



A Genre Analysis of Minutes of Academic Meetings: A Case Study of a Technical University in Ghana

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Abstract

Genre analysis has received much attention in the recent few decades, in which different genres have been analyzed for their rhetorical features for academic and pedagogical purposes. One genre that has received very little attention in Ghanaian scholarship is meeting minutes. Meeting minutes are a cross-disciplinary genre and play crucial roles in organizations such as academic institutions, including serving as official records of all formal meeting proceedings and resolutions. From the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tradition, this study explores the communicative events described in minutes of meetings. Using Swales' (1990) moves and steps genre analysis framework, a corpus of twenty-four minutes of meetings was collected from Sunyani Technical University and analyzed for their rhetorical structures as well as grammatical features that characterize these rhetorical events. The results show that the communicative events of the minutes are composed of a six-move structure: heading (Move 1), auxiliary information (Move 2), opening (Move 3), reference to previous minutes (Move 4), the content of the meeting (Move 5), and closing (Move 6). The prominent grammatical features that characterize these moves are tense (89.3% past and 10.7% present), voice (67.9% active and 32.1% passive), and sentence structure (48.8% simple, 29.8% complex, and 21.4% compound). These results have implications for the existing scholarship on meeting minutes, professional development (i.e. developing courses for secretarial students), and further research. It is expected that the knowledge of moves and grammatical features can help the students and novice secretaries practice writing minutes of meetings effectively.

Keywords

English for specific purposes (ESP), genre analysis, meeting, minutes, move analysis models

Introduction

As a genre, meeting minutes have discourse communities. A discourse community includes a group of individuals who share goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve these goals (Borg, 2003; Swales, 1998), and central to the analysis of any such communication is the notion of genre, the organizational patterns of written communication to achieve these goals which are seen as belonging to that community (Allison, 1999; Swales, 1990). Minutes of meetings are one of the commonest but most essential professional writings for institutions such as government agencies, academic institutions, businesses, and social organizations, serving as documents of proceedings of their meetings. In universities as an academic community, the practice is that minutes of all formal meetings held within departments of the universities are produced as official records of proceedings, including discussions, resolutions, and tasks assigned to individuals and their due dates for accountability (Heathfield, 2017). The minutes are often recorded by administrative secretaries of these departments who file them in the records of the institution and the minutes are usually published to relevant individuals, key among which are the chairpersons and members expected to carry out some aspects of the resolutions from these meetings.

Minutes play a crucial managerial role in coordinating team efforts of departments in several ways. Wolfe (2006) outlines two ways by which minutes are essential to projecting an organization or a team forward, including solidifying consensus reached at meetings, and holding individuals accountable for designated actions. A meeting minute serves as a reference for what resolutions have been reached and what actions need to be taken often with clearly stated timelines as per the decisions of boards. Minutes also serve legal purposes as records of proceedings and form the basis for actions within the jurisdiction of an organization in terms of corporate governance, human and material resource management, and quality assurance. Such documents not only provide organizations with institutional memory of the key decisions but also serve as the architectural framework of whatever the entire institution or its departments do to fulfill their core mandates. As an organization's rich and valid repository of its history, operational guide, and legal support, minutes' writing and preservation are among the top priorities of all businesses including academic institutions across all levels.

Genre analysis (GA) as an analytical framework is used to examine meeting minutes for better comprehension of the conventions, expectations, purpose, and target audience for the communities of practice. Bhatia (1993) examines GA in terms of how it reveals the form-function relationships and contributes to our understanding of the cognitive structuring of information in specific areas of language use. These relationships may help ESP practitioners to devise appropriate activities potentially significant for the achievement of desired communicative outcomes in specialized academic or occupation disciplines. GA, thus, reveals both the instructional and the communicative possibilities of a minute writing. It combines grammar of the language and its corresponding socio-cultural as well as its cognitive descriptions to explain language in use rather than linguistic forms on the surface level (Bhatia 1993).

