

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO THE SECRETARY

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Definition of a Secretary

The secretary of a society is defined as ‘the person who will take minutes of meetings, deal with correspondence and be responsible for the secretary’s report and the society’s submission to the end-of-year book’. Larger societies may have one secretary responsible for communication and another for recording.

Role of the secretary

Although the requirements of each society vary, in general the secretary has the following responsibilities.

Administrative duties

- They should attend any training workshops provided by the Societies’ Office, and make themselves familiar with the relevant sections of any handbooks and guidelines provided by the office.
- They should check to make sure the Society’s constitution is on file and up-to-date, and should become familiar with its conditions. It is also a good idea for the secretary to ensure a copy of the constitution is available at all committee meetings (see section on **Constitutions** in the BICS Guide).
- The secretary is responsible for having current list of committee members’ names, contact details and student numbers, and must ensure this list is filed with the Societies’ Office.
- As the end of the year approaches, the secretary will be expected to prepare the society’s *End of Year Report*, a document which details the society’s activities for the year. This may also form the society’s contribution to an *End of Year Book* if one is produced by the Societies’ Office.

Communication Duties

Secretaries are responsible for the society’s communications, both internal and external. Internal communications include keeping committee members informed of meetings, agendas, and minutes (see below), as well as making sure that the society has an up-to-date calendar of events (electronic or otherwise) in order to facilitate the PRO’s communication with society members. External communication includes receiving, reading, and responding to any communications (postal, electronic, telephone, *etc.*) from third parties. This includes contact from the Societies’ Officer as well as from other societies. As such, it is important that secretaries have passwords

for any resources used by the society for communication, e.g. e-mail accounts, SMS servers, web-servers *etc.*, or be in close communication with the officers responsible for these resources.

Recording Duties

The role of the secretary is vital to ensuring successful committee meetings. They are responsible for communicating the date, time and place of these meetings to the committee, as well as forwarding an *agenda* for each meeting. During the meeting, the secretary is to record the *minutes*, paying particular attention to any *motions* which are carried or overturned, as well as specific decisions made. These minutes are to be typed up after the meeting and forwarded to the individual committee members for review; also, they must be read to and approved by the committee at the start of the next meeting.

The following sections deal in more detail with specific aspects of the secretary's duties: at *meetings*, preparing *agendas*, taking *minutes*, and preparing the *secretary's report*.

Meetings

There are three different types of meeting which society committees may have to convene: an AGM, an EGM, and a committee meeting. All meetings can be either formal or informal. A formal meeting is one which has an *agenda* (see below), while an informal meeting is simply a 'get-together' to discuss matters of business.

Annual General Meeting: *you must hold an AGM*. The purpose of this meeting is to facilitate the changeover of committee members from one year to the next. As such, it is best to hold it at the end of the second semester or final term. In some institutions, however, the AGM is only to be held at the *beginning* of a new academic year. Check with your Societies' Office and/or your constitution for the relevant policy. Best practice suggests giving one weeks' notice of the AGM and making every effort to publicise the event: posters, e-mailing/texting members, and making use of any available websites and notice boards are all recommended. Check your constitution for specific regulations governing your society's AGM.

The agenda of the meeting is at the discretion of the committee, but must include the election of officers, as well as the reading of the treasurer's report (see BICS guide to **Finance**) and secretary's report (see below). In the

event that some committee positions are not filled at the AGM, an EGM can be held in September after Societies' Day/Freshers' Week, when you have recruited your new members. Be sure to record the names and contact details of new committee members and make all societies' instruction documentation available to them. It is also best practice to encourage new committee members to attend all relevant training workshops. In some institutions these are mandatory, so check carefully with your Societies' Officer!

Extraordinary General Meeting: an EGM can be held at any time of the year. If you are holding an EGM to fill vacant committee positions, it is best practice to advertise the date, time and venue of the EGM on any recruitment stands your society hosts prior to the meeting. Attendance is open to all members of the society, and usually, one week's notice is necessary (check your constitution for specific rules governing EGMs in your society). The agenda is at the discretion of the committee. Constitutional changes may be approved by members at an EGM, but do not come into effect until they have been approved by the Supervisory Body in your institute (see BICS Guide to **Constitutions**); contact your Societies' Officer for further information.

