

Workout log: five columns that make overload work

A workout log isn't a diary. It's last week's numbers, kept where you'll see them before this week's first set. Here's what goes in it, a layout you can copy, how to read it week to week, and what to leave out.

Short answer: A workout log needs five columns: the exercise, the weight, the reps in each set, how many reps you had left, and a short note. Before each session, read last week's line and beat it by a rep or a little weight. In a 2016 meta-analysis, monitoring progress helped more when it was physically recorded.¹

By Diogo · Updated October 25, 2026 · 6 min read

Progressive overload runs on one question: what did you do last time? [The progressive overload page](#) says to write it down. This page is what to write, a layout you can copy onto paper, a spreadsheet or any notes app, and how to read it from one week to the next.

The short version is five columns. Everything else is optional, and most of it gets in the way.

What the research says about logging

Less than you'd hope, at least for lifting. A PubMed search for this page found no trial that tested a training log on its own, against no log, in people who lift. The closest evidence comes from two other directions:

- **Monitoring progress, in general.** A 2016 meta-analysis pooled 138 randomized studies of 19,951 people. It looked at goals in general, not lifting. Getting people to monitor their progress helped them reach their goals, and the effect was larger when the information was physically recorded.¹
- **Getting people to lift at all.** A 2026 systematic review of 69 real-life programs that promoted muscle-strengthening exercise in healthy adults found that only nine measured whether people actually did it, and concluded that the evidence on how best to promote it is limited.²

Inside the training studies, the log shows up as a tool rather than a test. The usual rule for adding weight, from the American College of Sports Medicine's 2009 position stand, is to add 2 to 10% once you can do one or two reps more than your target,³ and you can't apply it without last week's reps. In an eight-week trial of 21 resistance-trained men, the ten who chose their own squat and bench press loads by effort were shown their record from the same day of the previous week to help them choose.⁴ So treat the log as the thing your progression needs, not as a proven habit on its own.

The five columns

Write the date at the top of each session, then one line per exercise:

Column	What to write	Why it's there
Exercise	The exact version: incline dumbbell press, not "chest"	Progress only means something on the same exercise
Weight	The load for your working sets. For bodyweight moves, the version (incline push-up, floor push-up)	The number you're trying to beat
Reps per set	Every working set on its own: 12, 11, 9, not "about 10"	The drop across sets shows whether the weight is right
Reps in reserve	How many more good reps you think you had on the last set	Weight and reps alone can't tell an easy set from a hard one
Note	One line: a seat or pin setting, a grip, a swap, a short night's sleep	So next week starts from the same setup

If your program is written in RPE instead, use that in the effort column. On the lifting version of the scale, first tested in a 2016 study of 29 squatters, RPE 10 means no reps left and RPE 9 means one.⁵ Pick one and stick with it. A logged hard set also gives you an [estimated one-rep max](#).

Expect the effort column to be rough. In one session of sets to failure, 141 gym members (72 men, 69 women) guessed short of the reps they really had left: by about four to five among the newest, and one to two among the most experienced.⁶ Across 12 studies and 414 participants, a 2022 review put the average miss near one rep, with better guesses close to failure and in sets of 12 or fewer, and no effect of experience.⁷ The number is still worth writing, because next week you'll compare it with the same lift at the same weight. [Reps in reserve](#) explains how to make the guess.

A layout you can copy

Here's the same training day two weeks running, written the way it would look on paper:

Day	Exercise	Weight	Reps per set	Reps in reserve	Note
Week 1, Monday	Goblet squat	30 lb	12, 11, 10	2	Heels down
Week 1, Monday	Dumbbell bench press	25 lb each	12, 12, 12	3	Go up next week
Week 1, Monday	Seated cable row	70 lb	10, 9, 8	1	Seat at 4
Week 2, Monday	Goblet squat	30 lb	12, 12, 11	2	
Week 2, Monday	Dumbbell bench press	30 lb each	9, 8, 8	2	New weight
Week 2, Monday	Seated cable row	70 lb	11, 10, 9	1	Seat at 4

In a notebook or a notes app, one line can be as short as "Goblet squat 30 × 12, 11, 10, 2 left". Copy the headings once, then add a line per exercise as you go.

How to read it, week to week

Read it before the session, not after. Compare each exercise with the same day last week:

- **Every set at the top of your rep range, with reps to spare:** add the smallest weight step next time. In the example, that's the bench press in week 1.
- **More reps than last week at the same weight:** that's progress, as the squat and the row show in week 2. Keep the weight and try for another rep. An eight-week trial in 43 lifters (27 men, 16 women, each with at least a year of lower-body training) found progressing by reps and progressing by load both viable, judged by muscle thickness and squat strength.⁸
- **Fewer reps right after a weight jump:** expected, like the bench in week 2. Build the reps back up before the next jump.
- **The same numbers for several sessions in a row:** that's a stall, and when you stall has the checklist.

Once a week, the log also answers how much you did: count the hard working sets for each muscle. A 2021 systematic review of 14 randomized trials, in lifters aged 18 to 35 with at least a year of training, found that the number of sets taken to or near failure was an adequate way to measure training volume for muscle growth, in sets of anywhere from 6 to more than 20 reps.⁹ So the log counts sets. How you spread them over the week is your workout split.

What not to track

- **Total pounds lifted.** Weight times reps times sets gives one big number per session, and it climbs just as easily when you add an easy set as when you get stronger. Hard sets are the simpler count.
- **How sore you were.** In a study of 110 male students who did different amounts of eccentric elbow work, soreness tracked poorly with the other signs of muscle damage they measured, such as lost strength.¹⁰ It isn't a score for the workout. (More in muscle soreness.)
- **Every warm-up set.** Warm-up weights follow from the working weight, so the log only needs the sets you're trying to beat. The ramp itself is on the warm-up page, and the warm-up set calculator works out the weights.
- **Anything you won't read.** If a column never changes what you do next session, drop it. Five columns you fill in every time beat twelve you abandon.

Common mistakes

- **Writing it after you get home.** By then "12, 11, 10" has turned into "about 12". Write each set before the next one.
- **Logging only your best set.** The second and third sets are where you see whether the weight is right.
- **Changing exercises every week.** A log can only compare like with like. Keep the same lifts for a few weeks.
- **Picking the weight before reading the log.** Last week's line decides this week's weight. For a first session with nothing to read, how much weight to lift covers the starting weight.
- **Chasing the number through pain.** Sharp pain isn't effort. Stop the set, and see a doctor or a physical therapist.

If you'd rather not read it alone

A log tells you what happened; deciding what to change when three lifts stall in the same week is the part a page can't do. Coaching is the version where someone else reads the log with you: your workouts are built around the days you actually have, and a weekly call looks at the week you just had and rebuilds the next one. [Coaching to build muscle](#) explains how that works, and [here's how to apply](#). Otherwise: write today's date, copy the five headings, and fill in one line at your next exercise.

General education only, not medical advice. If you have a medical condition, are pregnant, or take medication, check with your doctor before changing how you train or eat.

Sources

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10. Nosaka K, Newton M, Sacco P. Delayed-onset muscle soreness does not reflect the magnitude of eccentric exercise-induced muscle damage. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 2002. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12453160/> (accessed October 22, 2026).

Blank log sheet

The same columns as the layout above, with room for one session on paper. Print as many as you need.

Day	Exercise	Weight	Reps per set	Reps in reserve	Note