

Guidance for Minority Reports

Why Dissent?

A minority opinion or “minority report” is the expression of disagreement with the majority decision that advisory bodies may submit to staff liaisons. In the legal context, this is called a “dissenting opinion.” For the purposes of advisory bodies, we use the term minority report.

A minority report is valuable in capturing the nuance of a decision. It does not reverse, appeal, or change the decision made by the majority. A minority report can agree with the decision, but disagree on specific principles, suggestions, or strategies. A minority opinion can bring greater precision to the majority decision, but should be used selectively, such as when the opinion is absent in the discussion portion of the meeting minutes.

As covered in the Shared Equity Language training, which is required for all advisory body volunteers, some cultures view disagreement as being impolite. This can contribute to what is called “groupthink” (see definition below). When group think is present, a member withholds sharing valid knowledge, experience, or information that could influence a decision out of fear of social consequences. Members may also conform to avoid conflict, discomfort, or a number of other reasons.

Minority reports should not be used to advance personal agendas, get a “final say,” or generate polarization. Rather, the reports are meant to bring light to a rich discussion. The value that advisory body discussions, decisions, and recommendations bring are the collection of differing ideas and opinions and their convergence into shared values and priorities.

Here are some guidelines follow when writing a minority report:

- Minority reports must be discussed and written with the same level of transparency as any other group work. Advance notice, agendas, and meeting minutes are required. For staff support, you may request part of a meeting be splintered so that the dissent group can meet for the letter writing. The report and drafts are public record.
- Just as there is one majority report, decision, or recommendation, there is only one minority report. Dissenting members work together to produce one letter.
- Define who the report is addressed to. For example, if the group reports to a program, director, or Council, that authority goes in the “To” line. Check with the staff liaison if you think you are one of the rare bodies that reports to more than one of these authorities.
- Define whether the minority report addresses a decision or recommendation. If it is neither, then the letter might be better sent to the staff liaison as a process concern, or an “exit



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interview,” and not a minority report. A minority report is not a letter to “blow off steam” and may not be used to threaten, demand, or issue ultimatums.

- Minority reports may be written whether the decision was made by consensus or by vote. Minority reports are submitted at the same time as the majority report. They are delivered to the staff liaison, and filed per public records retention schedules.

DEFINITIONS:

Groupthink: psychological phenomenon that occurs within a group of people in which the desire for harmony or conformity in the group results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision-making outcome. Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints by actively suppressing dissenting viewpoints, and by isolating themselves from outside influences (Wikipedia, 2019).