Committee Meetings: these are the primary organisational platform for you society's activities. They are to be held as often as necessary, and according to the provisions of the society's constitution.

Successful committee meetings are the key to successful societies, so here are some tips on running a meeting. (Further information on chairing *etc.* can be found in the **BICS Guide for the Chairperson.**)

Before the meeting

1. Define the purpose of the meeting.
2. Develop an *agenda* (see below) in co-operation with key participants (often, the Chairperson and the Secretary will develop the agenda, and include any items tabled by other members).
3. Distribute the agenda and circulate any background material, lengthy documents or articles prior to the meeting. This is to ensure both that members are prepared and that they feel involved and up-to-date.
4. Choose an appropriate meeting time. Set a time-limit and stick to it if possible: remember that members have other commitments; they will be more likely to attend meetings if they are productive, predictable, and as short as possible.
5. If possible, arrange the room so that members face each other, i.e. a circle or semi-circle. For large group, try U-shaped rows.

6. Choose a location suitable to the size of your group. Small rooms with too many people get stuffy and create tension. A larger room is more comfortable and encourages individual expression. Remember also that a location where you can work without distraction and interruption will increase the efficiency of the meeting.

Bring to the meeting

1. The meeting agenda.
2. A prepared outline with all of the topics written on it, and plenty of white space, in order to record the proceedings (see **Minutes**, below).
3. An attendance sheet.
4. A copy of the minutes of the last meeting.
5. All background material pertaining to the meeting.

Remember that the real key to a successful meeting is a capable chairperson, who is able to keep the discussion moving without making anyone feel they are being side-lined, whilst also ensuring all the necessary discussion gets aired. If your committee is experiencing tensions, try increasing the formality of the meetings by sticking closely to a well-prepared agenda. This will keep the meetings business-like, and help to avoid the venting of personal opinions. Remember, however, that there should be an element of fun about these meetings, or at least an air of relaxation, if you wish the committee to perform at its best.

Agendas

The *agenda* is a plan for the meeting. It should begin with the title of the meeting, e.g. 'Committee Meeting, week 3', as well as noting the time, date and the location of the meeting. You *may* wish to include a projected end-time for the meeting, but be careful: it will cause frustration among the committee if meetings over-run or end up being significantly shorter than estimated!

The first order of business on the agenda should be the reading and approving of the *previous meeting's minutes*. Next will be the *Matters Arising* from the last meeting: any unfinished business which needs to be discussed again, as well as reports and updates on matters discussed before.

The agenda should next detail the individual objects for discussion at the meeting, in the form of a list. It is also useful to provide a brief background to each item. It's not a bad idea to meet with the chairperson of the society when arranging the agenda – remember fifteen minutes planning the meeting can save an hour of unnecessary discussion!

Lastly, a time should be set aside for *Any Other Business* at the end of the meeting. This is a chance for committee members to bring up subjects which were not included in the agenda, or which have occurred as a result of the present discussion. It is also a chance to return to unresolved issues from the current meeting.

Minutes

It is a secretary's job to record minutes for every committee meeting. The purpose of these minutes is to provide a summary of the meeting, either for later review, or to pass on to people who could not attend. They should include detailed reference to any decisions made, tasks assigned and expected future actions.

Except for *motions* (see below), minutes do not have to be recorded word for word; instead they should summarise the meeting. Good minutes will be clear and concise, without leaving out any valid information. The following points are essential:

Who is present at the meeting: include those who arrive late and those who leave. This is necessary not only to ensure committee members are attending and participating, but also to establish if a quorum is present at any given time. (A *quorum* is the minimum number or percentage of a committee which must be present in order for a decision made to be valid; the value of the quorum should be stated in your society constitution. If not, make sure to amend it; see Section 3 of **Constitutions**).

The reading and approval of the previous minutes

All pros and cons of the discussion: make sure to record all opinions put forward on any given subject. This is useful for assessing the society's progress and analysing the effectiveness of its decision-making; also, it will make sure all members feel their views are being represented, even if they are voted down on an issue.

