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How to keep up with literature and develop good habits? Try the Journal Club Blitz!

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A common problem we all face is that we don't get to those "important non urgent" tasks. One such task for us scientists is to read papers. We all have our constantly filling pile of interesting papers to read. Yet even as students we already struggle to get to those and PIs I talk with commonly complain they don't get to read papers anymore. This leads to obviously missing out on valuable information as well as a strong feeling of frustration:



So how do we solve this? One thing we implemented in the lab that seems to work quite well is the **Journal Club Blitz**. I got repeatedly good responses when I describe this to other PIs I met so I thought it's worth sharing. Let me describe what that is and why you may want to consider implementing some version of it.

First, how does it work and how is it different from your run of the mill journal club we all got to experience:

- 1hr Weekly dedicated meeting (could be at the end of the week, possibly over beer/food).
- In the meeting each person gets ~6min to briefly summarize a paper they read this week. You can do it with a timer to add pressure if you like. We are not that strict but I keep an eye on the time and try to keep it close to that, letting them know they should finish soon if they run long and that they should consider what they want to tell us in the remaining time.
- We have a dedicated Journal Club channel where students post their papers before the meeting. Rules/guidelines are:
 - a. *It must be a paper they read this week*. If they posted it on the channel and didn't present it that week (see below) they can not reuse it. Doesn't have to be a new paper, whatever they decided to focus on this week is fine.
 - b. *Going in no one knows if they will present yes/no*. In 1hr we cover ~8 papers, if you didn't present this week you know there is a very good chance you will present next week.
 - c. I try to keep a diversity of topics represented (I can see the papers before the meeting).
 - d. A student can 'take the fifth' and not present in a certain week for some reason (e.g. was sick, the paper was incomprehensible, final exam), but then they better have a good presentation ready next week. They know it's an exception and they can't do that repeatedly.
 - e. Generally I decide who presents (to keep the element of surprise) but I also ask 'who wants to go next?' and such so students that want to present (e.g. think the paper is really good) can step up.
 - f. In my lab staff are encouraged but not obliged to present. Same for undergrads. I tell them it's there for them to take advantage of, but they are not required to do that. Grad students are obliged as part of their training.
 - g. I have to present as well – not every time but frequently enough to set a good example.
 - h. While the general expectation is to present papers of interest to the lab, papers do not have to be in our field. They can be of anything science related that the presenter thinks is of interest. Could be completely off topic ([hagfish](#) anyone?), science policies, whatever. Of course students can't repeatedly present off-topic papers and you want to make sure it doesn't get out of hand but rather enriches, makes the meeting more fun, and reflects the value of scientific curiosity.

Here are some benefits I see in having the Journal Club Blitz based on our experience:

- Develop good habits.
- Keep abreast of the literature. Think: If you run this a year long each student would have read ~50 papers, and the lab would review ~400!
- Learn from your peers, information flow in the lab.
- You can use it as an opportunity to present/discuss a paper you think is key for people in the lab.

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- Fun interactions, positive group dynamics.
- Reflect values important to develop in trainees (e.g. critical thinking, scientific curiosity)
- Learn to concisely summarize a paper's key points and to present it clearly to diverse audiences – practice makes perfect...
- Allows you as PI to identify where/who struggles more and give feedback later to improve.
- Helps your gain vs gap mindset: The fact we don't get to read papers can lead to feelings of loss of control, frustration etc (see cartoon above). Having the journal club Blitz is not going to make your pile of must read papers go away (if it does, please tell me how) but it may give a sense of proactive control/progress, which by itself has value.

Notice that the journal club blitz employs several principles worth applying in other situations you may run into. These include:

- To avoid dropping it, schedule it (especially for important non urgent tasks).
- Set up good habits that serve as guardrails. If you get into the habit of weekly paper reading, it is more likely that you will continue to do that.
- Public pressure/shame as a motivator: It's much harder to drop it if you commit to something publicly and have accountability partners (in this case – your lab).
- Lead by example. You can say reading papers is important as much as you like, but students (just like your kids) are watching what you do. Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson eloquently put it: “Don't say things. What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary”

To conclude, the journal club blitz is not a solution to all your reading problems, but it may help in that while creating healthy lab dynamics/culture. There are definitely limitations in the above formulation as well. For example, you never get to cover a paper in detail. But you can adapt it to your own settings (e.g. switch to in depth paper review once every X meetings or for one paper), add stuff (e.g. gamify it) etc. Maybe give it a try and let me know how it works! 😊



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