Biotext

Tips for using tables and graphs

Tables and graphs are both useful for showing data. But they serve different purposes. This quick guide will help you use tables and graphs correctly.

Use a graph when you want to:

- show general trends, patterns or relationships
- point your audience to specific points of interest in a dataset.

See General tips for graphs below.

Use a table when you want to:

- show structured or repetitive information with precise values
- be able to look up precise values and compare related values.

See General tips for tables below.

Naming and referencing graphs and tables

Mention the graph (by its figure number) or the table in the text, and place it as close after its text reference as practical. It is good practice to discuss the key points of a table or graph and then direct the reader with an in-text reference, rather than just pointing to the graph:

Example

- Australian house sizes have increased rapidly over the past 50 years (Table 1.1).

not

- Table 1.1 shows the average house sizes for Australia's capital cities from 1960 to 2010.

Number tables and figures sequentially throughout the document:

Example

Numbering within a document:

- Table 1 Table 2 Table 3

Numbering within a chapter:

- Figure 1.1 Figure 1.2 Figure 1.3

Use a consistent naming convention:

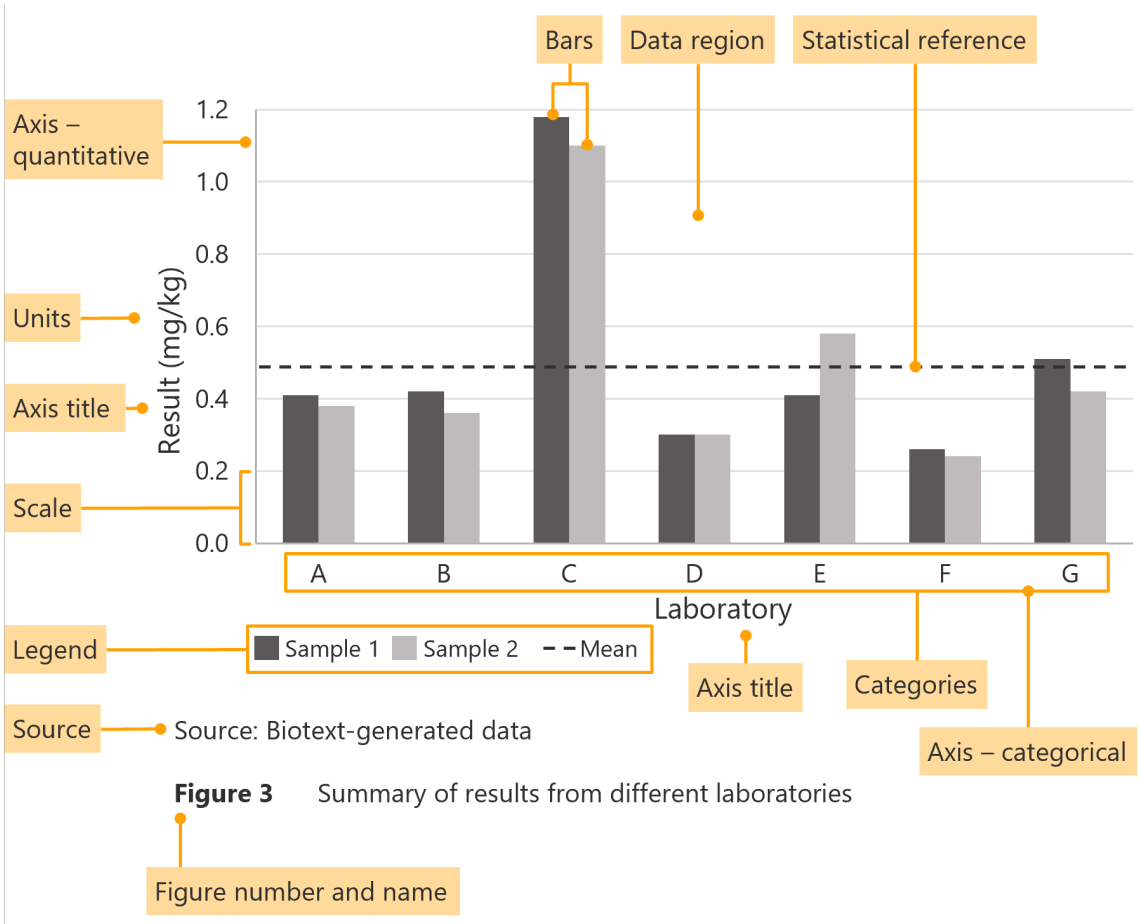
- Place names **above** tables. Names can go above or below figures, as long as it's consistent.
- Use sentence case in table and figure names (initial capitals only for the first word and any proper nouns). Don't put a full stop at the end of the name.

General tips for graphs

- Standardise common elements (e.g. legends, axes, colours, line styles) across similar figures in a document.
- Reduce clutter – remove any citations, caveats, logos, background shading, borders and other nonrelevant data or graphics from the graph.
- Choose simple graphs over 3D or circular graphs – simple shapes are easier to compare.
- Clearly label both axes with categories and values.
- Clearly distinguish different types of lines from each other by varying line weight, colour or style. Be careful that these differences do not result in visual emphasis of some lines over others.
- Look for opportunities to use colour meaningfully, and be careful not to imply meaning where there is none (e.g. green can be interpreted as 'good' and red as 'bad').
- Use appropriate divisions and scales. These elements should neither exaggerate nor minimise the data – for example, they should not stretch a graph to make it taller (to accentuate differences in values) or wider (to minimise differences).
- Place any abbreviations, notes or sources (in that order) between the bottom of the figure and the figure name, not on the figure itself.
- Include meaningful alt text to support accessibility and findability for online graphs.

Standard parts of a graph are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Parts of a graph



General tips for tables

- Tables should be as simple as possible and fit comfortably on a page.
- Avoid clutter by rounding numbers when possible – but make sure this retains the important elements of the numbers and is consistent with the level of precision needed.
- State units in the column headings rather than in the data cells.
- Standardise common elements (e.g. typography, borders, colours, line styles, spacing) across similar tables in a document.
- If the table extends over more than one page, repeat the column headers. If a row extends over one page, repeat the row header as well.
- Left-align columns of text.
- Align columns of numbers on the decimal point (even if the decimal point is not actually present).
- Make sure that every table cell has information in it, to improve accessibility and avoid ambiguity.
  - Use 'n.a.' for not applicable or not available (define these abbreviations in a note under the table).
  - Use '0' for a zero result only – do not use '0' for missing data.
- Place any abbreviations, notes or sources (in that order) immediately after the table.

Standard parts of a table are shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Parts of a table

