As we saw in Chapter 6, multilateral conferences can have a wide range of formal purposes. Some conferences do little more than slake a political need to at least appear to be doing something about a particular problem. Often, the most important result of a conference is the exchange of information that takes place there and the effect that has on the subsequent activities of individuals and governments. Often, conferences contribute to the elaboration or maintenance of international standards and regimes, which also affect the behaviour of governments and individuals. At times, they have other consequences, intended by at least some of the parties – or unexpected. However, at a more concrete level, the formal and tangible product of multilateral conferences is always words on paper. These words come in two broad categories: the record of what was said and the decisions taken by the conference.

**Summary records**

Just as the transactions of Parliament are recorded verbatim in Hansard (or Congressional Record in the United States) and proceedings in a court room are recorded in the transcripts, at a typical major conference, a special unit of the conference secretariat (known as the record writers) produce, not a full transcript, but ‘Summary Records’ of the statements made by the participants in the Plenary Debate. In some bodies these are known as PVs (from the French *Procès Verbaux*).

Unlike Hansard, Summary Records are not usually distributed in draft form; but delegates who have a special interest in ensuring that their intervention has been accurately reflected can approach the record writers and try to persuade them to make any necessary amendments. At times some delegates who, after having spoken, have second thoughts...
(perhaps after rereading their instructions), might try to get the record less stark. The summary records are useful for checking the position taken by different delegations and can serve at least two other operational purposes.

A delegation that finds the conference coming towards a decision with which it has serious difficulty, will often make a carefully drafted statement to place on the record its government’s position, or reservations about the decision. Often, such statements will be delivered with some dramatic effect, with great solemnity or even with anger and the speaker will ask that his statement be recorded in full (or *verbatim* or *in extenso*) in the summary records (in which case he will usually give the written text to the secretariat to make sure that they record it accurately). Reading a statement into the record usually carries with it a certain flavour of defeat; but it can also be an important face-saver. A delegation that strives unsuccessfully to have the conference associate itself with its position can receive some solace from an assurance by the Chair that its views will be recorded in the Summary Records (at the very least they can show their authorities that they tried). Conference chairmen can sometimes cajole a recalcitrant delegation not to oppose a conference decision by negotiating with them a flatteringly extensive entry in the Summary Records. Alternatively, a statement can be ‘read into the record’ in a very low-key fashion, by a junior officer, when few other delegates are listening. You might choose to do this, for instance, when bound by your instructions to insist on a point which you think it best not to highlight – perhaps a statement dictated by your Treasury Department that any financial consequences of a proposed conference decision are subject to a subsequent decision within your nation’s budgetary processes.

**Reports**

Besides any Summary Records produced by the Secretariat, almost every conference produces an official report on its meeting, including, in some cases, its discussion on particular agenda items. This is by definition an entirely different process from the preparation of the summary records: whereas the latter engages only the individual speakers and the secretariat, a report of the conference engages the whole membership, acting collectively. This means that the conference has to ‘adopt’ the report: i.e. it has to make a formal decision to make the document its own. Thus when a conference ‘adopts’ a text, it confers its authority to that document, which implies that it also gives its approval, or at least acquiescence, to its contents.