



FITNESS FRATERNITY

THE PROGRESSION PLAYBOOK

Know when to add weight, reps or sets.

What to record. How to judge progress.
What to change when results slow down.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO BUILDING STRENGTH & MUSCLE

THE VAULT / TRAINING EDUCATION



01 / THE FOUNDATIONS

Make progress measurable.

Use this guide alongside your programme. Keep the target clear and make one deliberate change at a time.

What counts as progress?

More controlled reps at the same weight. More weight for the same reps. The same work with more reps left in reserve. Better movement quality is valuable too - but record the change so you can compare fairly.

Set the rules before you lift

Choose a rep range: for example, 3 working sets of 8-12 reps. Warm-up sets prepare you for the exercise; they do not count as these working sets.

Choose an effort target: a practical starting point is to finish most working sets with around 1-3 good reps left. Beginners can keep 2-3 while learning the movement.

Keep conditions similar: exercise, equipment, seat position, range of motion, rep control, rest and exercise order all affect the result.

RIR = REPS IN RESERVE

2 RIR means you estimate you could complete two more reps with the same technique. It is an estimate, not a test you must prove by reaching failure.

Select a starting weight that lets you reach the lower end of your rep range on every working set with the intended effort and control. If you cannot, lower the weight. Use lighter warm-up sets first.

**02 / THE DECISION RULE**

Reps first. Then load.

This repeatable method is often called double progression. The thresholds below are practical coaching rules, not a universal prescription.

What happened?	What to do next time
Within the rep range; technique and effort on target	Keep the weight. Aim for one extra rep across the exercise, where you can earn it.
Every set reaches the top of the range at the target RIR	Repeat that standard on a second comparable session, then add a small amount of weight.
Below the minimum reps, or technique breaks down	Do not add load. Check rest and setup; reduce the weight if it is too heavy.
Pain or an unusual symptom changes the movement	Stop the affected exercise. Seek appropriate advice before pushing through.

How much weight should you add?

Use the smallest practical increase that keeps you inside the rep range. Around 2-5% is a useful starting point when equipment allows. Small exercises often need smaller jumps than large lifts. You do not need to increase every week.

THE NEW WEIGHT HAS TO FIT

After increasing, reps will usually drop towards the bottom of the range. If you fall below it or lose control, return to the previous load or use a smaller increment.

If the next dumbbell or machine jump is too large, keep building consistent reps, use safe microloading where available, or ask a coach to adjust the rep range. Avoid adding momentum to force the jump.



03 / WORKED EXAMPLE

See the rule in action.

Example: machine chest press. Target = 3 x 8-12 at about 2 RIR. Same machine, setup and rest each session.

Session	Load	Reps by set	Next step
1	40 kg	10 / 9 / 8	Keep load; build reps
2	40 kg	10 / 10 / 8	One extra rep earned
3	40 kg	11 / 10 / 9	Keep building
4	40 kg	12 / 12 / 12	Confirm next session
5	40 kg	12 / 12 / 12	Ready for a small rise
6	42 kg*	10 / 9 / 8	Build towards 12 again

*Illustrative loads only; this assumes a 2 kg increment is available. Sessions show a possible pattern, not a promised rate of improvement. Every listed set meets the technique and effort target.

The details change the decision

12 / 12 / 10? Keep the weight. All sets have not reached the top yet.

12 / 12 / 12, but the last reps are forced? Repeat the load with the intended control and RIR before increasing.

10 / 9 / 8 at the new load? That is expected. You are rebuilding reps against a heavier resistance.

COUNT QUALITY REPS

Shorter range, a bouncing rep or help from a partner changes the task. Record it honestly; do not count it as a like-for-like improvement.



04 / ADDING SETS

More work must earn its place.

A set increase is a planned rise in training volume. It should solve a specific problem and still allow you to recover.

When an extra set may help

Consider it when attendance and effort are consistent, technique is sound, recovery is good, and a target muscle has stopped progressing across several comparable sessions. Review the whole week first: presses and pulls also train smaller supporting muscles.

Make the smallest useful change

Add **one working set to one exercise in one weekly session**. Keep the load and rep target stable initially. Observe performance and recovery for roughly 2-3 weeks before making another change.

EXAMPLE: TWO SETS BECOME THREE

Your leg curl is 2 x 10-15 on Tuesday and Friday: 4 weekly sets. Add one set on Tuesday only: now 5 weekly sets. Keep Friday unchanged while you assess the response.

