How to Format a Table

In any research paper, it is important to be succinct, and help the reader to find the information that they need quickly, and without wading through reams of superfluous information.

One of the best ways to do this is by including relevant data in a table, presenting your findings in an easily digested format.

For any scientist, knowing how to format a table [1] is an essential skill for writing any research paper [2]. Most word processing programs allow you to create tables easily, and you can import or cut and paste tables from spreadsheet applications very easily.

When to Include a Table

For a data heavy paper, including at least one table is essential, and presents the data clearly and succinctly.

A table should be direct and to the point, without including all of the raw data that belongs in the appendix [3]. It should replace a lot of text and explanation, making the results [4] and discussion [5] part of the paper shorter and more clear, although it must be referred to in the text, rather than left to stand alone.

How Much Information Should a Table Contain?

The simple answer to this is a much as is needs and not more than is necessary!

Practically speaking, this means that a table need not contain all of the raw data [6] from your research or complicated statistical [7] breakdowns. It should include enough, however, that a reader can see any trends apparent in the data, especially those highlighted in the text.

Once you have decided upon the information to include, you can begin to format the table.

In a research paper, a table should span the entire page, although many journals prefer smaller tables sets as floating blocks to the left or the right of the text.

Longer tables can carry on for more than one page, especially in the appendix section of the paper, but you should always repeat the headings at the top of each page, so that the reader does not have to keep flicking backwards and forwards.

If a table is too wide to fit across a page without cramping the text too much, it is perfectly fine

to use a landscape format, where the table is presented on its side.

Conversely, if a long table only has 2 or 3 columns, you can double it up on the same page, as long as you use a clear dividing line between the two sections.

Format a Table - The Fine Details

There is always the temptation to use some of the many automatic formats included in word processors, with partial shading and highlighting.

In a research paper, you should keep the format simple, with plain black borders. Anything else just overcomplicates things - it is the information in your table that is important, not how it looks.

Finally, tables should be numbered consecutively, as Table 1, Table 2. They are kept apart from diagrams, graphs and photos, which are all referred to as Figures.

The only other distinction is that you should number tables in the appendix separately, as Table A1, Table A2, to prevent confusion.

Citation:

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