There is a general agreement among applied linguists that GA is one of the main approaches to ESP analysis. With its system of analysis, GA permits observations to be made on the repeated communicative functions found in genres and their linguistic functions (Brett, 1994). ESP defines genre with an emphasis on the communicative purpose pursued by the members of the related discourse community and how this purpose is related to rhetorical structures. Thus, doing GA in ESP typically involves, first, identifying the communicative purpose of a text and followed by the determination of the structural organization. The theoretical assumption is that the author's purpose is of primary importance in creating a certain genre. Besides the rhetorical function (i.e. structuring of the text), GA also takes into consideration the influence of purpose on the choice of grammatical forms, and this, according to Robinson (1991), is explained in relation to the wider discipline culture to which the author belongs. What this indicates is that genre does not mean only a text type; it includes the role of the text in the discourse community within which it has been created. This implies that GA leads to the research of institutional culture as well.

A review of the existing literature on ESP analysis of professional discourse has shown that GA has been used in many areas such as academic writings (e.g., Alharbi, 2021; Edusei, 2015; Musa, 2014; Lakic, 1997), business emails (e.g., Mehrpour & Mehrzad, 2013; Giménez Moreno, 2010), business letters (e.g., Kyei & Afful, 2021; Jalilifar & Beitsayyah, 2011; Santos, 2002), job application letters (De Mello et al, 2021; Thumnong, 2017; Henry & Roseberry, 2001), and news presentation (e.g., Agbaglo et al, 2021; Amoakohene, 2017). However, studies on analyzing the minutes of meeting as a genre in similar contexts and similar professional settings have been scarce. Concerning the minutes of meetings in Ghana, little research (if there is since I am yet to find one despite much effort to locate some) has been done in this area.

Studies on minutes of meetings, even though they are few in the literature, have been carried out from different persuasions. McEachern (1998) examined the minutes of meetings of nonprofit organizations, including NGO's, churches, and social clubs, to determine the way minute writers use of language influences readers' attitudes. It was found that the linguistic choices that an individual makes in minute writing are a key contributing factor to the development of the organization's culture. Also, Wolfe (2006), Kassim and Ali (2010), Spence and Liu (2013), and Changpueng and Patpong (2021) have studied the minutes of engineers in Thai and reported the relevance of meetings and meeting minute in the work of engineers. Accordingly, the skill of writing the minutes of meetings is highly required in that profession. Wolfe's (2006) study was conducted on three experienced engineers working in international companies and concluded that since minutes serves as a guide to the fulfillment of the content of resolutions reached at meetings, minute writing is vital for such professionals. The analysis of Changpueng and Patpong (2021) using the genre analysis framework (moves and steps) of Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993), and Thawee Wong (2006) showed that Thai engineers use e-mail as the medium in writing the minutes in seven common moves, including the heading, an opening salutation, the content of the meeting, a closing correspondence chain, a closing salutation, and attaching a document. In terms of lexico-grammatical features, the prominent one among them are syntactic features (such as simple present tense, active

voice, noun phrases,) and lexical features (such as proper nouns, abbreviations, and keyword lists).

Other studies have reported the success of employing genre analysis results in creating ESP writing lessons (e.g. Flowerdew, 2000; Handford, 2010; Walker, 2010; Opoku et al., 2022; Rockson et al., 2023). A study by Whitney (2019) was undertaken to assist students to develop minute writing skills together with a focus on ethics. The researcher, who had taught undergraduate students in technical and professional writing courses, was able to design his minute writing lessons by studying examples of such minutes and practicing analysis of the same. These samples of the minutes had been drawn from a number of institutions such as sports clubs, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and a local school board. A genre analysis of meeting minutes was necessary because it would contribute to the overall understanding of the minutes writing as a genre that requires adequate attention in the curriculum of Technical Writing.

The methodological approaches used by Changpueng and Patpong (2021) provide an analytical framework, which provides a useful guideline to analyze the minutes of a meeting, in terms of moves and steps, and the lexico-grammatical features. Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the genre of minutes of meetings written by administrative secretaries of a tertiary educational institution (Sunyani Technical University) to inform lessons of Technical English for Secretarial students or anyone interested in practicing minutes writing.

This study, thus, aims to examine the rhetorical structures of minutes, using the genre-based approach. In line with this focus, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the study:

1. What rhetorical structures (moves and steps) constitute minutes of meetings written in Sunyani Technical University?
2. What grammatical resources characterize the rhetorical structures of the minutes of meetings written in Sunyani Technical University?

