

# Editorial

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## A Table Is a Table Is Not a List

A table is an excellent format in which to present data. It simplifies what might in words be a tortuous disquisition. It groups information to demonstrate a relationship that would otherwise be difficult to establish. It also shortens a presentation; in the case of journal articles, this is not unimportant, as constraints of space can necessitate moderate to severe cutting. Therefore, what can be organized clearly in a table often can safely be deleted, at least in detail, from the text.

Before a set of data can properly be called a table, it must include certain elements. Of course, it must have a number and a title. Horizontal column headings must indicate certain attributes such as measurements, and the left-most vertical column must describe the related variables. This allows readers correctly to connect the information from points on the vertical axis with corresponding, relevant points on the horizontal axis. A table also may include many other features, depending on the complexity of the subject and the depth with which the author wishes to treat it.

A table is particularly effective when it is a compendium of data, such as results of numerous studies on the same drug, or outcomes of one therapeutic modality for a large number of patients. The values can be organized in a way that underscores their importance, whereas giving them in sentence form would involve placing many figures in parentheses, which generally looks so fussy that readers understandably skip them altogether. In addition,

units of measurement (e.g., ml/kg) are often indicated in a column heading so that they do not have to be designated down the column. As part of the text, they would have to be repeated with each value to ensure clarity and to obviate potentially dangerous misinterpretation.

In the scientific literature it is not unusual for authors to separate a list, even one with as few as three items, from the text and call it a table. The rationale, I assume, is that this will ensure that the information is displayed more prominently than it would be if it were simply included in the body of the work. The reason has merit; however, there is nothing at all wrong with a list. A numbered list especially catches the eye almost as quickly as a table; that is, the material is set off in some way, generally by extra space top and bottom, and is thus highlighted as noteworthy. In many instances, a list is even better than a table, as it puts across points with dramatic simplicity, requiring no orientation among columns, but just direct language.

Thus, while I sincerely appreciate the significance in which authors hold their data, I maintain that a list is not a table and, when these data are not arranged with the requisite elements, edit accordingly. My purpose is to be correct within the definition of a table, as well as to treat with apposite respect the results of diligent scientific enquiry.

**Sarah Jeffries**  
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