

# Requirements for Experimental Notebooks

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## 1. THE ROLE OF THE SCIENTIFIC NOTEBOOK

Learning to maintain a laboratory notebook is one of the most important skills you will develop in Junior Lab. A good laboratory notebook is essential when you begin to write papers or to develop oral presentations summarizing your experimental efforts. A clear well-written narrative that includes experimental schematics, plots of raw data, and details of your analysis methods will enable you to receive quick feedback and assistance during lab sessions from peers, TA's and section instructors.

A poorly maintained notebook will prove immensely frustrating to you and your instructor. It is very difficult to answer questions like 'why didn't the experiment work' or 'why was my result off by an order of magnitude?' without being able to clearly and easily trace your efforts using your notebook. Don't count on being able to recall the gain of your amplifier even one day after a lab session!!!

Finally, we hope that your Junior Lab notebook(s) will hold an honorable place on your bookshelf alongside future notebooks you will create as a professional scientist in the years ahead.

## 2. GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Create a *descriptive* table of contents and make an entry every time you add new material:  
**Date** ——— **Contents** ——— **Page**
- Sign and date each page demonstrating authenticity.
- Don't ever erase, use white-out, or tear out pages of a lab notebook. Indicate "mistakes" by simply drawing a single, neat line through the item. These may prove to not so incorrect as initially thought and will very often be useful as a guide to how the experiment was done and provide clues on how to better execute the experiment next time.
- Loose-leaf pages are never acceptable within a lab notebook. Graphics or tables generated by computer must be neatly taped into the notebook. Remember to annotate these types of graphics with as much information about how they were created as possible.
- Identify the location of the data files or long analysis programs if they are too big to directly enter

or tape into your notebook. Analysis scripts, functional forms for non-linear fits, etc. should always be present in your notebooks.

- Note typical "readings" and instrumental settings so to be able to quickly setup an experiment on subsequent days.
- Sketch waveforms at various places within the signal chain. This will help ensure your understanding of each component and permit you to rapidly identify equipment failure.
- When tabulating data, make neat columns with headings and always note correct units.
- Don't wait until after the session has ended to visually examine the quality of your data. Make preliminary, hand drawn plots of data, **AS THEY ARE ACQUIRED**. These initial plots will very often save you time and frustration in making sure that your data are reasonable and suggestive of the behavior you expect. **The importance of making preliminary plots and analyses in real-time cannot be overstated.**
- Your notebook should contain diagrams, narratives, tables of raw data, formulas, computations, reduced data, error analysis and conclusions in a neat compact, orderly arrangement.

### 2.1. Additional Junior Lab Requirements

For each experiment you perform, your notebook should contain the following:

- List the objectives of the experiment. Restate the essential physics of the experiment in your own words!!!
- Preparatory questions and solutions
- A block diagram of experimental apparatus.
- A list of things you have to do and the data you must obtain.
- Identify the required calibrations.
- Attempt to foresee how particular problems can be circumvented.

**Bring your notebook to every lab session and to all oral exams. Failure to do so will result in penalties to your grade!**