Progress Reports

A progress report provides information on the status of an undertaking. It is typically produced at set intervals over the duration of a project. The length of a progress report varies, depending on the type of project, the frequency of reports, and who is reading the report. Below are general guidelines for writing a progress report. If your supervisors have different requirements, you should, of course, defer to them.

Audience

First, analyze your audience to help you determine what information to include and what tone to use.

- How are my readers connected to this project? How will its outcome affect them?
- What decisions will my readers need to make after reading the progress report?
- What information do they need to have in order to oversee this project effectively?
- How much do the readers know about the technical aspects of the project?
- Are my readers comfortable using the technical jargon of my industry?

Now, determine the best way to communicate with your audience. Progress reports can take different forms.

- Brief oral reports at weekly or monthly staff meetings
- Periodic emails to colleagues
- Memos to supervisors
- Formal reports for clients or government agencies

Chances are your supervisors will have specified which form they want. If they haven't, you may want to ask them about their preferences. If you'll be producing multiple progress reports, or if several divisions of an organization will be producing similar reports, you may want to create a template to follow, so information will be presented the same way each time.

If you're producing an internal report for a colleague or supervisor, it may be acceptable to adopt a less formal tone. You should use a more formal tone, and possibly explain more of the technical jargon associated with the project, when reporting to an outside audience, such as a group of investors or clients. As with any kind of business or technical communication, though, your tone should always be courteous and professional.

Convey information clearly and simply. Always be specific, direct, and honest.

Consider whether you should present your progress report as a narrative or a bulleted list. Also, would using color, headings, graphs, or tables make your report easier to understand? Would it help to highlight new information in bold or a particular color?

Introduction

Your introduction (also called an "introductory summary" or "abstract") should clearly state the purpose of the report. Introduce the project and remind the readers that this is an update on its progress. Next, give a

brief overview of the project, summarizing the project's status. Last, explain the progress that's been made since the last report, including whether or not you've met your established interim goals.

Be sure to identify the person being addressed, the project's name, and the dates the progress report covers. After reading the report, readers should NOT have to ask, "What does this mean?" or "Where can I find this information?"

Body

The body should be a more detailed version of your introduction. Identify tasks accomplished since the last report and tasks still ongoing. Discuss problems you've encountered, issues that need to be addressed, and possible solutions to any problems. Talk about any changes that may have occurred in the project plan along the way and why they were necessary. Issues you may need to address in your report include personnel changes, difficulty in obtaining materials, cost overruns, weather delays, security risks, and problems with or advances in technology. After explaining the current state of the project, describe what's next.

If applicable, state whether the project will meet its deadline. State how problems that have arisen may affect the deadline, budget, or management structure. If there are no problems, indicate this in your report. Strike a balance in your report: don't sugarcoat problems or promise things you can't deliver, but don't alarm your readers unnecessarily either.

You can also indicate total hours worked and acknowledge group members who've assisted in accomplishing tasks.

It may be helpful to divide the body into subsections and refer to any attachments containing more detailed information.

Conclusion

The conclusion should convey your general attitude about the project's status: are you confident of completion or concerned about problems that have arisen? Be honest in your assessment of the situation, since this will help supervisors know how they can ensure the project is completed successfully. You may also want to let readers know you're willing to adapt to any changes they suggest. Finally, if you need the readers to take action—to choose a new supplier or increase funding, for example—be sure to convey that clearly.

References

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