

STYLE GUIDE FOR LABORATORY REPORTS

Instructor: Roger Easton

2112 Carlson

475-5969

easton@cis.rit.edu

Introduction

As a scientist, probably the most fundamental means you will use to communicate with colleagues is through reports and papers that summarize your research. The material you will write about is often complex and non-intuitive. Because of this fact, it is very important that you learn to write these reports *clearly* and *concisely*. To do this well often requires significant practice. Laboratory reports are one of the more important opportunities to develop in this area.

In real research, the utility of an experiment is to test some hypothesis or theoretical model. In the labs you will implement this quarter, the theory is well established. However, it will be very useful for you to approach these experiments from the point of view that the theory is not well known; after all, this may well be your first introduction to the theory.

The result of your experiments will fall into one of three categories:

- (1) the data support the theory within the experimental uncertainties,
- (2) the data do not support the theory within the experimental uncertainties, or
- (3) the experimental uncertainties do not allow for a meaningful comparison between the data and the theory.

Conclusion (3) is often, if not usually, a disappointment, because it means that one has to either admit severe deficiencies in the data-taking technique or to revisit the experimental method used and search for a better way to go about making the measurement (of course, this is a very common outcome in real experiments!) However, an honest researcher will report this when necessary. Each week, try to answer the question: into which of these three categories does your experiment fall?

Lab Notebook:

You should all have a laboratory notebook where you record your data. This may be “virtual” in the sense that it may be computer file, or it may be a bound notebook (i.e., not loose-leaf pages). I encourage use of the former, as a “virtual” lab notebook may be more easily disseminated.

Writing Your Lab Reports -- the Writing Should “Flow”:

Remember the three C’s: concise, clear, and complete. Break your text into sections that flow one to the next. Many layouts are possible, and you have the freedom to choose the one that works best in the particular context. Here are a couple of examples:

Example 1:

1. Title Page (including date, number of lab, name of partners)
2. Abstract
3. Introduction

4. Experimental Set-up: “Experimental” is an adjective, not a noun, and thus is not an appropriate heading by itself!
5. Data Analysis
6. Conclusions

Example 2:

1. Title Page (including date, number of lab, name of partners)
2. Abstract
3. Background
4. Observations
5. Conclusions

Try to tailor your section headings to match the lab activities, rather than formatting your lab to fit a set of fixed headings. You **absolutely** need to write a brief abstract that is placed at the front of the report and that states what you did and any conclusions you reached. In the main text, include a section that describes the context and relevance of what you did, a discussion of the experimental procedures, your results (which could be more than one section, as in example 1 above), and then your conclusions (at the end). In each lab procedure handout, there will be a few questions that you will need to answer. It usually is convenient to answer these questions in the conclusion.

Diagrams of setups are particularly useful in lab reports. These can be very simple – they do not have to be artistic. Include relevant dimensions that are necessary in any equations in the description.

All required material in your lab writeup should be typed on a word processor, both for ease of submission and for archiving. This includes equations, figures, data tables, and answers to any questions. Handwritten pages will not be accepted. Include captions with figures and data tables. Number your equations, data tables, and figures and refer to them by number, e.g., “As demonstrated by Eq. 1, ...”, “As shown in Fig. 2, ...”, etc. Equations are typically numbered in parentheses located flush with the right margin, while figures and tables are numbered in their captions. The lists of equations, figures, and tables are numbered separately.

The general idea of the lab reports this quarter is to follow the format of real research papers as closely as possible. If you would like some examples of what such papers really look like, go to the library or the CIS Reading Room and look through a couple of imaging science journals, e.g. *Optical Engineering*, the *Journal of the Optical Society of America (JOSA)*, or the *Journal of Imaging Science and Technology*.

The Certainty of Uncertainty

Every measurement exhibits some associated uncertainty. A good experimentalist will try to evaluate the level of uncertainty, which is specified along with the measured value (e.g., 10.4 ± 0.1 mm), which are then graphed as “error bars” along with the measured numerical value). A very useful reference book on this subject is **Data Reduction and Error Analysis for the Physical Sciences** (Third Edition), by Philip Bevington and D. Keith Robinson (McGraw-Hill, 2002, ISBN 0072472278). It is not unreasonable to say that this classic book should be on the shelf of every scientist.

In these labs, it is very important for you to do this too. In particular, it is helpful to decide which of the three possible results mentioned above that applies to your data. How can you do this? One way is to make what you think is a reasonable decision about the uncertainty. For example, if you measure a length with a ruler, maybe you can only measure the length to some fraction of the smallest rule division. Another way is to measure the uncertainty. That is, take the same measurement multiple times. The average value is then used as the final measurement, and the uncertainty is related to the standard deviation of the individual values. We will discuss these ideas more thoroughly as the class goes on, but you should be prepared to estimate uncertainties for as many measurements as you can. The measurements are usually expressed as the mean value μ plus or minus (\pm) the uncertainty, which generally is standard deviation σ of the measurement. **Be sure to specify the units used in any measurements! Also watch the number of significant figures; just because your spreadsheet calculates to 7 or 8 places does not mean that this level of precision is merited!**

Present your data in numbered tables and include captions that clearly specify the source of the data.