The present study is significant in three main ways. First, it contributes to the understanding of the generic structure of minutes (particularly within the Ghanaian academic context), which is a significant part of the assemblage of genres in the operationalization of educational institutions as business organizations. Again, the study offers ESP teachers valuable insights that can inform the content of their lessons to students, especially those studying Secretarial and Administrative programs. Finally, the findings of this study serve as a fertile ground for further research in genre studies, in general, and in minutes as well as minutes writing in particular.

Method

The study adopted a qualitative research design mainly to analyse the rhetorical structure of the minutes. It is generally agreed that a qualitative research design allows for the examination of naturally occurring data and the breaking down of data into

themes, patterns, and relationships to understand human behavior. The researcher relied on the qualitative research method because it helped in accounting for the rhetorical structures and the grammatical resources that typified the rhetorical structures in their authentic form. However, few quantitative techniques such as frequency counts and percentages were employed to help draw broad conclusions after analyzing the numerical values of the occurrence of the rhetorical moves found and the textual characteristics associated with the moves.

The corpus of this study comprised samples of the minutes of meetings obtained from some academic departments at Sunyani Technical University (STU). The corpus included twenty-four minutes (four each from six departments) conveniently sampled from the minutes dated between 2016 and 2022 from these departments who voluntarily accepted to participate in the study after being approached with the request for minutes of their departmental meetings. The choice of the sample technique is a result of ethical issues as some departments denied the researchers access to their minutes. The sample size is relatively small. However, the present data can show sufficient similarities to inform the general tendencies characteristic of the minutes in the selected institution.

The text analysis process followed a two-step procedure. The first step involved coding the data. The minutes were coded as MN1, MN2, MN3 ... MN24, and the sentences were coded as MN1S1, MN1S2, for example, for Sentences 1 and 2 of Minute 1. The non-sentential elements such as headings of the minutes and list of members (present and absent) constituting a move were also coded as MN1P1 and MN1P2 for heading and attendance respectively of Minute 1. Such coding aided the researcher's identification of the exemplars and attempts to ensure anonymity to resolve some ethical issues in the study.

The second step also involved two-level analysis – macro-level and micro-level. At the macro-level, the researchers analyzed any rhetorical section of the minutes of meetings that performs a particular communicative event about the overarching communicative purposes as a move following Swales (1990) model of move/step analysis as used in Changpueng and Patpong's (2021). This model of move analysis uses cognitive-semantic criterion in the determination of a move, rather than the grammatical criterion. Also, the cut-off frequency of 60% of the occurrence of each move proposed by Kanoksilapatham (2005) was employed as the criteria to recognize a move as conventionally obligatory or optional. Frequency of occurrence below 60% in the corpus is recognized as an optional move.

At the micro-level analysis, insights from a grammatical analysis were required. Bhatia (1993) and Hyon (2018) mention that lexico-grammatical features consist of the vocabulary of recurring words, phrases, parts of speech, tenses, voice, and syntactic construction and grammatical patterns that establish the moves of genres. However, the present study focused on sentential elements such as tenses, voice, and sentence types (structures) as the knowledge of these grammatical aspects is required to help writers write the minutes effectively.

Results

This section presents the analysis of the findings that originate out of the data in line with the guiding research questions.

Rhetoric Structures (Moves/Steps) of the Minutes of a Meeting Written in STU

The moves and steps identified in the minutes of meetings are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Moves and steps in minutes written in Sunyani Technical University*

Move 1: Heading

Move 2: Auxiliary information

Step 1: Records of attendance

Move 3: Opening

Step 1: Praying

Step 2: Giving remarks and/or welcome address

Move 4: Reference to other meetings

Step 1: Providing information of the previous meeting

Step 2: Referring to actions taken based on the previous meeting

Move 5: Content of the meeting

Step 1: Results of discussions and action plans

Step 2: Stating timeline with actors

Move 6: Closing

Step 1: Motion for closure

Step 2: Closing benediction

Step 3: Stating the closing time

The minutes are composed of six-move structures, including heading (Move 1), auxiliary information (Move 2), opening (Move 3), reference to previous minutes (Move 4), content of the meeting (Move 5), and closing (Move 6). Moves 1 does not have any steps. Move 2 has one step: records attendance; Move 3 (opening) has two steps: praying and giving remarks or welcome address; Move 4 (reference to other meetings) has three steps: providing information on previous meetings, referring to actions taken based on previous meeting, and schedules for subsequent meeting; Move 5 (content of the meeting) has two steps: results of discussions and action plans, and Move 6 has three steps: motion for closure, closing benediction and stating the closing time.

