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WRITING OFFICIAL LETTERS
MINUTES-NOTE TAKING



*International Confederation
of Free Trade Unions*

Price : six pence or the equivalent in other currencies
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International Confederation of Free Trade Unions

WRITING OFFICIAL LETTERS

The Importance of Letters

To most of us, speech comes more readily than writing, and when information has to be passed on, the obvious way of doing it is by word of mouth. The telephone has greatly widened the opportunity of conducting business in this way. But a trade unionist is well advised not to rely on this method alone. In the affairs of the heart, it may be good advice never to put anything in writing. The reverse is often true in business. What is written, especially if carbon copies are kept, survives as a record. The record remains as a reminder of what has happened, and a check in the event of a dispute. It is only too easy during transactions which may take some months, to forget exactly what had happened at any one time. Written records will provide exact information, not only about what happened but — what is often as important — when it happened. When it is remembered that the actions of shop stewards and branch officers may be vital evidence in a Court of Law, as for example in the pursuit of claims for damages on behalf of union members, exact records are extremely important.

For this reason, a duplicate copy of letters provides branch officials with lasting evidence of their own communications. All branch letters, therefore, should be written in duplicate. If letters are typed or written in an interleaved correspondence book, it is easy to make carbon copies. But even if letters are hand written on loose sheets, ordinary carbon paper will make clear copies providing a fountain pen with a fairly hard nib or a ball-point pen is used.

Simplicity and the Avoidance of Jargon

Always write as plainly as you can. Short sentences and simple words are more effective and more easily understood e.g., « I am much appreciative of the plentiful supply of enrolment forms resulting from your kindness in forwarding them to the factory antecedent to the meeting », could be better expressed, « Thank you for sending a good supply of enrolment forms to the factory in time for the meeting ».

Secondly, avoid jargon. « Re your communication of the 28th ultimo, I have to advise you that I have no information on the queries set out therein » is a clumsy way of saying, « Thank you for your letter of May 28th. I am sorry that I have no information about the questions you ask »,.

Other pieces of jargon to be avoided are phrases like « in connection with »; « with regard to »; « with reference to »; « About » will nearly always do just as well. « So far as blank is concerned » is usually superfluous e.g., « So far as stationery is concerned, we have enough for the next month », may be simply written, « We have enough stationery for the next month ».

A natural and friendly manner is not unbusiness-like.

A Plan for letterwriting

There is a standard form of showing names, dates, addresses and reference numbers in letters. These must always be included as they are essential to identify the letter, and if you lay them out in the standard pattern, the reader will know exactly where to find them. People expect letters to be arranged in this way and may well misread one which is different. In a big office, all letters may be opened in a central department by clerks working at high speed. A badly laid out letter — one in which the name of the person for whom it is intended is omitted or in the wrong place, or with the heading or reference number left out — might be held up or sent to the wrong department. The lay-out of this information is shown on page five.

LETTER HEADING

- C. **Any reference numbers.**
Your Ref :
Our Ref :
- D. Name
Title, and full
address of person
to whom you are writing.
- A. **Your own address**
in full : i.e.
including town and country.
- B. **Date in full**
(including month and year).

Dear Brother . . . ,

Heading — giving subject matter and underlined

Paragraph 1

Subject matter and who you are.

(In some cases, the heading and information under your signature, will make this paragraph unnecessary.)

Paragraph 2

Problem arising.

Paragraph 3

Action requested to deal with problems in Paragraph 2.

Yours sincerely,

E. Signature
Your name printed.

F. Your official position.

See page 6 for notes on the diagram.

