



CABINET MINUTE: STYLE GUIDE

Welcome to the Cabinet Minute style guide and thank you in advance for helping us to write the Cabinet Minute. Cabinet Minute-writing is a bit of an art form, so this guide assembles all the various style and grammatical rules in one place. Some of these are slightly arcane, and unique to the Cabinet Minute – but it is important that we stick to common rules so that we achieve consistency across the historical record.

The guide covers:

- The overall style of the minute, with some worked examples;
- The standard format and layout;
- Specific rules for grammar, spelling, capitalisation and punctuation.

Style

The Cabinet minute is written in past reported speech. In other words, it reports what people said, not what they did, or how they spoke. A few important style rules flow from this:

- First, stage directions are plain and kept to an absolute minimum. The standard introduction to any speaker is: **THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [...] said that [.....].** The minute always uses “said that” and never “explained”, “noted”, “commented or other variants.
- Second, the minute is written in the perfect tense, and always in the third person. This means:
 - every verb goes back one step further into the past. For future verbs, these become conditional (i.e. “I will” becomes “(s)he would”);

- “I/we” become “(s)he/they”. Sometimes “we” may also become “the Government”, if this adds to the clarity of the minute;
- References to times or dates must be written so that it is clear to when a speaker was referring when the record is read in 20 years’ time. This means the minute uses either “that”, “the previous” or “the following”. Therefore:
 - References to current time periods, such as “today”, “this week”, “this year”, become “**that** day”, “**that** week”, “**that** year”, and so on;
 - References to past time periods, such as “yesterday” or “last week” become “**the previous** day”, “**the previous** week”, and so on;
 - References to future time periods, such as “tomorrow”, “next week” become “**the following** day”, “**the following** year”, and so on.
 - Usually it is not necessary to specify individual days of the week. Therefore “later that week” or “the following week” tend to suffice.
- When using reported speech it is grammatically correct to use either simply “(s)he said” or “(s)he said that”. The Cabinet convention is the latter. **Please do include the “that”.**

The examples below set out how these rules work in practice, on some common points that arise during Cabinet meetings:

- “I announced the proposals today” *becomes* “[S]He said that] he had announced the proposals that day”.
- “The changes will be implemented next year” *becomes* “The changes would be implemented the following year”.
- “The figures were published today” *becomes* “The figures had been published that day”.
- “I spoke to the President yesterday” *becomes* “He had spoken to President [Name] the previous day”.
- “We will be going to the summit on Saturday” *becomes* “they would be going to/attending the summit later that week”
- “I expect that the French will block agreement” *becomes* “He expected that the French would block the agreement”; or “It was likely that the French would block the agreement”.

- “We must argue strongly against the Commission proposals” *becomes* “The UK/the Government must argue strongly against the Commission proposals”. [Note: sometimes, on Foreign Affairs items, putting “the UK” into the third person every time becomes too cumbersome. The occasional - exceptional - “we” is OK.]

This can take some getting used to, but quickly will become second nature. If you have any questions, do ask members of the Secretariat who will be able to assist. Alternatively, an internet search for “reported speech” will bring up a number of websites which should be able to resolve any queries.

Format and structure

The Secretariat is responsible for the format of the minute (i.e. fonts, layout, bullet styles etc). The Cabinet desk officer has access to the template, which should be used to maintain consistency. For preparing a contribution to the minute the main thing is to adhere to the basic structures below.

Each minute is split into sections depending on the items discussed, but the three headings are: Parliamentary Business, Current Events and Foreign Affairs. The first item in each of these will be numbered, so Parliamentary Business will start with “1.”, the first Current Events item with “2.”, and the first Foreign Affairs item with “3.”. This will of course vary depending on items being discussed. Note that Cabinet Minutes for fiscal events tend to have only one item, which is recorded by its title (so “Budget 2016” or “Autumn Statement 2016”).

Within this, each item is reported in six steps. Not every step is always needed for every item, though most “Current Events” items use all six. These are as follows:

Step One: the introduction from the Prime Minister or relevant Secretary of State. This may take a paragraph or more to write. The first paragraph begins: “THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [] said that...” . Subsequent paragraphs begin: “Continuing, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [] said that...” . There is no fixed length for a paragraph – it’s a question of breaking the text up into manageable chunks. About half a page is usually the maximum. If there are three or more paragraphs, the final one can begin: “Concluding..”

Step Two: report and assign contributions to important Cabinet Ministers. This where it is very material for the record to know who was speaking. In a single-party government, this tends to be only the Prime Minister or Chancellor. Under a coalition government, the Deputy Prime Minister, or other senior figures from each party, should always be recorded separately and have their comments assigned.

