the name of the originator of the report. It is not usually necessary or advisable to include a list of those present at the meeting.

For a report, you will usually find that you can shorten the minute, though occasionally your report will be longer than the minute as you may have to explain the context to the

higher committee, and perhaps spell out acronyms familiar to you and your members but unknown elsewhere in the institution. How much you need to include in terms of background will also depend on whether the report will be presented to the higher committee by your chair, or whether it is simply one of many papers which will be circulated to the higher committee. As with chair's notes, it is important to flag up any action that should be taken by the higher committee. For example, you may be reporting for information – 'A working party on ... has now been set up, and will report by [date]!' or you may be reporting for a decision – 'the committee recommends that Mr Samuel Smith be exempted from the core course for the following reasons:...'

Whilst minutes should always be in the past tense, reports can be written in past or present tense as appropriate. You can use the past tense phrasing of 'the committee recommended...!' or the present tense phrasing of 'the committee recommends ...!' or 'the committee wishes to recommend ...!'. However, be consistent and don't mix tenses.

A chair might suggest that it is not necessary to produce a written report, saying that she or he 'will just stand up at the meeting and make an oral report'. Unless the

reporting deadlines are very tight, this is not good practice, and is likely to be disapproved of by the secretary and/or chair of the higher committee. Put yourself in the shoes of the secretary to the higher committee – it is much easier to prepare for the meeting and brief your chair if you know what is in that report. From your point of view as secretary to the lower committee, it may seem attractive to forget about a written report, but it is unlikely to save much time in the long run and there is always the risk that your chair will forget one vital item in making his or her verbal report.

Follow-up action

Apart from the minutes and any reports, you need to identify what follow-up action is necessary and who is doing it. As soon as you have got the draft minutes back from the chair, have a 'debriefing' meeting with the chair, just to run through the minutes, annotating them with notes such as 'next agenda', 'George', 'me' etc. You can then tick them off as you deal with each item, ready for the next agenda and back where we started from!

Developing your role

The sections above should help you through your first few meetings, but there are many ways in which you can develop your role – and your job satisfaction – as your confidence increases. You are a vital member of the ‘team’ which is the committee, and you should feel able to contribute at meetings and to suggest new ways of managing the business outside the meeting.

As secretary to the committee you should always feel able to contribute on matters of fact (for example, from your knowledge of the degree regulations) or where you think there are other issues to be considered (for example, the knock-on effects for the Finance Office of a decision that ‘it would be nice to issue scholarship cheques to students on a weekly basis, rather than annually’).

In the early stages, you met your chair to find out how she or he wanted to run the committee, but what if your chair’s approach seems wrong? You should feel able to discuss with him or her the most effective way of running the committee. Sometimes issues like this cannot be solved simply by a conversation or two with the chair, and you may need to discuss matters with your line manager or someone with more experience of committee servicing.

Perhaps the remit no longer seems appropriate, or the membership balance is wrong? If you find that your committee regularly has to defer a decision because it doesn’t have all the information it needs, it might be worthwhile looking at the membership. The addition of someone from

Computing Support with knowledge of the student record system, for example, might enable your committee to reach decisions from a position of knowledge, rather than deferring decisions to the next meeting while you ask Computing Support for the necessary information.

If members table papers regularly, or raise items under Any Other Business without first having mentioned them to you or your chair, it might be worth discussing with your chair how these problems should be handled in future. For instance, if your deadlines for circulation of papers are reasonable, and are notified to members in advance, there should be no excuse for members tabling papers. Tabling papers is discourteous to other members, giving them no time to consider the issues before the meeting. With encouragement from you, the chair might take the view that tabled papers should not be accepted – or that, if accepted, discussion of them should be deferred to the next meeting.

If a meeting seems ‘to have gone all wrong’, sit down with your chair afterwards to discuss what went wrong and why. Look at

whether there was more you could have done, individually or together, to prepare for the meeting. Sometimes problems which arise are not of your making – the meeting was hijacked by a particularly vocal and difficult member, perhaps – and you shouldn't feel you have to take the blame for them. However, there is also a lot you can do to enable your committee members to contribute effectively, for example by ensuring that they know and understand the remit of the committee and its reporting relationships. It is also important for each member to know why he or she is on the committee. If there 'as a representative from the Department of Astrology', for example, this implies consultation with members of

the department between meetings and feeding back to them after meetings, not just turning up and expressing an individual view. Making sure that members understand what is expected of them in terms of 'action' between meetings should also reduce time spent unproductively noting that 'no further information was available and this matter would accordingly be carried forward [again] to the next meeting.'

Working with your committee chair, and with the members, there is much that you can do to streamline the committee process and to ensure that meetings are productive – good committee servicing is much more than just turning up and writing the minutes.