Notes on the diagram :

- A. Always give your full name and address. This includes the town and the country, and is written at the top right and corner.
- B. Give the full date immediately below your address — not just « Monday », but the month and year e.g., 22nd March 1962.
- C. The reference numbers written at the top left hand side of the page should include any reference numbers or initials which you think will help you find other related papers when the reply arrives, and any initials or reference numbers which will help the person to whom you are writing to link up your letter with previous correspondence.
- D. The name, position and full address of the person to whom you are writing, written under the references, will ensure that your letter is passed to the right person straight away. In the event of the envelope becoming soiled or damaged, it also ensures that the Post Office forwards your letter to the correct address.
- E. Your signature should always be written, even if the rest of the letter is typed. To avoid the embarrassment of your correspondent being unable to read your signature or spelling your name correctly, you should type or print your name immediately beneath your signature.
- F. If you are writing in an official capacity, such as Branch Secretary of Chairman, Shop Steward or Delegate, you should write this below your name.

Arranging the Subject Matter

No rigid formula can be laid down for arranging subject matter as it depends on the nature of the information to be given. The following plan may meet most circumstances.

Each separate idea should be given a paragraph — i.e. it should begin on a fresh line and the first word should be indented half an inch or so. Paragraphing helps the reader to distinguish each separate idea.

The first paragraph coming immediately under the heading should say what the subject of the letter is. In some cases it will be sufficient merely to link the letter up with previous correspondence on the same subject e.g. « Thank you for your letter of 22nd March 1962 ». It may be also necessary to explain who you are and on what authority you are writing if this is not likely to be known to the reader, e.g. « As a student whos attended the ICFTU African Labour College, I read with interest the article on Trade Union Education in the May issue of Free Labour World ». Under certain circumstances, all the necessary information may be conveyed in the heading which begins the letter and the official title at the end of the letter : there is then no need for this paragraph.

Further paragraphs should deal with the particular problems which arise under the general topic of your letter. Each separate problem should be given a separate paragraph, as a general rule.

The final paragraph should contain the request for some action to deal with the problems which have been explained in the previous paragraphs.

One Letter, One Topic

Various aspects of union work are handled by different officers and departments. If one letter contains more than one subject, it may be required by two or more departments. Separate copies then have to be made for each of the different officials who have to see it and keep a record of it in their filing systems. This causes confusion and waste of time.

MODEL LETTER

12 Bright Street
Lagos,
Nigeria.

22nd January 1966

The Principal
ICFTU African Labour College
P.O. Box 3337
KAMPALA
Uganda

Dear Sir,

The Union's Educational Service

At our last Branch Meeting, questions were raised on the Union's educational service, and as Secretary, I was requested to write to you.

The branch was recently formed and we have some 500 members. We would naturally like to learn more about trade unionism and especially branch administration.

Please advise me on the best steps our active members can take, and send me a supply of relevant material and any other information.

Yours sincerely,
(Signature)

A. STEWARD
Secretary



WRITING MINUTES

« Minutes » of a meeting should be a complete record of all the **business** which was done. They need not (and indeed should not) contain reports, verbatim or otherwise, of what was **said**, though summaries of reports and information given by delegates or officers should be included, together with a note of any action the meeting decides to take in relation to them.

The nature of the meeting (i.e. branch meeting, branch committee meeting) and the date, time and place at which it is held should always appear, together with the name of the person actually taking the chair, whether or not he is the regular chairman. If the meeting is specially summoned or if it is the continuation of a meeting previously adjourned, this also should be shown.

At a committee meeting it is usual to show in the minutes the names of those present and to record any apologies for absence. At a full branch meeting this would obviously be impossible. Sometimes there is an « attendance book » which members sign on entering the room, in which case the minutes need only record, after the name of the chairman, « Members present as shown in the attendance book ». If no such book is kept, the branch may instruct the Secretary to enter in the minutes how many members were present at the commencement of business — this is, of course, particularly important where the branch has standing orders which require a quorum to be present before any business can be done.

The Secretary or Minute Secretary will not often find it possible to write up the minutes in final form while the meeting is going on. He will usually find it best to make notes in a rough book or, when correspondence is being dealt with, on the backs of the letter, etc., and then write up the minute book in presentable form later.

