

The Value of Weekly Reports

S. Keshav, University of Cambridge sk818@cam.ac.uk

Written weekly reports, the more detailed the better, shared with your supervisor and with your research group are an excellent way to track and advance your research¹. Here are some reasons why:

Keep track of both short- and long-term goals

Graduate school is unstructured, with only a handful of loose deadlines, so it is easy for students to drift. Reports structure your research over both the short and long term. You can focus your effort towards your short-term goals, making sure you don't miss deadlines. You can also track longer-term goals, making productive use of a multi-year doctoral program.

A long-term memory Your report records your research efforts, successful or not. It's a place where you can note your progress, eureka moments, and research struggles, helping you remember what you did and learned. Even recording unsuccessful paths has value: you may need to justify why you didn't take a particular approach when writing a paper later; when you get stuck you may want to backtrack to a previously unexplored path; and some of these dead ends may become fruitful areas for research later in your career.

Hone your writing skills Writing well is critical for success in a research career. Weekly reports are a training ground for better writing. By putting your thoughts into words, you practice summarizing complex ideas and communicating clearly. Don't worry if your initial efforts are less than stellar: practice makes perfect.

Spark creativity The act of writing is in itself a catalyst for fresh insights. As you reflect on your week, you will see gaps in your research, alternative approaches, or new questions to explore.

Building blocks Your weekly reports are building blocks for bigger projects. When the time comes to write your thesis or a paper, you can mine them for text, figures, and references.

Help create community Sharing your weekly reports with others in your research group, such as in an appropriately shared online directory, allows you to learn from each other and fosters a supportive and creative research atmosphere.

Streamline supervisor meetings Weekly reports are not marked tests. Instead, they let your supervisor quickly come up to speed on what you've been up to, making meetings productive and mutually collaborative. By getting the question of "what have you been up to" out of the way, they can focus on discussing your progress, spotting if you're stuck or heading down an unwise path and guiding you back on track, and identifying potential errors in your work.

Pass the torch When you graduate or move on to new projects, your weekly reports become a gift to your successors. Your notes help them understand your project, your methods, and the hurdles you faced. This smooth handover ensures that your research can continue even after you've moved on.

Given these many benefits, writing weekly reports is a habit well worth forming. Try to block out an hour or so each week for writing them.

Here is an outline structure that works well:

1. Warm up
 - Re-state your medium-term goal
2. What I did
 - Your prior week's achievements
3. Insights
 - What you learnt
 - Barriers to progress
4. Agenda for weekly supervisor meeting
 - Areas where you are looking for feedback
 - Research goals for the next week
 - Long-term plans
5. References
 - References that support your work

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Anais Berkes, Jon Crowcroft, Amelia Holcomb, Nicole Keshav, Anil Madhavapeddy, E-Ping Rau, and Eleanor Toye Scott for their perceptive feedback.

¹Weekly reports as a structuring tool is a time-tested idea: <https://digitalflapjack.com/blog/> logs reports going back decades!