

# Writing a progress/status report

by [Michael Ernst](#)

January, 2010

Writing a weekly report about your research progress can make your research more successful, less frustrating, and more visible to others, among other benefits.

One good format is to write your report in four parts:

1. Quote the **previous** week's plan. This helps you determine whether you accomplished your goals.
2. State **this** week's progress. This can include information such as: what you have accomplished, what you learned, what difficulties you overcame, what difficulties are still blocking you, your new ideas for research directions or projects, and the like.
3. Give the **next** week's plan. A good format is a bulleted list, so we can see what you accomplished or did not. Try to make each goal measurable: there should be no ambiguity as to whether you were able to finish it. It's good to include longer-term goals as well.
4. Give an **agenda** for the meeting. Some people like to send this as a separate message, which is fine.

The report need not be onerous. It can be a few paragraphs or a page, so it shouldn't take you long to write. Minimize details that are not relevant to your audience, such as classwork and the like, in order to keep the report focused; you will spend less time writing it, and make it more likely to be read.

Writing the progress report has many benefits.

Writing the report will make you more productive, because it will force you to think about your work in a manner concretely enough to write down. Any time that you spend organizing your thoughts will more than pay itself back in better understanding and improved productivity. When a project is complete, it is all too easy to forget some of your contributions. You can look back over your progress reports to remember what was difficult, and to think about how to work more productively in the future. You may be able to re-use some of the text when writing up your results.

Writing the report will make your meetings more productive. When you have a weekly research meeting, the report should be sent 24 hours in advance, to help everyone prepare. (Two hours is not an acceptable alternative: it does not let everyone — both you and others — mull over the ideas.) Don't delay your report because you want to wait until you have better results to report. Instead, send the report on schedule, and if you get more results in the next 24 hours, you can discuss those at the meeting.

Writing the report will give you feedback from a new point of view. The report enables others outside your research project to know what you are doing. Those people may respond with ideas or suggestions, which can help get you unstuck or give you additional

avenues to explore. It also keeps you on their radar screen and reminds them of your work, which is a good thing if you don't meet with them frequently. (For PhD students, a periodic report to the members of your thesis committee can pay big dividends.)

Writing the report helps explain (to yourself especially, but also to others) how you spent your time — even if there isn't as much progress as you would have preferred, you can see that you did work hard, and how to be more efficient or effective in the future.

**Important tip:** Throughout the day, maintain a log of what you have done. This can be a simple text file. You can update it when you start and end a task, or at regular intervals throughout the day. It takes only a moment to maintain the log, and it makes writing the report easy. By contrast, without a log you might forget what you have done during the week, and writing the report could take a long time.

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