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Visual Presentation of Data

Stacy Christiansen

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Tables and figures demonstrate relationships among data and other types of information. A well-structured table is perhaps the most efficient way to convey a large amount of data in a scientific manuscript. As text, the same information may take considerably more space; if presented in a figure, key details and precise values may be less apparent. Text may be preferred if the information can be presented concisely (see Box). For qualitative information, text should be used if the relationships among data are simple and data are few, whereas a figure should be used if the relationships are complex. For quantitative information, a table should be used when the display of exact values is important, whereas a figure (eg, a line graph) should be used to demonstrate patterns or trends. Tables also are often preferable to graphics for small data sets and are preferred when data presentation requires many specific comparisons...

Tables

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Because of their ability to present detailed information effectively and in ways that text alone cannot, tables are an essential component of many scientific articles. Tables can summarize, organize, and condense complex or detailed data and therefore are commonly used to present study results. The purpose of a table is to present data or information and support statements in the text. Information in the table must be accurate and consistent with that in the text in content and style. A properly designed and constructed table should be able to stand independently, without requiring explanation from the text. | A table

Figures

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The term figure refers to any graphical display used to present information or data, including statistical graphs, maps, algorithms, illustrations, computer-generated images, and photographs. Figures may be used to clarify or explain methods, to present evidence and quantitative results, to highlight trends and relationships among data, to clarify complex concepts, or to illustrate items or procedures. Figures should be accurate, clear, and concise. In scientific articles, selection of a particular type of figure depends on the purpose and type of information being displayed. Some of the most common types of figures in biomedical publications are discussed herein. | Line graphs

Nontabular Material

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Nontabular material does not contain cells of individual data. Usually it is set off from the text by a box, rules, shading, or other elements. Sometimes the box or sidebar is cited in the text (following the citation rules for tables) and other times (eg, in news articles) it is not. Any references that appear in nontabular material should also appear in the reference list and be numbered in order of their appearance (see , Table Components). | UPDATE: We will discontinue using quotation marks to identify parts of an article, but retain the capitalization; eg, This is discussed in

Abbreviations

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Within the body of the table and in column headings, units of measure and numbers normally spelled out may be abbreviated for space considerations (see , Abbreviations, Units of Measure; , Units of Measure; and , Numbers and Percentages). However, spelled-out words should not be combined with abbreviations for units of measure. For example, “First Week” or “1st wk” or “Week 1” may be used as a column heading, but not “First wk.” Abbreviations or acronyms should be explained in a footnote (see , Table Components, Footnotes). |

Numbers

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Additional digits (including zeros) should not be added, eg, after the decimal point, to provide all data entries with the same number of digits. Doing so may indicate more precise results than actually were calculated or measured. A percentage or decimal quotient should contain no more than the number of digits in the denominator. For example, the percentage for the proportion 9 of 28 should be reported as 32% (or decimal quotient 0.32), not 32.1% (or 0.321) (see , Statistics, Significant Digits and Rounding Numbers). Values reporting laboratory data should be provided and rounded, if appropriate, according to the number

Tables That Contain Supplementary Information

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Tables that contain important supplementary information that is too extensive to be published in the journal article may be made available from other sources. These tables may be available from the author or by electronic means (eg, online database, journal website, CD-ROM). Supplementary tables posted on the JAMA and Archives Journals website undergo review and editing because they are considered part of the journal's content. |

Statistical Graphs

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Line graphs have 2 or 3 axes with continuous quantitative scales on which data points connected by curves demonstrate the relationship between 2 or more quantitative variables, such as changes over time. Line graphs usually are designed with the dependent variable on the vertical axis (y-axis) and the independent variable on the horizontal axis (x-axis) (Example , Example). Survival plots of time-to-event outcomes, such as from Kaplan-Meier analyses (see Figure in , Study Design and Statistics), display the proportion of individuals, represented on the y-axis as a proportion or percentage, remaining free of or experiencing a specific outcome over

Diagrams

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Flowcharts demonstrate the sequence of activities, processes, events, operations, or organization of a complex procedure or an interrelated system of components. Flowcharts are useful to depict study protocol or interventions (Example), to demonstrate participant

recruitment and follow-up such as in a randomized controlled trial (CONSORT) (Example , and Figure in , Study Design and Statistics), or to show inclusions and exclusions of samples in other types of studies, such as in meta-analyses of observational studies (MOOSE), meta-analyses of randomized controlled trials (QUOROM), and studies of diagnostic accuracy (STARD). Decision trees are analytical tools used in cost-effectiveness and decision analyses.

Maps

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Maps are useful to demonstrate relationships or trends that involve location and distance or to illustrate study sampling methods (Example). Maps may be used to demonstrate geographic relationships (eg, spread of a disease). Choropleth maps depict quantitative data (eg, relative frequencies by county, state, country, province, or region), with differences in numerical data, such as rates, shown by shading or colors. Authors should verify map details to avoid misspelled or incorrect names, deleted features, distorted geographic relationships, misplaced or missing cities, and misplaced boundaries. |