Grammatical Resources Characterizing the Rhetorical Functions in the Minutes

This section presents the results of the micro-textual level, the typical grammatical features of Move 3 to 6. Three grammatical features, including tense (present and past), structure (simple, compound and complex), and voice (active and passive), of the sentences analyzed revealed the following frequency patterns as shown in Table 2.

The grammatical features used in the minutes include: past tense, present tense, simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, active voice, and passive voice. From Table 2, the past tense (89.3%) is used more frequently than the present tense (10.7%)

by writers of minutes of meetings. In terms of sentence structure, there is preference of simple sentence (48.8%), followed by complex sentence (29.8%) and least compound sentence (21.4%). The minutes are written in more active sentences (67.9%) than passive ones (32.1%).

Table 2. Lexico-grammatical features of the characterizing the moves

Language Features		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Tense	Past	450	89.3
	Present	54	10.7
	Future	0	0
Structure	Simple	246	48.8
	Compound	108	21.4
	Complex	150	29.8
Voice	Active	342	67.9
	Passive	162	32.1

Discussion

Each move constitutes a rhetorical block serving a communicative function, and its frequency of occurrence in the present data makes it obligatory or optional in the writing of minutes in the academic context particularly in our current sampled population. With reference to Kanoksilapatham's (2005) cut-off frequency of 60% as a criteria, the moves are categorized into conventionally obligatory (with frequency of occurrence 60% and above) and optional (with frequency of occurrence below 60%) in the data.

Move 1 – Heading

Move 1, Heading of the minutes provides general information about the meeting, including names of the university and department, nature of minutes, date, venue, and time of meeting. The occurrence of this move within the present corpus is 100%; every minute has the move. It shows the significance of the move in minutes of writing and can therefore be identified as obligatory and conventional. An example of Move 1 is presented as follows (All of the names of the departments and venues are pseudonyms marked with asterisk *):

- (1) (MN2P1) – *SUNYANI TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY*
*DEPARTMENT OF *CCCCCCC VVVV*
MINUTES OF THE GENERAL MEETING
*HELD ON 16TH MAY 2022 AT *HHHH ROOM*

The results show that the general details are similar to Move 1 (heading) of Changpueng and Patpong (2021) even though in the minutes of the Thai engineers the heading is a kind of email heading since their minutes are written as an email message to participants.

Move 2 - Auxiliary Information

Move 2, auxiliary information provides relevant details of non-proceedings reported in the minutes. This information is provided immediately after heading under the heading

"Attendance". It occurred in all the minutes (i.e. has 100% occurrence) in the corpus and can be described as conventional and obligatory. This move is realized in a step: records of attendance. The step accounts for the participants present for the meeting by listing their names and designations. In addition, names of absentees with apologies are provided. Below is an example of Move 2 from the present corpus (All names are pseudonyms for ethical issues):

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (2) (MN1P2) – ATTENDANCE | DESIGNATION |
| 1. Dr. Kwame Benewa | <i>Snr Lecturer and HoD</i> |
| 2. Dr. Yawson Vivor | <i>Snr Lecturer</i> |
| 3. Ms. Zira Grusiba | <i>Lecturer</i> |
| 4. Ms. Lydia Baidoo | <i>Lecturer</i> |
| 5. Mr. David Nacee | <i>Lecturer</i> |
| 6. Ms. Judith Braku | <i>Administrator</i> |
-
- (MN5P2) –**APOLOGIES**
1. Dr. Tyler Hakim
 2. Ms. Jacobel White

Move 3 – Opening

Move 3, opening, details how the meeting was called to order as well as the commencement time of the meeting. The occurrence rate of this move in the present corpus is 100%, which means all the twenty-four sampled minutes reported the opening of the meeting. It is therefore obligatory. Two steps are identified in the move: opening prayer, and giving remarks and/or welcome address.