For each speaker, you should start a new paragraph, such as: “THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER SAID THAT...”. For Foreign Affairs items, the Prime Minister will often introduce the discussion and the Foreign Secretary will then follow. Both should have their contributions assigned. Other Cabinet

Ministers will usually have their points listed anonymously under “points made (see below). Exceptions may be made for:

- The Chief Secretary to the Treasury if (s)he is making an important point about public expenditure (though not otherwise);
- The Attorney General, if (s)he is making a legal point (though not otherwise, and such legal points should generally appear after other “points made”, before the relevant Secretary of State responds);
- Points from ministers whose departmental brief is very relevant. For example, the Home Secretary and/or the Defence Secretary may have their points assigned if a matter of international security is being discussed. This is a matter of judgement. If in doubt, assign the point to the individual. It can always be moved back to “points made” at a later stage.

Step Three: Points made by other Ministers. Once assigned contributions have been recorded, a new paragraph begins: “In discussion, the following points were made:”. Underneath follows a bulleted list of the points made by other Ministers during the discussion, with a semi-colon at the end of each one.

Generally, it makes sense to put these broadly in the order in which they were made, but they can be grouped together if Ministers raise points along similar themes. The Minute should not repeat an identical point just because several people made it. Disagreements should be recorded, with the contrasting points made next to each other. You should not draft away the disagreement.

If someone just asks a question, it isn’t generally included here but the answer should be recorded in the next section. It is fine to record a question as a question (i.e. with a question mark) – there is no need to use the minute style (though this is also acceptable).

Step Four: Responses from the responsible Secretary of State to their colleagues. Where applicable, this paragraph should start: “Responding, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [...] said that [...]. This is often something of a list as it will reflect responses to points as they are made in the meeting. This is standard for the Minute.

Step Five: the Prime Minister sums up the discussion. It’s important to record any thanks to colleagues, civil servants, ministers and departments for their work; important points of difference that have been resolved; and any actions. The Prime Minister sometimes intervenes during the discussion. Usually, though not always, the right thing to do is to wrap all his points into this one, final paragraph. Sometimes the Prime Minister says nothing at the end of an item; in which case the Minute omits this step.

Step Six: finally, starting a new line, every item in the Cabinet Minute must end:

The Cabinet:

- took note.

A mocked-up Minute is contained at Annex A that shows how these stages fit together for a full item. Any other questions should be directed to the Cabinet desk officer who will be able to check against previous minutes.

Content and levels of detail

It is a matter of judgement for those drafting on how they express the discussion. But below are some guidelines that help maintain some consistency:

- **Err on the side of inclusion of detail.** Looking back over past minutes, you will see that the current records are fuller and more detailed than in the past. This is a conscious choice.
- **Do not write the Minute verbatim.** While the Minute usually records things in the order in which they were said, sometimes a bit of reordering helps the Minute flow more smoothly. This should not be overdone, but nor should you feel excessively constrained.
- **Include the politics.** If people disagree, it should be recorded (politely). It is particularly important to record differences of view across parties in a coalition government. Include criticisms of previous Governments, e.g. “the previous Government’s policy in this area had not achieved its objectives...”.
- **Do not be afraid of colour,** and try to capture people’s original words – within reason. If a Minister says something or someone has been “exasperating”, the Minute shouldn’t say it had been “difficult”. Conversation also shouldn’t be watered down through excessive use of civil-servantese, such as “probably”, “seemed to be”, “could be seen as”, “likely to be”, or “would be seen as”. If somebody says something should be done, do not say it should be “considered”;
- **Use active and personal language** (not “there was a need” or “in terms of”). Having said this, “it was important to...” is a reasonable way of recording “we must...”;
- **Check the facts and be as precise as possible.** Often it may be unclear what a Minister said. Desk officers in the Secretariat can consult with a minister’s private office to ensure factual accuracy. Quite often, the Minute needs to add to what a minister has said. For example, “Employment had risen by 4 per cent” is not enough, even if it’s all the minister said. The Minute will need the time period over which this had taken place, e.g. “between 2010 and 2014”, in order for future readers to understand the point;
- Finally, **keep sentences crisp.** Cut them in half if they are getting too long.

Grammar, punctuation, spelling and capitals

The Cabinet Minute maintains strict rules on grammar, including some which are specific to its drafting. If you have not read Lynne Truss's excellent book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, we would recommend it. This section sets out some common inaccuracies, as well as specific rules for drafting the Minute. In particular:

- **Split infinitives** should not be included. If you need to redraft the sentence completely to avoid these, please do.
- **Lack of hyphens.** Government documents have a tendency to be hyphen-free. However, the Cabinet Minute insists on hyphens in compound adjectives appearing before a noun, particularly where the meaning is otherwise not clear. For example: "in the long term", but "a long-term trend"; "lone parents", but "lone-parent families"; "fixed-term parliaments".
- **Sentences without verbs, or two sentences joined together only with commas.** "The Summit would discuss overseas aid, there would be a dinner on the final evening" needs either a full-stop in the middle or the word "and";
- **Sentences should not end with prepositions.** For example "The Government needed to consider which areas it should intervene on" becomes "The Government needed to consider on which areas it should intervene" or even better "The Government should consider where and how to intervene".

