LABORATORY NOTEBOOKS:

Good Record Keeping Procedures

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The advance of knowledge through research relies upon the generation of data -- experimental results. Accurately recording this data is critical to the dissemination and verification of the new knowledge, to the personal reputations of the investigators, and to the certification of inventorship. Researchers in both academic and industrial environments must adhere to good record keeping procedures in their laboratory notebooks to ensure that the integrity of the data will withstand any legal scrutiny that may arise.

10 Routines for Good Records

1. Use bound laboratory notebooks to which pages cannot be added or removed. Number each page consecutively, and never remove pages or portions of a page for any reason. Number additional volumes sequentially.

2. Record all experimental data in the notebooks. Record each entry indelibly in ink. Never make deletions; instead, make corrections by drawing a line through the entry. Date and initial the changes.

3. Sign and date each entry. For example, write: "Pages ___ through ___, Name, Date." If you do not work on a project for a period of time, indicate that in your notebook by writing: "On vacation {dates}" or "On other projects {dates}." 

4. Write on every page. If you decide to skip a page or any space on a page (for example, you get to the end of one experiment near the lower portion of one page and you want to start at the top of the next page), draw a diagonal line through the skipped lines and sign and date the line.

5. Use a narrative style to describe the hypothesis, experimental design, materials, methods, and conclusions. Tell the story of your research clearly.

6. Permanently affix all labels, gels, diagrams, etc. in the notebook. Do not use temporary measures like staples or paper clips.
7. Corroborate each entry. Each entry should be read, signed, and dated by someone who did not perform the work but who is competent to understand it. In the notebook, the corroborator should write the following statement: "On this date I read the entries in this notebook from the entry dated _______ on page _____, to and including the most recent entry above. Name & Date." Corroboration should occur regularly; an ideal schedule would be once each week, as big parts of the project are completed, and at the end of the project.

8. Describe inventions completely in a separate entry in the notebook. Have the entry signed and dated by a corroborator. In addition, enlist a third person who is knowledgeable but is not an inventor to read, sign, and date the entry describing the invention.

9. Do not rely solely upon computer generated and stored data. If you keep your records and notes on your computer, print them out regularly (once a week is a good schedule). Bind the printouts permanently together to form a notebook. Sign and date each entry just as in the traditional bound notebooks.

10. Ideally, records should be retained in a fireproof safe. Records of inventions need to be kept a long time (in some cases for 30 years) in order to prove both correct inventorship and diligence in working on an invention between conception and reduction to practice.