Step 1 of Move 3: opening prayer

This step aims to project members' consciousness of the relevance of God in their activities. This step has 100% occurrence in all the minutes in the corpus. Here is an example:

- (3) *The meeting started at exactly 10:00 am with an opening prayer by Mr. Egard Brown. – (MN3S1)*

Step 2 of Move 3: giving remarks and welcome address

The section of the minutes reported the chairpersons' opening remarks, welcome addresses, and reechoing of the purpose of the meeting as:

- (4) *The chairperson greeted and welcomed members informing them that the purpose of the meeting was clearly stated in the agenda. – (MN3S2)*

Move 4 – Reference to Other Meetings

Move 4 draws a link between the present meeting and the immediate previous meeting. It is present in eighteen out of twenty-four minutes (i.e., occurrence rate of 75%). Hence, Move 4 is identified as obligatory in minutes in STU. Move 4 has two steps: providing

information of the previous meeting, and referring to actions taken based on the previous meeting.

Step 1 of Move 4: Provide information of the previous meeting

Minutes provide three sub-themes of the minutes of the previous meeting. First, participants are taken through the minutes of the last meeting; second, corrections are made where necessary, and finally, accepted by motion as in:

- (5) (a) *The minutes of the previous Departmental Meeting were accepted on a motion by Ms. Alex Ntim and seconded by Kwabena Hartey after a few corrections and omissions were made. – (MN5S5)*
- (b) *... the secretary [was directed] to take members through the previous minutes. The house accepted the previous minutes after some minor corrections had been made. Mr. Clement Barko moved for the acceptance of the minutes and it was seconded by Grafena Addo – (MN9S2)*

Step 2 of Move 4: referring to actions taken based on previous meeting

This step provides a briefing to the participants of actions having taken on some key decisions from the previous meeting. The minutes serve as the official reference of the level of progress of previous action plans. From the present corpus, the briefing is usually chairperson-led as in:

- (6) (a) *The chairperson told the house that, the percentage from the IH Dues to be given to the department was seven percent (7%) – (MN12S5)*

Move 5 – Content of the Meeting

Move is an obligatory and conventional move as it appeared in all of the minutes of the meetings accounting for 100% occurrence in the corpus. It provides the main purpose or results of each meeting and shows the content of the meeting. There are two steps: results of discussions and action plans, and stating timeline with actors.

Step 1 of Move 5: results of discussions and action plans

The writers normally begin by writing the progress report, discussion results, announcements, and action plans. This part of the minutes constitutes the greater portion of the whole minutes, and it is made up of several paragraphs.

Step 2 of Move 5: stating timeline with actors

The actors and timelines for carrying out actions in Step 1 are recorded. This might be because, as professional bodies, university departments need to have individuals to be responsible for the actions that have been discussed in Step 1. As a result, the names of the actors are mentioned in this step. Additionally, the purpose of the timelines is to show the actors the expected time to finish their work or the specific time that they finished their work.

An example of Move 5 is shown in (7) below:

(7) *New programme*

- *The house was informed of a two-year French programme that was being developed to take advantage of the university's proximity to the Francophone countries. The proposal was read to members. The sectional head anticipated immense benefits to the community should the proposal be accepted. The chairperson advised the French committee to draw a proper guideline with clearer stated terms of reference. – (MN2S44-46)*
- *The chairman gave the committee 30th May 2022 to fine-tune the information and submit the amended proposal for recommendation and possible acceptance as a working document. – (MN2S47)*

Move 6 – Closing

Move 6 provides information on the procedures of the adjournment of meetings. It is an obligatory move as it occurred in all minutes of meetings in the present corpus. It involves three strategies: motion for adjournment, closing benediction, and stating the time of closure.

Step 1 of Move 6: motion for adjournment

This step (100%) provides the movers and seconders for the adjournment of meetings and the formulaic expressions used for such ends.

Step 2 of Move 6: closing benediction

This step (with 100% occurrence) indicates that closing benedictions were usually the winding-up activity for meetings in such professional circles.

Step 3 of Move 6: stating the time of closure

This step (with 66.7% occurrence) provides the time for the closure of the meeting.

