

Keeping a Research Journal for Your Scholarly Project

We've talked about how much bigger the scholarly project is than the term papers that you may have written for other classes. Fortunately, there are a variety of tools that keep the scholarly project manageable: getting literature search help from your librarian, using EndNote to manage and format references (and PDFs of articles), keeping all of your articles in a three-ring binder or in a single directory, focusing on one part of the project at a time, etc.

One very useful tool is a research journal (or research log), which functions as an "ectopic brain" for your scholarly project. Like a lab notebook for bench research, the research journal keeps in one place all of your thoughts, ideas, questions, etc., about your scholarly project, over the course of the project.

Why keep a research journal?

- Nothing is lost: not those initial ideas that you find you need halfway through the project, not those great subject headings for searching. It's all at your fingertips.
- When your major advisor asks about your progress since you last met, you can pull out your research journal and show him or her.
- If you reach a "dead end" with your project, you can track back to see what went wrong.
- It can help you avoid plagiarism by engaging you at a deeper level; keeping a journal helps you process and integrate the information from the literature.
- If you get drawn away from the project for a couple of weeks, reading the journal will remind you where you left off.
- It can help you when you are writing and revising your project because your thoughts will be clear about the topic.

What is included in a research journal?

- Initial and developing ideas about your topic(s). What are you interested in? What are your questions about it?
- Information on what you discussed with your major advisor, and notes about the feedback from him or her, including tasks and deadlines.
- How you found your information sources: what databases did you search, what search terms did you use. Jot down your search histories, other databases or search terms that you think might be useful for future searches.
- How you decided which articles you included in your project and which ones you excluded. What inclusion/exclusion criteria did you use?
- Thoughts about each article that you read. What questions does the article raise for you? You may want to create a table of study characteristics to make it easier to compare articles (study population, number of participants, measures, statistical significance/effect size, conclusions, limitations, etc.).

- Conclusions about the topic, answers to your initial questions, new questions, etc.
- Ideas that come up when you aren't working on your project (in the shower, on clinical rotations, etc.). Write them down, then transfer them to your journal later.
- If you are planning original research, make notes about the project as it progresses: what is your research question? What are your independent and dependent variables? How will they be operationalized? What methods will you be using? How are you going to manage the data you collect? (You need to think about this before you start collecting data.)

General guidelines for keeping a research journal

- **Keep the research journal together.** Whether the journal is electronic or hardcopy, it should stay together. Having pages of research journal scattered over multiple locations or in multiple files can defeat the purpose: to keep your thoughts about your project together, for easy access. If you keep an electronic journal, make it easy to print out.
- **Date your entries.** This is useful for keeping track of the process of the project and reporting on your progress to the major advisor.
- **The more you use it, the more useful it will be, to both you and your advisor.** If you create a journal then only use it sporadically, you may miss capturing important information.
- **It's okay if you don't use everything that's in the journal.** This is more about capturing those thoughts and ideas, so in the future, you don't find yourself thinking, "What was that great idea I had back in September? I can't remember!"

Your major advisor may have more ideas about how he or she wants you to use the journal. He or she may require that you keep one, or may require that you turn a copy in every so often. If in doubt, ask.

How my advisor wants me to use a research journal:



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