

Designing Tables for Economics Papers

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University
Prepared by Paul Dudenhefer, Writing Tutor



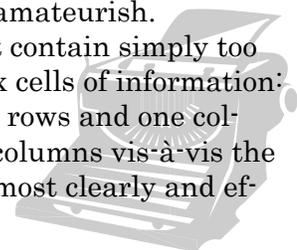
Tables are excellent for presenting a large amount of data in a concise, easy-to-read form. A well-designed table can communicate in brief what may otherwise take several paragraphs if presented textually, and can do so more clearly. Tables can also be used for emphasis: by presenting data in a table, you call special attention to it.

In economics papers, tables may be used for any number of purposes, but three are more common than others. In empirical papers there is usually a table of *descriptive statistics*. Also called “summary statistics,” descriptive statistics usually give a socio-demographic profile of a sample population. Also common in empirical papers are tables listing the *variable names and their definitions*, as well as tables presenting *regression results*. In a single paper, there may be several tables that present regression results, coefficient estimates, and the like.

It is helpful to know the main parts of a table. They are as follows.

- **Table number.** Every table should have a number, and the tables should be numbered consecutively throughout a document.
- **Title.** The title should be brief but descriptive. It should not be a complete sentence, but a collection of words that indicate the subject of the table: “Effect of Class Size on Student Achievement: OLS Regression Results,” or “Summary of Income Data from Survey in Rural Georgia, 1920–1945.”
- **Column heads.** Every column of information should have a column head, a word or phrase that identifies the information. Columns are read down. *Spanner heads* are used when column heads are in two or more levels, that is, when there are both a collective head and individual heads.
- **Stub.** The stub is the very left-most column in a table.
- **Body.** The body of a table consists of the columns to the right of the stub and below the column heads.
- **Footnotes.** There are three main kinds of footnotes that may be included at the end of a table. A *source note* identifies either the source of the data used in the table or, if the table was reproduced without change from a published work, the published work (it is possible that both things need to be identified). To reproduce a table without change from a published work that is still protected by copyright requires formal permission. *General notes* apply to the table as a whole. *Specific notes* pertain to specific numbers or rows or columns in the table; use superscript letters to indicate specific notes.
- **Rules.** Rules are lines that visually separate the table into parts. In general, only horizontal rules should be used, and sparingly at that: many tables can do very well with only three horizontal rules. Vertical rules are rarely necessary: indeed, professional standards require that they be avoided whenever possible. Tables with an excess of horizontal and vertical rules—especially tables that resemble a checkerboard—look amateurish.

Tables can be as long as they need to be, but beware of tables that contain simply too little data. A good rule is that any table should have no fewer than six cells of information: two rows and three columns, three rows and two columns, or even six rows and one column or one row and six columns. The precise layout—the number of columns vis-à-vis the number of rows—should be the layout that presents the information most clearly and effectively.





Here is a sample table of descriptive statistics. The main parts are identified.

Number ↓ Title ↓

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics

Spanner head

Beneficiaries^a

Rule

Variable Full Sample High-Cost Low-Cost

Column head

Stub

Body (excludes stub)

| Variable | Full Sample | High-Cost | Low-Cost |
|---------------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| Predicted home care costs | \$2927 (2351) | \$6224 (2070) | \$1828 (1056) |
| Medical care events | | | |
| Home health care | 12.59 (63.95) | 34.04 (104.52) | 5.45 (40.09) |
| Inpatient care | 0.373 (0.956) | 0.649 (1.239) | 0.281 (0.821) |
| Outpatient care | 3.74 (9.53) | 5.20 (11.91) | 3.25 (8.54) |
| Age | 72.02 (14.34) | 76.01 (15.37) | 70.69 (13.73) |
| Male | 0.43 | 0.29 | 0.48 |
| Married ^b | 0.47 | 0.33 | 0.52 |
| Body mass index | 25.38 (6.23) | 24.30 (8.43) | 25.73 (5.27) |
| Observations | 97,193 | 24,293 | 72,900 |

Source note Source: Adapted from McKnight 2006, table 1, p. 301.

General note Note: Values are means, except for observations. Standard deviations in parentheses.

Specific notes {
^aPredicted.
^bProxy measures only. See text for explanation.

The following details about the example should be pointed out. (1) In a table of descriptive statistics, it is customary to provide standard deviations, where applicable. In this case, the standard deviations are given in parentheses, right next to the means. (2) The heading “Beneficiaries” is a spanner head because it “spans” or applies across two or more column heads; a spanner rule indicates the relationship between the spanner head and the column heads. (3) The general note applies to the table as a whole. (4) The specific note “a” applies only to the category “Beneficiaries”; likewise, the specific note “b” applies only to the figures for “Married.” (5) Note the absence of vertical rules, which are not considered professional and thus should be avoided if at all possible. (6) In this example, in column heads, all substantive words are capitalized, whereas in the stub entries, only the first word and any proper nouns are capitalized; it is customary to do one or the other: that is, to capitalize all substantive words in the column heads but only first words and proper nouns in the stub, or vice versa. (7) Note that when a stub entry has sub-entries—as in the case of “Medical care events”—the sub-entries are indented. (8) The figures in the body of the table should be aligned in some consistent way; here, they are aligned on the left. (9) The column heads should be aligned in some consistent way over the columns of figures; here, they are centered. (10) The column head for the stub, as well as the main entries in the stub, are always flush left.