When to hold or reduce volume

Do not add sets just because one session felt flat. Hold or reduce work if performance is falling, fatigue is building, soreness is affecting the next session, or joint discomfort is increasing. If the new set lowers the quality of the rest of your training, remove it and reassess.

Think across the week: adding one set to an exercise performed three times a week adds three weekly sets. Log weekly working sets, and avoid changing load, sets and exercise selection together.

**05 / THE TRAINING LOG**

Record enough to decide.

Your log should tell you what happened and what to do next. A notes app, notebook or training app all work.

Record	Why it matters
Exercise + setup	Machine, seat setting, grip and range make comparisons useful.
Load + reps for every set	Write 40 kg: 10 / 9 / 8, not just "3 sets done". State if dumbbell weight is per hand.
RIR + rest	Record estimated RIR for each set and rest between sets.
Technique + context	Note reduced range, assistance, poor sleep or a changed exercise order.
Next-session target	Choose: hold, add reps, add load, or review recovery.

A useful entry looks like this

MACHINE CHEST PRESS / SEAT 4

40 kg | reps: 10 / 9 / 8 | RIR: 2 / 2 / 2

Rest: 2 min between sets | usual range and control

Next time: keep 40 kg; aim for 10 / 9 / 9 if quality allows.

Compare like with like

As a practical starting point, rest around 2-3 minutes for demanding multi-joint lifts and 1-2 minutes for smaller isolation exercises. Take longer if needed to preserve performance. Record meaningful changes in rest rather than mistaking them for a strength gain.

**06 / WHEN PROGRESS SLOWS**

Troubleshoot before you overhaul.

One flat session is normal. A practical review point is 3-4 comparable exposures without improvement, rather than one arbitrary calendar week.

Check in this order	Practical response
1 / Are the results comparable?	Check setup, range, exercise order, rest and RIR. A stricter rep standard can explain fewer reps.
2 / Have you trained consistently?	Restore regular sessions and repeat key exercises long enough to judge them.
3 / Is the load appropriate?	If you repeatedly miss the rep floor, reduce load modestly and rebuild with control.
4 / Is recovery keeping up?	Review sleep, food intake, stress and other activity. Address the obvious gap before adding work.
5 / Is fatigue widespread?	If several lifts decline together, trial a lighter week: reduce working sets by about one-third to one-half and leave more reps in reserve.
6 / Is just one lift stuck?	Review technique with a coach. Try a smaller load jump or a modest rep-range adjustment. Consider an extra set only if recovery is good.

After a lighter week, return gradually to your usual workload as performance and recovery improve. A lighter week is an option, not a compulsory reset on a fixed schedule.

CHANGE ONE THING, THEN REVIEW

Write down the change and its review date. Give it several comparable sessions. Persistent pain or unexplained fatigue needs appropriate professional advice, not a harder programme.

**07 / COPY & USE**

Your next-session worksheet.

Print a fresh copy for each exercise you want to track. Record working sets only; use a second sheet if needed.

Exercise: _____ Setup: _____

Rep range: _____ Target RIR: _____ Planned rest: _____

Load convention (total / per hand / machine setting): _____

Date	Load	Reps per set	RIR per set	Next target

Technique / recovery notes**My one change for the next session****Review date / what would count as progress****BEFORE YOU ADD WEIGHT**

Every set at the top of the range? Same technique? Target RIR met? Repeated on a second comparable session? If yes, use a small load increase.

**08 / KEEP IT SIMPLE**

The rules to take with you.

Use the log to make your next session purposeful. Progress is a trend you build, not a result you can force every workout.

- 01 Choose a rep range and effort target.**
- 02 Make technique and setup repeatable.
- 03 Build reps before making a small load increase.
- 04 Add sets selectively, after reviewing recovery.
- 05 Log the work and write your next target.

Need help applying it?

Bring your training log to an FF coach. A clear record makes it easier to choose the right starting weight, check your technique and decide what to change next.

About this guide

General training education for healthy adults, not an individual programme or medical advice. Adapt exercises and loading to your experience and circumstances. Use safety equipment or a competent spotter where appropriate. Stop an exercise if it causes sharp or increasing pain.

Evidence & further reading

ACSM (2026). Updated resistance training guidelines: consistency, individualisation and the role of load and volume.
acsm.org/resistance-training-guidelines-update-2026/

ACSM (2009). Progression models in resistance training for healthy adults. Historical guidance on progressive loading.
pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19204579/

The decision thresholds, examples and review periods in this playbook are practical coaching applications, not exact protocols prescribed by these sources.