There are a number of other rules specific to the Cabinet Minute, even if this conflicts with other Government style guides:

- There should be no contractions. "Was not" "it is" and "did not" rather than "wasn't" "it's" and "hadn't";
- "Per cent" is written out in words, never "%";
- Spending is expressed: "£2 billion" (not "£2billion", "£2 bn" or "£2bn");
- Financial years use hyphens not slashes, i.e "2012-13" not "2012/13";
- Dates are expressed: 31 January, 1 March, 2 June;
- Use the words for numbers **one** to **twelve** (subject to the bullet below), but figures for numbers higher. E.g. "Twelve people had been killed in the blast, and 40 had been injured";

- Having said this, percentages or statistics always use figures. E.g. “GDP had risen by 1 per cent”;
- If you have to express a half, follow the same convention as above. So: “The grant scheme had been in place for **four-and-a-half years** and had increased employment by **5.5** per cent during this time”.

There are also a number of conventions for capitalisation:

- Government has a capital letter only when it is preceded by “the”.
- Ministers are always capitalised.
- Departments and civil servants are not capitalised *unless* using a proper noun. E.g. the Department for Work and Pensions or the Civil Service.
- Local government, local authorities and councils are not capitalised.
- Fiscal events are always capitalised, but not associated timeframes e.g. “the Spending Review” but “the summer Budget”.
- Stages of Parliamentary proceedings should also be capitalised, e.g. “Second Reading”, “Report” (but not “stage” in Report stage).
- Specific bills should be capitalised, but not when the term is used generically. So “the Housing Bill” but “there would be “20 bills”. It should also be “Private Members’ Bills”.
- Other EU countries are always Member States.
- When discussing the courts, there is no capital, but the Supreme Court is always capitalised.
- “The economy” is not capitalised.
- Similarly, neither are “devolved administrations” (though it would still be the “Scottish/Welsh/Northern Ireland Government” as above)
- “Parliament” should be capitalised, but “parliamentary” should not be.

There are a number of ministerial titles that differ from common usage for the purpose of attributing the Minute. These should always be in block capitals. When another Cabinet member refers to them, this can be minuted as spoken.

- Chancellor – The Chancellor of the Exchequer;

- Secretary of State for Justice – The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice;
- Home Secretary – The Secretary of State for the Home Department;
- Foreign Secretary – The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs;
- Chief Whip – The Chief Whip and Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury;

In addition, there are a number of ministerial titles that vary with the office holder:

- If a minister is made First Secretary of State, this should be minuted the first time a point is attributed and thereafter they should just be referred to by their ministerial title. For example: “The First Secretary of State and Chancellor of the Exchequer” thereafter “The Chancellor of the Exchequer”
- If a minister is appointed “Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster” this is how they are referred to in the minute;

Junior Ministers should normally be referred to using their full title on Gov.uk, for example: *The Minister of State for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation* rather than *The Minister of State at the Department of Business for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy*. This is partly because there may be two officeholders with the same title in the latter format, and it should be clear from the cover page of the minute who you are referring to.

In addition, there are various other oddities on which conventions have evolved over the course of time for writing the Minute:

- Proper nouns can be abbreviated after the first mention, so long as the abbreviation is included afterwards in parentheses. For example: The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) can subsequently be called DEFRA. Similarly, the House of Commons should be written out in full the first time but thereafter simply “the House”; the House of Lords subsequently “the Lords”;
- The Minute avoids acronyms for two-word titles – for example the Environment Agency or for unusual technical terms that are unlikely to appear in the Cabinet Minute again in the near future;
- Very, very common abbreviations (e.g. UK, EU, UN, NHS) do not need to be spelt out in full;
- When the Minute refers to the current Government, say “the Government” (note: not “this” Government). Other Governments will require a qualifier to explain who you mean, eg the previous Government, the last Conservative Government, the French Government, rogue Governments etc;
- Similarly, foreign ministers should generally have their country prefaced to their title. For instance: Russian President Putin;

- Never abbreviate people’s names - for example Aung Sang Suu Kyi not ASSK;
- IED remains as IED;
- Islamic State was referred to as ISIL until December 2015, whereafter “Daesh” has been used. “Daesh” should be used until otherwise stated.

These are the most common queries that occur in Cabinet meetings. For any other ambiguities, either consult with members of the Secretariat or the Cabinet Secretary’s office directly.

ANNEX A: EXAMPLE MINUTE STRUCTURE

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [] said that she had announced proposals for the regulation of the industry the previous day. These had been received well, though there had been some criticism of the ban on [] because of its impact on small businesses. Her Department would be publishing detailed guidance later that year.

Continuing, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [] said that....

Concluding, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [] said that....

THE DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER said that he was grateful to the Secretary of State for [] and her officials for their work on the package. This illustrated that the Coalition was fulfilling its promise to support those who []. Separate discussions would be needed to agree the detailed guidance, following the consultation.

In discussion the following points were made:

- a. the package was excellent, and would support growth by [];
- b. [...];

Responding, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR [] said that....

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that...

The Cabinet:

- took note.