Once you have assessed the uncertainty of your measurements, you still need to estimate the uncertainty of any derived results. For example, if your measurements of “a” is 10 units ± 1.5 and “b” is 5 units ± 0.5 , then what is the derived measurement of $c = a + b$? or $d = a \times b$? You should not report precision above and beyond what is warranted. For example, I often see students report 5+ decimal places of precision in numbers derived from observations measured with an uncertainty of more than 10%. This is ridiculous (to put it mildly!). A well-known and very useful reference on the topic of precision and the propagation of errors is the book “*Data Reduction and Error Analysis in the Physical Sciences*” by Phillip R. Bevington (McGraw-Hill Science/Engineering/Math; 3rd edition, July 23, 2002, ISBN: 0072472278). This is a very useful book for all scientists. I assure you that you will use it for years and consider it to be a very worthwhile purchase.

Equations and Subscripts:

You will need to include equations and subscripts in your lab writeups, so you need to have the means to do so. Subscript fonts are available in most word processors and equation fonts in many. For example, Microsoft Word™ includes a rudimentary “Equation Editor”, and add-on software (such as MathType™ from MathSoft) also is available. You might consider investing in a scientific word processor that includes equation, graphing, and curve-fitting features — many are available, and the time you are likely to save over the course of your college career will easily outweigh the cost and learning time.

As already mentioned, number any equations used in your lab writeup. Note that the symbol “*” that is commonly used for multiplication in some disciplines is more often used to refer to the mathematical operation of convolution in imaging. I suggest that you use either “ \times ” or “ \cdot ” in lab reports. These are available in most symbol fonts.

Graphics and Images

I encourage you to include graphical displays of various kinds into your lab reports. For example, you can check out digital cameras from the supply room to photograph your

lab setups and include them in your reports. As already mentioned, labeled diagrams are particularly useful in laboratory reports and should be included. This is an obvious place where the old motto certainly applies: “One picture is worth 1024 words.” Include the figures in the text near their first reference and not as a collection at the end of the report.

You can (and should) display data graphically; you can use the graphing tools in spreadsheet programs such as Microsoft Excel™. Include the graphics in appropriate locations in the text, i.e., **not** as a group at the end of the report (nothing is more annoying than to find the graphs after I’ve read the report!). Also, reference any graphics taken from other sources, including the lab description handout.

Include legends on graphs if useful.

If you use color in your graphs but submit black-and-white output, make sure that your graphs are readable! It does little good to use colored symbols in a graph that disappear into the gray background when printed with a black and white printer.

Number your figures and include captions that clearly describe what is pictured.

If you fit lines or curves to data points in graphs (such as by linear regression), then you need to state what was done.

Length of Report

There is no standard length to a lab report. To use a cliché, the lab report should be as long as it must be, but no longer. You need to explain the concepts and the process sufficiently, but do not write pages of description when a few words and a figure will suffice.

Late Policy

All lab reports will be graded out of 100 points. A penalty of 5 points **per day** will be assessed if the lab is turned in late.

Grading of Laboratory Reports

As in Imaging Systems Lab 1, lab reports will be evaluated according to standards of technical writing commonly used by publishers of professional journals. Your report will be judged in terms of the following five criteria.

1. Grammar and Syntax (20 points)

Use whole sentences with appropriate grammar and syntax. Please do not use colloquial or slang terms. Also, please **PROOFREAD** your reports before submission -- and I don’t mean just check the spelling. You are practicing for your profession, so take some pride in the results of your efforts and submit the best report that you can.

2. Organization and Presentation (10 points)

Organize in a reasonable way. Use paragraphs, and indent at the start of paragraphs, except for the first paragraph of a section, or skip lines between unindented paragraphs. Label all figures, tables, and equations and refer to all of them in your text. Do not include something if you don’t refer to it. Attribute all items taken from other sources, such as figures or equations.

3. Quality of Data and Experimental Procedure (20 points)

The best data is obtained when you know what you are doing. So, please read the lab experiment handout before coming to lab. Examine your data as much as you can before the lab period is over. If they do not conform to what you expect, consult with your instructor and be prepared to retake the data if necessary.

4. Quality of Graphical Presentation (20 points)

Give titles to your tables and graphs, and label them with a number. If the data have units, please include them in a consistent manner. Use points on a graph to show measured data and lines to show functions and equations. Do not connect the data points unless you intend to linearly interpolate between points.

5. Discussion (25 points)

Your technical writing should indicate your understanding of the topic. Your report should not be simply a list of what you did but a discussion of the significance of what you did. Show that you know the theory behind the observations. Use your figures and tables to clarify your discussion. Answer all questions posed in the handout for the lab.

6. Grader's Prerogative (5, or even more, points)

(Self-explanatory)