

AMA Manual of Style

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Figures

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Item type: section

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

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. |

Illustrations

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Illustrations may explain physiological mechanisms, describe clinical maneuvers and surgical techniques, and provide orientation to medical imaging. Complex interactions often are easier to convey and understand in an illustration than in text or tables (Example). |

Photographs and Clinical Imaging

Stacy Christiansen

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Photographs and other images in biomedical articles are used to display clinical findings, experimental results, or clinical procedures. Such figures include radiographs and those from other types of medical imaging, photomicrographs, and photographs of patients and biopsy specimens. The availability of digital imaging has provided the ability to enhance

images of photographic scientific data, such as clinical images or gel electrophoresis bands. Such digital manipulation may produce misleading or fraudulent images. Some publications require that authors who submit digital images also submit the original gels, while others ask authors to list image adjustments in the paper itself. |

Components of Figures

Stacy Christiansen

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Clear display of data or information is the most important aspect of any figure. For figures that display quantitative information, data values may be represented by dots, lines, curves, area, length, or shading, based on the type of graph used. The horizontal scale (x-axis) and the vertical scale (y-axis) indicate the values of the data plotted in a graph. In most graphs, values increase from left to right (on the x-axis) and from bottom to top (on the y-axis). The range of values on the axes should be slightly greater than the range of values being plotted, so that the

Titles, Legends, and Labels

Stacy Christiansen

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UPDATE: We will discontinue using quotation marks to identify parts of an article, but retain the capitalization; eg, This is discussed in the Methods section (not the “Methods” section). This change was made February 14, 2013. Many journals, including JAMA, use both titles and legends to describe and clarify figures. Others, like the Archives Journals, combine the title and legend underneath the figure. The figure title follows the designation “Figure” numbered consecutively (ie, Figure 1, Figure 2) and does not appear in the figure itself. Articles that contain a single figure use the designator “Figure” (not “Figure 1”). The title

Placement of Figures in the Text

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In the published article, figures should be placed as close as possible to their first mention in the text. Figures should be cited in consecutive numerical order in the text, and references to figures should include their respective numbers. For example: Patient participation and progress through the study are shown in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows patient participation

and progress through the study. Patient participation and progress through the study were monitored by the investigators (Figure 1). Given the potential for variability in the page layout and online publication process, the text should not refer to figures by position on

Figures Reproduced or Adapted From Other Sources

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