

# Assigning and Responding to Project Logs

## What is a project log?

A project log is a notebook or journal composed of a series of entries that chronologically record progress, frustrations, set-backs, plans, and attempts. Typical entries might include notes, questions, tentative or partial calculations, “what if” discussions, sketches, crude charts, mini-evaluations, plans for the next day or week, and the like.

## What do typical project log entries do?

Project log entries typically address one or more of these questions:

- What have I done since the last entry?
- What is my immediate goal/deadline and how can I get there/how can I meet it? What calculations or research or other activity will help me get there?
- What has been easy/difficult about this phase or part of the project? What factors have made it easy or difficult?
- How optimistic/pessimistic am I feeling about the project? Why?
- If I am stuck or unsure of how to proceed, what questions do I need to have answered? Who can I talk to about this? What other resources can I call on to help me proceed?
- What is likely to happen next as I work on this project? What should I plan for, or watch out for, or try to prevent?
- Why has this project gone well? What do I need to remember to help make sure that my next similar project also goes well?
- For group projects: how is this group functioning? What do we need to discuss together in order to smooth the way?
- For group projects: what are my immediate responsibilities as a group member? What will the other members be doing while I work on this? How are they depending on me? How am I depending on them?

Project logs can also be focused specifically on the writing process. They ask questions like:

- How did you arrive at your topic?
- When did you first begin to think about the assignment?

- How long did it take you to complete the assignments (including time spent learning and revising)?
- What kind of planning or investigating did you do?
- Where did you write the first draft? Subsequent drafts? (Briefly describe the settings)
- Who is the audience for this piece of writing?
- What is your relationship to the audience?
- What do you see as the major strengths of your essay?
- What do you see as the weakness of the essay?
- What would you like to change about your process of writing?

### **Why keep a project log?**

A project log serves two purposes, one while the project is in progress and the second after the project is complete.

While the project is ongoing, the project log entries become a way for the worker (team member, researcher) to monitor his or her own momentum. By addressing such questions as "what have I done since the last entry?" workers are forced to take stock and to make plans. Thus, the project encourages a regular awareness of the projects.

Once the project is complete or nearly complete, the log becomes a recourse/record of what happened. By referring to the log, workers can critique the project as a whole, identifying both strategies that worked and those that caused problems. Ultimately, the project log enables workers to envision and plan for other similar projects.

### **How much/how little should teachers discuss the project log in class?**

Students need regular indications that the project logs are important. Teachers can help by identifying the sort of entry that might be appropriate at any given point, especially if class discussion or office hour meetings have led in that direction. Such discussion takes little time (a minute or two).

For example, if the project is divided into stages or steps, then that movement from one stage to another can be an opportunity for either looking back ("I should have done it this way") or for looking ahead ("I'll make these tentative plans"). If an occasional class period affords time (even just 3 or 4 minutes) for a log entry (or the beginning of one), more is better.

Another strategy for keeping project logs relevant is asking students to keep their project

log in a shared Google Doc. This affords the instructor regular access to check in on students' logs, provide short comments and feedback, and identify recurring areas of concern that would be best addressed in the classroom.

## **How should a project log be graded?**

In order for students to recognize that the project log is something they should take seriously, students need to understand two things:

- 1) the intellectual rationales for keeping a project log—that is, students need to see how such a log will be useful to them, both for the immediate project and for other similar projects in the future and
- 2) students also need to see that keeping the project log will earn them substantial course credit (and not keeping the log will substantially hurt their grade).

In general, project logs ought to be sufficiently important that they can affect the course grade by at least one level (for example, the difference between a "C" and a "B"). Project logs shouldn't be graded according to writing correctness (spelling, grammar, etc.). They should be evaluated according to criteria specific to the project itself.

In general, the criteria might include frequent and regularity of entries (many entries, no large gaps between them), willingness of entries to discuss the project in its fullness and complexity (i.e., entries thoughtful rather than cursory, various rather than monotonous), and the regular presence of entries which judge the project's progress and make plans.

If given sufficient direction via handouts and classroom discussion, students can certainly evaluate their own project logs. Project logs could also be evaluated as the basis of a final reflective assignment which asks students to analyze their project logs or write about their project process using direct evidence from past entries.

One way or another, project logs should be evaluated at least twice: once just a little ways into the project (an evaluation to make sure students are on track and using the log effectively), and then again at the end of the project.