Whenever a proposal is put to the meeting, whether it relates to approval of, or action upon, correspondence or reports, or whether it is in the form of a motion or an amendment to

a motion, it **must** be recorded in the minutes, whether accepted or not. The exact wording of the proposals and the name of the movers and seconders must be given. It is a mistake to assume that motions or amendments rejected by the meeting, or decisions to take no action, need not be entered in the minute book. The wording of motions or amendments not put to the meeting (i.e. those for which there is no seconder (*), and those ruled out of order by the chairman) need **not** be recorded, though the **fact** that a proposal was ruled out of order by the chairman should be.

At committee meetings, it is usual to enter the names of those voting for and against each proposal or amendment. It will, of course, be impossible to do this at a branch meeting, but the **numbers** are normally announced by the chairman immediately the vote is taken, and where this is done, the minutes should record it.

It is important that the Secretary gets the exact wording of every motion correctly, and he should not hesitate to ask the chairman to see that it is read or spoken at dictation speed, to enable him to do this. It sometimes happens, especially where a decision arises from a discussion, that the Secretary is expected to frame the actual motion on which the decision is to be taken. There is nothing wrong in this — he is often the person best qualified to do the job — but he **must** get it framed, and ask the Chairman's permission to read it out to the meeting, before the vote is taken. If this isn't done, with the best will in the world confusion may occur.

If copies of the minutes have been circulated to all members (as is sometimes the case at committee meetings), then there is no need to read them out at the next meeting. In these cases, the first motion should be «That the minutes, having been circulated, be taken as read and signed as a correct record». In all other cases, the meeting must start with the reading of the minutes by the Secretary. He should speak clearly and

(*) Normally, at **committee** meetings a seconder is not required.

not too fast, keeping his voice lively and interested. When he has finished, the motion : « That the minutes be signed as a correct record » should be moved and seconded. The Chairman will allow discussion of this only on the question of accuracy. If the accuracy is challenged, and the proposed correction is one that the Secretary can accept, he should do so at once and with a good grace. If he feels, however, that the proposed correction is wrong, then the Chairman will ask for a seconder and put the correction to the vote as an amendment to the motion to sign the minutes as a correct record. If the amendment is carried, the correction should be written by the Secretary in the margin of the minutes, and initialled by the Chairman. This procedure cannot, of course, be used to **alter** what the meeting decided, though a member who disapproves strongly of a decision will sometimes « try it on ». The procedure is concerned solely with the accuracy of the minutes as a record of what took place.

The Secretary should always make sure that the Chairman **does** sign the minutes, and date his signature, immediately the motion to approve them has been passed.

NOTE TAKING

Equipment

Giving reports of meetings is an important part of the work of committee-men and delegates. It is almost impossible to do this accurately if written notes are not taken. The first necessity in note taking is to have the proper tools — a good note book and pencil and rubber. These, because they are so simple, are often overlooked. But they are important.

Summarising

There is a tendency to try to take down every word a speaker utters. This cannot, of course, be done in long-hand and it is futile to try. A note-taker should put down only the main ideas and any important facts. This means he should select. Some people, even while they are selecting, seem to

take down complete sentences word for word. There is no need to do this. It is often simpler to reword a sentence. For example, the following sentences might well occur in a conference speech: « And so I conclude, brothers, that step by step the operating staff of the railways are being driven to desperation or despair. If they do not actually despair in all cases — some people traditionally grin and bear it — deep within them there is the growing bitterness that their lot is daily worsening ». It would be sufficient to note: « Growing discontent of the railwaymen at worsening conditions ».

Headings

Most speakers — especially those who have been trained in public speaking — follow a plan. If the leading idea in each section can be noted down as a heading, the rest of the speech falls into place easily. Sometimes, of course, this method cannot be used, because the ideas in a speech have no clear shape to begin with. No one can make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. But official reports will normally be coherent, and the argument can be followed step by step. For example, an officer giving a report on the progress of a wages claim might well have the following notes in front of him:

- (1) Mention short interval since last wages claim, and comment on the unsatisfactory nature of the last wage award.
- (2) **Case put by workers' side :**
 - a) Increase in prices.
 - b) Wage movements of related industrial groups.
 - c) Profits in the trade.
 - d) Feeling amongst men.
- (3) **Employer's reply :**
 - a) Refers to alleged promises of workers' side during last negotiations.
 - b) Plead poverty.
 - c) Categorical rejection.
- (4) Workers' decision to refer to arbitration.
 - a) Reasons in favour of arbitration.
- (5) Appeals to members' sense of responsibility to support the proposal to submit a dispute to arbitration and to await the results of this arbitration.

