Keeping a Laboratory Notebook

Unit: Laboratory

MA Curriculum Frameworks (2016): SP3, SP8

Mastery Objective(s): (Students will be able to…)

- Determine which information to record in a laboratory notebook.
- Record information in a laboratory notebook according to practices used in industry.

Success Criteria:

- Record data accurately and correctly, with units and including estimated digits.
- Use the correct protocol for correcting mistakes.

Language Objectives:

- Understand and be able to describe the process for recording lab procedures and data.

Notes:

A laboratory notebook serves two important purposes:

1. It is a diary of what you did in case you want to look up the details later.
2. It is a legal record of what you did and when you did it.

In a research laboratory, you would normally do a write-up in your lab notebook whenever you do a significant experiment that you believe you might want to refer back to sometime in the future.

Your Notebook as an Official Record

Laboratory notebooks are kept by scientists in research laboratories and high tech companies. If a company or research institution needs to prove that you did a particular experiment on a particular date and got a particular set of results (perhaps to apply for a patent), your lab notebook is the primary evidence. This means you need to maintain your lab notebook in a way that gives it the best chance of being able to prove beyond a reasonable doubt exactly what you did and exactly when you did it.

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For companies that use laboratory notebooks in this way, there are a set of guidelines that exist to prevent mistakes that could compromise the integrity of the notebook. Details may vary somewhat from one company to another, but are probably similar to these, and the spirit of the rules is the same.

- All entries in a lab notebook must be hand-written in ink.
- Your actual procedure and all data must be recorded directly into the notebook, not recorded elsewhere and copied in.
- All pages must be numbered consecutively, to show that no pages have been removed. If your notebook did not come with pre-numbered pages, you need to write the page number on each page before using it.
- Start each experiment on a new page.
- Sign and date the bottom of the each page when you finish recording information on it. (In industry, each page needs to be witnessed by someone else, usually your supervisor. The date that an entry is considered to have happened is the date it was witnessed, even if that is much later than the date when it was originally recorded.)
- When crossing out an incorrect entry in a lab notebook, never obliterate it. Always cross it out with a single line through it, so that it is still possible to read the original mistake. (This is to prove that it was a mistake, and you didn't change your data or observations.) Any time you cross something out, write your initials and the date next to the change.
- Never remove pages from a lab notebook for any reason. If you need to cross out an entire page, you may do so with a single large "X". If you do this, write a brief explanation of why you crossed out the page, and sign and date the cross-out.
- Never, ever change data after the experiment is completed. Really. Your data, right or wrong, is what you actually observed. Changing your data constitutes fraud, which is a form of cheating that is every bit as bad as plagiarism.
- Never change anything on a page you have already signed and dated. If you realize that an experiment was flawed, leave the bad data where it is and add a note that says "See page ____." with your initials and date next to the addendum. On the new page, refer back to the page number of the bad data and describe briefly what was wrong with it. Then, give the correct information and sign and date it as you would an experiment.
- Never, ever erase or cover with white-out anything in a lab notebook. Erased or covered-up data is considered the same as faked or changed data in the scientific community.

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Recording Data

Here are some general rules for working with data. (Most of these are courtesy of Dr. John Denker, at http://www.av8n.com/physics/uncertainty.htm):

- Write something about what you did on the same page as the data, even if it is a very rough outline. Your procedure notes should not get in the way of actually performing the experiment, but there should be enough information to corroborate the detailed summary of the procedure that you will write afterwards. (Also, for evidence's sake, the sooner after the experiment that you write the detailed summary, the more weight it will carry in court.)
- Keep *all* of the raw data, whether you will use it or not.
- Don't discard a measurement, even if you think it is wrong. Record it anyway and put a "?" next to it. You can always choose not to use the data point in your calculations (as long as you give an explanation).
- Never erase or delete a measurement. The only time you should ever cross out recorded data is if you accidentally wrote down the wrong number.
- Record all digits. Never round off original data measurements. If the last digit is a zero, you must record it anyway!
- For analog readings (*e.g.,* ruler, graduated cylinder, thermometer), always estimate and record one extra digit.
- Always write down the units with each measurement!
- Record *every* quantity that will be used in a calculation, whether it is changing or not.
- Don't convert in your head before writing down a measurement. Record the original data in the units you actually measured it in, and convert in a separate step.

Calculations

- Use enough digits to avoid unintended loss of significance. (Don't introduce round-off errors in the middle of a calculation.) This usually means use at least two more digits than the number of "significant figures" you expect your answer to have.
- Use few enough digits to be reasonably convenient.
- Record uncertainty separately from the measurement. (Don't rely on "sig figs" to express uncertainty.)
- Leave digits in the calculator between steps. (Don't round until the end.)
- When in doubt, keep plenty of "guard digits" (digits after the place where you think you will end up rounding).

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Integrity of Data

Your data are your data. In classroom settings, people often get the idea that the goal is to report an uncertainty that reflects the difference between the measured value and the "correct" value. That idea certainly doesn't work in real life—if you knew the "correct" value you wouldn't need to make measurements!

In all cases—in the classroom and in real life—you need to determine the uncertainty of your own measurement by scrutinizing your own measurement procedures and your own analysis. Then you judge how well they agree.

For example, we would say that the quantities 10 ± 2 and 11 ± 2 agree reasonably well, because there is considerable overlap between their probability distributions. However, 10 ± 0.2 does not agree with 11 ± 0.2, because there is no overlap.

If you get an impossible result or if your results disagree with well-established results, you should look for and comment on possible problems with your procedure and/or measurements that could have caused the differences you observed. You must *never* fudge your data to improve the agreement.

Your Laboratory Notebook is *Not* a Report

Many high school students are taught that a laboratory notebook should be a journal-style book in which they must write perfect after-the-fact reports, but they are not allowed to change anything if they make a mistake. This is not at all what laboratory notebooks were ever meant to be. A laboratory notebook does not need to be anything more than an official signed and dated record of your procedure (what you did) and your data (what happened) at the exact instant that you took it and wrote it down.

Of course, because it is your journal, your laboratory notebook *may* contain anything else that you think is relevant. You may choose to include an explanation of the motivations for one or more experiments, the reasons you chose the procedure that you used, alternative procedures or experiments you may have considered, ideas for future experiments, *etc.* Or you may choose to record these things separately and cross-reference them to specific pages in your lab notebook.

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