Below is an example of Move 6 from the present corpus.

- (8) *In the absence of further deliberations, Ms. Nina Drovel moved for the closure of the meeting and [was] seconded by Miss Hilda Daako, who also prayed to close the meeting at 2:00 pm. – (MN7S27)*

The grammatical features particularly the preponderance of past tense disagrees with the findings of Changpueng and Patpong (2021) which state that the present tense is used more frequently in the minutes of meetings of Thai engineers. The differences are a result of the different means employed in writing minutes in the two sets of data. In the data of Changpueng and Patpong (2021), the engineers wrote minutes in emails to their readers, which employ the use of more present tense. On the other hand, in the data of the present study, the minutes are written in report form and shared with members as attached documents. The dominant use of the past tense in the present study is due to the typically reporting nature of the minutes in the corpus. The writers

are recounting events that are logically situated in the past from the time of writing the minutes. The past tense is an unmarked characteristic of realizing moves in minutes of meetings from the findings of the present study. Examples of past tense usage in the corpus are presented as (9) below.

- (9) (a) *Members **were informed** to sign for their Club [T-Shirt].* – (MN22S68)
(b) *The house **decided** that answer booklets/sheets for Mid-Semester examinations should be provided by the department.* – (MN17S31)

From the corpus, few present tense sentences are used particularly in MN2 to describe the contents of articles in a draft constitution submitted to the house by a committee. Examples are presented in (10) below.

- (10) (a) *Article 1 spells out the name of the welfare scheme (Welfare Club) ...* – (MN2S31)
(b) *Article 6 suggests mandatory Auditing and processes required for successful auditing* – (MN2S38)

The use of the present tense, as shown in the examples, presents situations and states that do not change; the states expressed by the articles of the draft constitution are fixed arrangements.

In terms of sentence structure, the writers of the minutes make use of more simple and active sentences. The results show that 48.8% of the sentences in the present corpus are simple against 29.8% complex sentences and 21.4% compound sentences. The active voice has 67.9% usage versus 32.1% passive use. These statistics agree with the findings of Changpueng and Patpong (2021) that Thai engineers used frequent simple and active sentences to document proceedings and resolutions of meetings for the participants. The frequent use of simple and active sentences serves two basic purposes: first, it makes the minutes easy to read, and second, it focuses attention on the contributors in the meetings and creates by doing so conceptual prominence for them. Examples of simple and active sentences are presented in (11) below:

- (11) (a) *He [the chairperson] asked the various committee heads to prepare to present their reports to the house.* – (MN4S18)
(b) *Members gave reasons for the apparent lack of interest in the invigilation process.* – (MN2S27)

Conclusion

This study is a pilot study for further and broader study and so used a smaller corpus of twenty-four minutes written by administrative secretaries of six departments of Sunyani Technical University. This study aimed to analyze the corpus for their rhetorical events (moves and steps) using Swales' (1990) method of genre analysis. It also analyzed the grammatical features that characterized these events. The study utilized qualitative research design at both macro and micro levels of analysis.

At the macro level, the genre analysis results show that there are six moves identified in the minutes of the meetings written by the administrative secretaries of Sunyani Technical University. It supports the definition of minutes as a genre with emphasis on the communicative purpose and conventions pursued by the members of the related discourse community and how this overarching purpose is related to rhetorical structures. Genre analysis in ESP typically begins with the communicative purpose followed by the structural organization and linguistic features serving the achievement of this communicative purpose. The communicative purpose of minutes in academic communities is not only to provide official records of meetings but also to serve as a legal record of proceedings and a basis for actions within departments.

The present study has illuminated the rhetorical structure and the characteristics of the minutes of meetings in the academic community. Such knowledge in turn leads to helping writers of meeting minutes, especially novice administrators, to write the minutes being sensitive to the conventions of minutes as a genre of writing texts in a professional context. In terms of linguistic features, most of the moves (i.e. moves 3 to 6) are presented in sentences and most of these sentences (over 89%) are in the past tense, active voice, and of simple structure.

The results of the study can be taken into account when designing ESP materials and pedagogy, especially in professional writing. Teachers can apply the move analysis and linguistic knowledge to create lessons for ESP learners to train to write minutes effectively.

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