

Guidelines for Progress Reports

The objective of this document is to provide a brief set of guidelines to assist first year students in writing their progress reports. It contains a description of the purpose of progress reports, and the role of the progress reports in student evaluation, followed by suggestions on how the progress report may be structured.

Purpose

Progress reports serve a variety of important functions, two of which are described here. First, the practice of research often requires attention to detail, occasionally to the extent that details begin to obscure the broader goal of a research program. A progress report provides an opportunity to step back from the details of day to day research activity, and to describe the conceptual framework into which that research fits. This exercise often helps to clarify the motivation for a program of research, and can be a catalyst for new research ideas. Second, a critical component of scientific research is the communication of that research to others. One form of communication that will play an important role in your progress as a scientist is that of writing. The progress report provides an opportunity for you to practice writing, to receive critical feedback on writing, and therefore to improve writing skill.

Although the subject matter of both of these objectives is past research, an important function of the progress report is to chart the course of future research. As such, a progress report should describe the progress made to date in such a way that the supervisory committee can understand the motivation for the research that you plan to carry out in the near future.

Evaluation

The progress report provides an opportunity for committee members to evaluate, and to contribute to, the research progress made by students. Progress reports are marked by each member of the student's supervisory committee as being 'satisfactory', 'borderline', or 'unsatisfactory', in each of three areas; content, presentation and progress toward the Ph.D. Promotion to the Ph.D. program is based on these progress reports, performance in Contemporary Problems and Statistics, and other aspects of academic development that your supervisory committee deems relevant.

Structure of the Progress Report

The structure of progress reports may vary from one to another for several reasons. Students who have been in the program for several years may write a progress report aimed at addressing a prior concern of the supervisory committee, or they may use the progress report to get feedback on a particularly important aspect of their thesis. For upper year students, the most important guide to the structure of the progress report is provided by suggestions, and sometimes directives, of committee members. As such, students should seek information from committee members if it is not entirely clear what is expected.

If your committee does not have specific instructions regarding the structure or content of the progress report, which may be the case for first year students, then the following

guidelines may be used. A first-year progress report should aim to achieve the following objectives.

- 1) to provide the background information required to set your research in an appropriate context.
- 2) to provide a precise description of the research issue being addressed.
- 3) to describe the research activities undertaken since beginning the program in September
- 4) to evaluate the progress made during the year toward the goal of the research project.
- 5) to describe the direction that research will take in the coming year

There are a variety of ways of meeting these objectives, and some students have noted that a research article satisfies some of the same objectives. For example, some of the background information you provide, as well as the description of your particular research question, may also be appropriate for the Introduction in a manuscript. Further, a description of your research activities undertaken during the year could contain a Method section that would also be appropriate in a manuscript.

At the same time, the progress report should not be treated as if it were precisely the same as a manuscript. To appreciate the distinction between a progress report and a manuscript, consider that a manuscript focuses on the rationale for research that has already been conducted, while the progress report should also indicate the general aims and direction of a research program. With this in mind, if you include parts of a manuscript in your progress report, it is suggested that you note explicitly how that section satisfies one of the objectives listed above.

The maximum length of a progress report is 30 double-spaced pages. This page limit includes figures, tables and appendices. Of course, your progress report does not have to be 30 pages in length. If you can report your progress effectively in fewer pages, then we encourage you to do so. If you firmly believe that your progress report cannot be completed in fewer than 30 pages, please discuss this issue with your committee. If there is a conflict between the guidelines presented here and the advice of your committee, then please follow the advice of your committee. This document is intended for use by those who are unsure of what is required in a progress report, and does not contain a set of criteria that must be met by all students. If you have further questions regarding progress reports that your supervisory committee cannot answer, then please feel free to contact me.

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