



## The Elbow's Guide to Effective Minutes

In the first of [The Elbow's](#) Guides to Good Governance we looked at agendas and specifically how to craft a good agenda. Leading directly on from agendas – in theory at least - are the minutes. In this guide we have The Elbow's considered views on effective minutes; how to prepare them and what they should look like. She should know she's written and read a lot of minutes.

Let's start though with a poem since good literacy matters.

*Yesterday upon the stairs I met a board  
which wasn't there*

*It wasn't there again today, I wish, I wish  
they'd go away*

Or to put it more bluntly are you expecting your clerk to clerk what isn't there? More of this later. But first the serious bit.

The [Governance Handbook](#), which we have all read haven't we girls and boys, says

*High quality professional clerking is **crucial** to the **effective** functioning of the board. The clerk should be the boards' 'governance professional'. Their role is not only about good and effective **organisation** and **administration**, but also, and more importantly, about helping the board understand its role, functions and legal duties and supporting the chair to enable and **facilitate strategic debate and decision making**. This is crucial in helping the board exercise its functions expediently and confidently, so that it can stay focused on its core functions.*

## What are minutes?

Before we go any further we all need to remember that **minutes matter** but what are minutes?

- A written record of the **main** points of the meeting not a word for word report; although sometimes this is necessary but not often.
- An **official** record of the meeting.
- **Evidence** that the meeting has taken place.

Minutes must be kept in perpetuity and be available for inspection – not just by Ofsted but by ESFA, auditors, and stakeholders.

They do not need to be the length of 'War and Peace' nor do they need to read 'a brief discussion took place'. Horses for courses and all that.

## What must they be?

A true and accurate record. That is all. They should of course be well written, clear, precise, concise. They should be in the correct tense. Everyone including the DfE makes the odd typo. Perfection is as perfection does.

Minutes must be impartial.

If there was challenge minute it. If someone left the meeting for whatever reason, minute it but check you are still quorate. If there was something to celebrate say it.

They should not be

- The selected highlights avoiding the difficult bits,



- Informal,
- Changed after the fact,
- Just a list of decisions,
- Sugar coated.



### Elements of Effective Minutes

The Elbow's idea of effective minutes are those which are therefore

- **Accurate** – not made up, wishful thinking, or full of imaginary people. Honest.
- **Compliant** – eg decisions are clearly ratified,
- **Clear** – not *waffley* and make sense to someone not at the meeting,
- **Consistent** – logical, using the same terminology throughout,
- **Focused** – on the matters of the meeting, follow the agenda, allow for additional urgent items, stay strategic. They should reflect the meeting in summary and not be a verbatim '*she said, he said*' report, though sometimes this is appropriate. Never say never.
- **Coherent** – show that the meeting had a point and purpose and wasn't just a cosy chat,
- **Correct** – making the odd typo is only human but minutes need to have good sentence structure, correct grammar, and not be in the first person,
- **Action orientated** – who agreed to do what by when,
- **Impact biased** -the whole point of governance is to support school improvement after all. Is pupil and
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- stakeholder voice reflected in your minutes?
- **Timely** – no good the clerk sending minutes three months after the meeting.



### When do you take them?

Speaking as a clerk? At the time. Contemporaneous is always best. You cannot remember the nuance if you don't take some notes. Straight onto the laptop or long hand is fine. If you record the meetings make sure you have a policy.

Always check your spellings – autocorrect cannot always be relied on.

It is nice to see other people jotting notes in the meetings too. Shows you are paying attention.



### Who writes them?

The clerk. Schools and academies must have a clerk – it says so in the maintained school regs and the model DfE Articles of Association. In an emergency another governor can take the minutes but the one person who cannot is the headteacher. It says that in the maintained schools governance regulations as well. One should not mark one's own homework after all.



### Who agrees them?

The Chair of the meeting should have final say on the draft but it is good practice to liaise with the headteacher. They can then be sent to the participants in the meetings and others who may need to see them.



Give careful consideration as to where you send any **confidential** minutes.

Some chairs like to rewrite minutes. They can't help themselves. There are many reasons why they may do this. As a clerk you have to ask them why they feel the need to do this if your minutes are correct, accurate, on time and meet The Elbow's suggested 10 points of effective minutes.

It is not good practice to have the whole board trying to make comment on the minutes at drafting stage. If someone does not agree with what has been written this can be raised at matters arising at the next meeting because minutes are not public documents until they have been ratified. Ensure governors and trustees know this.

### What should you do with them?

File them. Keep them. In school not your shed. Use a cloud based storage system (GDPR compliant of course). Paper copies can be kept in files. Have a governor check from time to time that files are up to date. You can publish them on the website but the regulations say they need to be made available when requested so you can interpret this as appropriate.

### What should you do with the drafts?

This is a very good question. Agree a protocol with your clerk. GDPR will have an impact here. You may wish to ensure that drafts are kept until the final version is ratified. Whatever you do be clear about it.



### What should minutes include?

Apart from the date, time, location, purpose, attendees, name of the clerk, roles

eg who is chairing, apologies, time anyone left or joined the meeting, list of documents tabled and circulated, declarations of business and pecuniary interests in any item on the agenda (eg are you a governor at another school which may be involved in academy discussions), decisions ratified, positions agreed, actions allocated, timescale for said actions, precis of the discussion, questions asked and their answers, key matters such as data, outcomes, safeguarding updates, premises, HR, staffing, performance management, wellbeing, governor and training, impact, school improvement, policies, outline of any other business, date of next meeting;; not much.



### Feedback

It is good practice to have regular dialogue as board about the minutes. A few questions could be whether the minutes **reflect** whether we have

- challenged
- been curious
- received answers
- shown impact
- asked a range of relevant questions
- reflected on our practice
- been compliant
- done what we said we were going to do
- undertaken link visits
- done any training or development
- collaborated outside school
- oh, and heard from the pupils.

The reason for this is not just to support the performance management of your clerk but also to assess whether you and the



board have been effective. You may wish to develop your own checklists and questions but the key question is **do the minutes reflect the board we consider ourselves to be?** And answering that is not always easy.

Remember minutes do matter.

### **Pause for thought**

Other things you may wish to consider. There is no right or wrong answer here – just some things to think about.

- Attendees listed in alphabetical order,
- Names of who asked what question – full names and titles or initials.
- Roles and responsibilities clearly identified – the link governor for trainspotting asked; the Chair of Magic asked;
- Chronological minute numbers over time,
- Opportunity in the meeting for the clerk to give an update on governance matters – DfE updates, LA updates, interesting documents.

**Note your thoughts about your minutes here...**

### **About the Elbow**

The Elbow is a governor, trustee, independent clerk and National Leader of Governance with over 15 years of governance experience. She is always learning.

She is a passionate believer in the importance of good clerking and doesn't mind saying so; and in fact does so often.

If you are so inclined, please follow her on Twitter @thesarkyclerk

*Thank you for reading...*

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