Committee servicing checklists

First steps

- know your committee's remit and membership
- meet your chair - a 'getting to know you' meeting at this stage, to establish what he or she expects of you

Drafting an agenda

- consult as appropriate:
 - terms of reference
 - minutes of previous meeting
 - agenda for same meeting last year
 - pending file for committee business
 - chair
- think about style - headings, action points or full agenda?
- arrange items in logical order
- is there any 'reserved business'?

Practical arrangements

- date, time, place
- book room
- tea/coffee?
- date, time and place for briefing, if appropriate
- fixed finish time?

Papers for circulation

- agenda
- minutes - if not previously circulated
- reports from matters arising
- papers on specific issues - prepared by you or sought from other people (if specific format/presentation required, make this clear)
- can you save time at the meeting by, for example, producing a paper in advance summarising action taken since the last meeting?

Circulation

- ensure that you have the correct circulation list, correct forms of address etc.
- any special invitations to be sent out?
- do papers and envelopes need to be marked 'Confidential'?
- circulate several days before date of meeting

Briefing

- ascertain if briefing is required: usually of value even for simple meetings and essential for long and wide-ranging agenda
- is oral briefing enough?
- are chair's notes required?

The meeting

- arrive early to check seating, etc
- take essential items as appropriate - notebook, pen, file(s), any reference documents (eg University Calendar), committee terms of reference and membership, chair's notes, list of membership, attendance book, calculator, background correspondence, minute book or copy for signing, any papers for tabling etc.
- think whether other items might be needed
 - eg paper for voting slips if a decision goes to a vote

Identifying those present

- have places names for each member
- if members do not know each other, open meeting with quick round of self-introductions
- speakers might be asked to identify themselves (useful in a large meeting)

Continued overleaf

- attendance book or sheet passed round for signature
- draw a map of who is sitting where

Taking notes

- do your homework first
- think about what *really* matters
- make sure you record any decisions
- if in doubt, *ask*
- if lost over jargon, acronyms etc *ask*
- ask speaker for a copy of any pre-written paper - and ask for permission to attach it to minutes, if appropriate
- DON'T PANIC!

Draft minutes

- don't delay!
- use the past tense throughout
- what style is appropriate - verbatim, summary or action minutes?
- annotate them with any queries for your chair
- amend them, taking chair's comments into account, and send out as soon as possible

Standard items to be included

- classification ['Confidential', 'Strictly confidential', etc.]
- file reference
- name of the committee
- 'Minutes of the meeting held on [date] at [time] in [location].'
- 'Present:' [a list of those present, annotated with 'representing...' or 'as alternate for...' as appropriate]
- 'In attendance:' [you as committee secretary, plus anyone who had been invited for that meeting only (eg to present a specific item)]

- 'Apologies for absence:' [a list of those members who told you they were unable to attend this meeting]

Numbering and layout

- be consistent
- devise a numbering system (or follow the existing one) and stick to it
- be consistent about headings and a hierarchy within them, eg 29 MAIN HEADING, 29.1 Sub-heading, 29.1.1 Sub-sub-heading
- decide what to do about 'action' - initials in margin, phrase in bold at end of section, etc.
- include a header or footer on each page showing name of committee and date of meeting

Reports

- know your committee's remit and authority
- check whom to report to, and deadlines for doing so
- head your report with name of your committee and date of its meeting, and name of committee it is reporting to. You may need to incorporate a reference or paper number for the higher committee - check with the secretary
- don't include list of those present etc.
- put name or initials and date at the foot of the report

Other follow-up action

- meet your chair to confirm follow-up action
- make sure all papers are properly filed, and minutes indexed if appropriate
- mark on a spare set of minutes who is doing what...
- ...and then make sure that it gets done!

And finally...

'it is the characteristic of all committee discussions and decisions that every member has a vivid recollection of them and every member's recollection of them differs violently from every other member's recollection. Consequently we accept the convention that the official decisions are those and only those which have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials from which it emerges with an elegant inevitability that any decision which has been officially reached will have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials and any decision which is not recorded in the minutes has not been officially reached even if one or more members believe they can recollect it – so in this particular case if the decision had been officially reached it would have been officially recorded in the minutes by the officials

–

and it isn't
so it wasn't'

Sir Humphrey

An extract from the BBC television series 'Yes Minister'

Acknowledgements

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Just a minute? A guide to committee servicing

Jean Grier

Committees are a major feature of university life, and few administrators escape servicing a committee at some point in their career.

At its best, servicing a committee can be an interesting, stimulating and even entertaining task. At its worst, it can be frustrating, demoralising and fraught. This Guide looks at the processes involved in an attempt to ensure that as many meetings as possible fall into the former category.