His speech would naturally fall into these five phases. The delegate taking notes should be able to pick out the main sections and give each in a few words. His notes might carry the following headings :

- a) Last wage award.
- b) Present wage claim.
- c) Employers' reply.
- d) Arbitration, proposal for the next step.
- e) Appeal for support for the proposal.

These should stand out from the rest of the notes and be underlined. They will be of the greatest help to a delegate when he comes to report the proceedings to his branch. Even if he has not caught every single illustration — and he will rarely be able to do this — he will be in possession of the main shape of the argument. His report, though necessarily it cannot be a complete recapitulation, is likely to be a fair summary.

Mentioning names

The delegate who is reporting ought to mention names, other than his own, frequently. His members' only experience of the performance of union representatives may be at second-hand from their delegates' accounts. They may have to rely on his reports to form their opinions. He should say who gave the main reports, and who made any important contribution from the floor. He can't do this unless he takes careful note of speakers' names throughout the whole of the proceedings.

Things which must be reported

Some items, because they are obvious, tend to be left out of a report. For example, the subject of the meeting, names of principal speakers, date and place will be firmly in the delegate's mind. It may seem to him superfluous to mention them in his report. But these facts may not be so familiar to some of the less well-informed members of the branch. The main facts should be recorded firmly in the notes taken at the meeting, and duly included in the report.

There is another reason why it is important to mention names, dates and places, since the proceedings of a meeting may well assume importance some time in the future when these details may easily be forgotten. Moreover, the issue

may hinge upon exactly who was present, or upon the time the meeting took place. For this, memory would be an unsatisfactory guide.

In making a report, the main decisions must be given with strict accuracy. The action decided upon is of even greater importance than the arguments leading up to it. The reasons why a decision was taken are, of course, important. But the decision taken and not the discussion around it ultimately affects the members. For this reason it is advisable to take down any official decision word for word. Indeed, a whole issue may turn upon a single word. The substitution of « must » for « may » in the following sentence — « Overtime may be worked upon the notification of the management » — is enough to stop an industry.

Arrangement

Notes should take plenty of space. This might seem a waste, but the use of paper is often handsomely rewarded by the greater clearness of the notes. There should be a good margin on the left of the page — at least 2 inches wide. All new paragraphs (which should be frequent) should be inset a further inch to make them stand out. Margins and spaces allow room for additional notes on those occasions when speakers refer back to earlier parts of their speech. Afterthoughts can then be recorded in their proper section. Margins are also useful for inserting things like references to books and pamphlets, which need to be recorded but do not strictly form a part of the main argument.

Selection

There may be more than one speech to report upon. There may also be general discussion, or formal motions. A note-taker cannot normally be expected to note every detail. His allotment of time to report back will, in any case, be much less than the meeting took. He must, therefore, condense and select. The branch will only want to hear the most important arguments — not necessarily always exclusively from the platform — and the decisions taken. The report must be pruned and weeded to give a fair but compact summary.

LIST OF ICFTU STUDY GUIDES

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ICFTU Bulletin (six issues per year) 10 /- or \$ 1.50

NOTES

The first of these is the question of the origin of the word "notes". It is generally supposed that it comes from the Latin "nota", meaning a mark or sign.

The second is the question of the origin of the word "note". It is generally supposed that it comes from the Latin "notare", meaning to observe or remark.

The third is the question of the origin of the word "notebook". It is generally supposed that it comes from the Latin "nota" and "book", meaning a book of marks or signs.

The fourth is the question of the origin of the word "note-taking". It is generally supposed that it comes from the Latin "nota" and "taking", meaning the act of observing or remarking.

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