

Toward a common policy for writing Team minutes

Grant Thompson, BSAI Groundfish Plan Team co-chair

The following ideas are intended to help the Groundfish Plan Teams develop a more consistent, and more helpful, approach to writing Team minutes. This is an update of a similar document that was last presented during the November 2016 Joint Team meeting, with the new section “Revised suggested policy regarding Team actions” based on an email circulated for comment to all Team co-chairs and coordinators on September 20 of this year.

General

Bear in mind that the Team chairs/coordinators will need to be able to respond to questions about statements in the minutes when making their SSC, AP, and Council presentations. Statements should be clear enough that chairs/coordinators can figure out what they mean (i.e., the fact that the rapporteur knew what he/she had in mind at the time when the minutes were written is not sufficient).

If a rapporteur is unsure about a sentence in his/her section, it is *much* better to include a comment to that effect than to hope that someone else will figure out that the sentence is really only the rapporteur’s best guess and take the initiative to determine whether the sentence is actually accurate.

Use complete sentences, except (perhaps) in bulleted lists.

After the first reference at the beginning of the minutes, use “Team” (capitalized); not “PT,” “pt,” “Plan Team,” or “plan team.”

For topics other than standard assessments, topic headers should be reasonably detailed (e.g., “Modeling sablefish depredation by sperm whales” is better than “Groundfish”).

For the final draft at least, minutes should be arranged in topical order (i.e., grouping similar items together), even if this is not the order in which the items appeared on the agenda. In the case of stock assessments for the November minutes, summaries should be listed in SAFE chapter order.

In Google Docs, use “suggesting mode” except for truly non-substantive edits, especially in the context of communicating an official Team action.

In Google Docs, be careful about rejecting suggestions without any discussion.

Format for topic headers: capitalize first word only, except for proper nouns.

Format of minutes for each topic (subheaders are not necessary, unless the section is especially lengthy):

- *Brief* summary of presentation (there is no need to write down every bullet in the presentation, as those should be accessible elsewhere)
- Discussion
- Recommendations

Former suggested policy regarding Team actions

For the last few years the policy has been that Team actions take the following form:

- Stand-alone paragraph
- Bold font
- Use the phrase “Team recommends” or “Teams recommend”

At the same time, writers of the minutes have been discouraged from including what have been referred to as “pseudo-recommendations” that take the form of sentences embedded in the main text beginning with phrases such as:

- The Team agrees...
- The Team supports...
- The Team endorses...
- The Team requests...
- The Team suggests...

Revised suggested policy regarding Team actions

However, the experience of the last few years has shown that it is extremely difficult for Team members to follow these guidelines, as the task of getting sections drafted before the deadline is challenging enough in its own right, without also having to comply with a complicated style guide. Also, use of the verb “recommends” is sometimes awkward in characterizing particular Team actions.

Rather than continuing to endure the challenges posed by enforcing the old policy, maybe it is time to change the policy. Here is a suggestion (in the following, “editors” refers to Team members who are editing the minutes):

- Team actions will be characterized simply by the combination of stand-alone paragraphs with bold font, and may use any verb that the rapporteur and editors feel is appropriate (i.e., use of “recommends” is no longer required).
- Rapporteurs and editors may include in the main text any number of sentences taking the form of what were formerly known as pseudo-recommendations, with the understanding that these do not constitute Team actions and confer no responsibility for a response or any other action from analysts or anyone else (i.e., they may only reflect the opinion of the last person who wrote/edited those sentences, even if the text itself implies otherwise).

Tips on writing discussion summaries

Discussion summaries are important parts of the minutes. The summaries should reflect any substantive discussion, especially any points pertinent to Team actions. A bullet list of points made during the discussion is acceptable.

Try to avoid attributing comments to specific individuals, particularly if they are not Team members, as such individuals will not have an opportunity to review the comments being attributed to them.

In the event that Team members have divergent recollections of comments made during discussion, the person who made the comment should have the deciding vote regarding what he or she said.

Team members should be allowed to clarify or retract their own comments after the meeting concludes.

Tips on describing Team actions

At the conclusion of each topic, the chair should ask the rapporteur to summarize any Team actions, to make sure that everyone is on the same page (although exact language is not necessary at this point).

Team actions on harvest specifications do not need to be listed in the minutes, as they are already listed in the introductory chapter of the SAFE report.