Actions taken/expected: any decisions made by the committee should be recorded, so that everyone knows who is responsible for which duties, when their deadlines are, and so on. For example, 'John is responsible for making posters, which will be ready by Wednesday the 14th of March', *etc.* As well as this, propositions about the societies' future activities should be noted, such as, 'by next month, we will be prepared to host two meetings a week.'

Motions: a *motion* is a presentation of an idea to a meeting for discussion. It must have a proposer (the person putting the motion forward) and a seconder (a person who agrees with the motion), and then it must be passed by a vote of the committee. Accordingly, it is a good idea for motions to be written out beforehand and presented to the meeting in the form of an overhead, or on a page for everyone to see. Motions must be recorded *exactly as they are stated*; it is also important to record the proposer, seconder, and the result as follows:

‘It was moved by *John McCarthy*, seconded by *Mary O’Donnell*, and (carried/defeated) that *the membership fee of the society will increase to €4*’

Every item of business raised in the meeting should be noted, even if it is only one line in the minutes.

Do not record:

- Speaker’s experience
- Old material
- Redundant information
- Personal comments
- Motions withdrawn (These are motions which are tabled, but retracted *before* going to vote – as opposed to motions defeated.)

Tips for Taking Minutes

- Ensure that all of the essential elements are noted, such as type of meeting, name of the society, date and time, venue, name of the chair or facilitator, main topics and the time of adjournment. For formal meetings include approval of previous minutes, and all resolutions.
- Prepare an outline based on the agenda ahead of time, and leave plenty of white space for notes. By having the topics already written down, you can jump right on to a new topic without pause. (Minute taking templates may be available at the Societies’ Office/website.)
- Prepare a list of expected attendees and check off the names as people enter the room. Or, you can pass around an attendance sheet for everyone to sign as the meeting starts.
- Don’t make the mistake of recording every single comment. Concentrate on getting the gist of the discussion and taking enough notes to summarise it later. Think in terms of *issues discussed, major points raised* and *decisions taken*.
- Use whatever recording method is comfortable for you: a notepad, a laptop computer, a tape recorder or shorthand.

- If you are an active participant in the meeting, be prepared! Study the issues to be discussed and have your questions ready ahead of time. If you have to concentrate on grasping the issues while you are making your notes, they won't make any sense to you later.
- Don't wait too long to type up the minutes: do it while your memory is fresh. Be sure to have the minutes approved by the chair or facilitator before distributing them to the attendees.
- Don't be intimidated by the prospect of taking minutes. Concise and coherent minutes are the mark of a professional. The very process of recording minutes can give you a deeper understanding of the issues faced by your society along with ability to focus on what's important.

Secretary's Report

The secretary's report is a summary of the society's activities for the year, and often comprises the society's contribution to an end-of-year book if such is produced by the Societies' Office. The closing date for submission of the report will be decided by the Societies' Officer, but will generally be required around the close of the final term or semester. The specific format of the secretary's report varies from one institution to another, but in general will include:

1. The names of the committee members for the relevant year.
2. A description of the society and its activities during the year in question.
3. A list of events which were organised and carried out by the society during the year.
4. Any changes made to the society's constitution for the year.
5. The society's membership numbers for the year in question.
6. The number of committee meetings held, and whether or not an AGM has been held.
7. If an AGM has been held, the names and contact details of the incoming committee members.

A provisional version of the report should be read during the AGM, and should, if time allows, be updated to reflect that such has been held before submitting the report.

Other Documentation

The secretary may also be required to produce an end-of-year or handover booklet for the society. This is a very useful document for ensuring continuity, and should include any information relevant to running the society which is not already included in the secretary's report. As the contents of this document will vary from society to society, it should be written in conjunction with the chairperson, and in consultation with the committee as a whole.

Appendix:

1. The Constitution
2. Agenda sample
3. Minute Taking template
4. Letter writing template

What is a constitution?

A constitution is a document which outlines the *terms of reference* of your society or club. In other words, it presents a list of rules and guidelines for the operation of the group. In order for a society to have official status in a university, college, or institute, it *must* have a constitution.

