

Keeping Meeting Minutes

Distributed: Friday, September 25th.

Meeting minutes serve as a common record of what transpires in a meeting. They record the important and relevant announcements, discussions, and decisions. In a software development project, they can serve to informally inform people outside the group (managers, coworkers, consultants, employees, etc) about the progress being made by a team. More importantly, they are a reference that the group members themselves can consult at some point in the future when retracing the decision-making process that was used to reach a conclusion.

It is important to keep these minutes during the meeting itself. Do not try to reconstruct the discussion after the fact. Appoint someone to be the secretary and be responsible for recording the minutes. Formal meeting minutes have a process whereby they are approved by the entire group (e.g., the first item on a meeting agenda might be approval of the minutes from the previous meeting). Your group meetings, however, should not be conducted in such a formal manner.

Some basic information that should appear at the top of the minutes includes: (i) meeting date, time, and location, (ii) the attendees, and (iii) the secretary for the group.

A meeting should have a specific, focused agenda. Everyone's time is precious and a meeting that drags out too long is not an efficient use of that precious resource.

The first item on the agenda is typically a progress report on all the open action items from the previous meeting (see below). Be specific about what has been accomplished as promised, what has not been done, what challenges have been encountered, and how they have been dealt with. This part of the meeting should give the group a good picture of whether the project as a whole is on schedule or not.

A meeting is a good way to broadcast information (i.e., make announcements) but it is also an excellent venue for making important decisions that require buy-in from the rest of the group. Often a 15 minute face-to-face conversation can sort out an issue that would drag on for days over email. The minutes should reflect the important elements of this discussion. The decisions made, as well as the pithy justification for these decisions, should be recorded.

Finally, always conclude a meeting with a list of open action items. A good action item includes:

- A *specific* task (not just “work on user’s guide”)
- An assignment of responsibility for the task to a specific individual (or group of individuals)
- A deadline for completion of the task (typically the next meeting, but not necessarily)

Remember that the deadlines for tasks will serve as the milestones for tracking progress in the project, so be specific and hold yourselves to these milestones.