A constitution is composed of a number of *articles*. Each article contains a specific rule for a particular aspect of running the society, and they are grouped under headings such as 'Meetings', 'Committee Positions', 'Membership', *etc.* (see *constitution template*). Each society's constitution will be a mix of standard articles (which apply to all societies), as well as more specific rules which are particular to the running of each individual society. All in all, the constitution should provide a complete reference to how each society is to be run by its committee, as well as its aims and responsibilities to members.

Existing societies will already have a constitution: it should be on file with your Societies' Office. It is a good idea for new committee members to review the constitution at the start of the year, so they have a clear idea of its contents; best practice also suggests that committees should have a copy of the constitution available for all meetings in case of disputes.

New societies will have to create a constitution as part of their initiation process. This constitution can be developed from the template included at the end of this chapter; it should also be available from your Societies' Office or

website. A new constitution must be *ratified* (voted in) by the supervisory body in your institute, and will also have to be put forward to the society's members for approval at the first meeting.

Why do you need a constitution?

Besides being an essential legal document, the society's constitution is also a very useful tool for ensuring success both in the short-term and in the long-term. Firstly, it provides a framework of guidance for the society's activities, helping a committee to focus its attention on the correct activities for running the group. Secondly, it ensures that incoming committees can find out exactly what rules they have to follow and what their aims and objectives for the year should be.

The constitution is also available for reference in the case of disputes over the running of the society. This can happen in the case of an argument between members of the committee, and can also arise when regular members are dissatisfied with the way the society is being run. While of course it is preferable to resolve such issues through consensus and compromise between committee members, or by accommodating the additional needs of the society's members, the rules of the constitution can be consulted if necessary. For example, there may be a provision for a committee member to lose their office should they regularly fail to attend meetings.

These rules should define clearly which course of action is correct, in just the same way that the Irish Constitution provides clear definitions of the laws governing the State.

If it is found that the constitution fails to meet any of the above functions, or its terms are inadequate for the society's needs, then it will need to be *amended*.

Amendments to the constitution.

It will be necessary, at some stage or other, to make changes to every society's constitution, either because the society develops beyond its original terms of reference (for example, the development of a society website would necessitate provision for the office of webmaster, as well as rules for the running of the site), or because the articles in the constitution have proven to be insufficient to meet the needs of the group (for example, the constitution failed to provide a resolution to a certain dispute).

A number of formalities must be observed when amending a constitution to ensure that it remains fair and legal. Firstly, of course, a constitution cannot provide any rules which are contrary to an institution's code of conduct or against state laws. Secondly, the amendments must be approved by the society's members at an extraordinary general meeting (EGM), or at the society's annual general meeting (AGM). Next, these changes will have to be ratified by the institution's supervisory body in the same way the original constitution was approved. Finally, an updated version of your constitution should be filed with your Societies' Office, and the amended sections should be included in any end-of-year documentation produced by the society (e.g. secretary's report, end-of-year report, *etc.*).

Sample Agenda

Committee Meeting, Semester I, Week 3

21st September, 2015, Room 203, Main Building

7:00 pm

1. Minutes of previous meeting
2. Matters arising:
 - ▶ *Deposit on hotel room for guest speaker*
3. Discussion on next week's guest speaker:
 - ▶ *Collecting from airport;*
 - ▶ *Arranging dinner;*
 - ▶ *Preparations for reception.*
4. Any Other Business

2. Minute taking template

Minutes

Committee _____

Date _____ Time _____ Venue _____ End time _____

Present:

Apologies:

Matters Arising:

Item no _____
Discussion

Decision

Action

Formal Letters

	1- writer's name
	2- writer's address
	3- date
	4- name of the person who'll receive the letter
	5- company where the person works
	6- address of the company
	7- greeting
	other options for greeting:
	- Sirs
	- Mr. Smith
	- Mrs. Smith
	- Ms. Smith
	- Miss. Smith
	8- introduce the subject of the letter
	9- after finishing the subject we usually say thank you
	10- closing (saying goodbye)
	other options:
	- Sincerely yours
	- Yours sincerel
	- Yours truly
	- Yours faithfully
	11- writer's signature
	Remember that in formal letters we don't use contractions, so you musn't write <i>I'm, We'd, He'll, etc.</i>