Basic Advice for Tabular Layout[*]

Tables should be used to make data easier to understand. Tables should be used only to high-light and organize data — not to decorate. Although tables are structured around gridlines most of those lines do not need to be displayed.

Do not include anything in a table that does not make its data clearer. Tables should not include 'ink' (negative space) that is not needed for clarity; there should be neither decoration nor anything that draws attention away from the data.

Basic guidelines for tabular layouts

1. Include only necessary ink, and de-emphasize and regularize required non-data ink[2]

   - most values should be displayed in a regular upright typeface;
   - to emphasize text make it bigger or bolder or italicized,
   - coloured text or backgrounds can be useful to highlight values

2. the only lines to use are single horizontal lines[1]

   - do not use vertical lines[1] (use spacing to separate columns)
   - do not use doubled lines[1]
   - shading can be a good way to separate rows

3. when units are part of the data, put them in the heading not the entries[1]

4. decimal points must be preceded digits[1]; for example 0.1 not .1.

   - if there is no decimal point, align numbers at the least significant digit
   - otherwise align numbers on decimal points

5. If you have the choice, use 'tabular lined numerals' instead of proportional ones[5,6]

Some useful LaTeX packages

It is not necessary to use LaTeX to generate great tables but for those who do use it here are some extra recommendations.

Although there are a myriad of helpful packages for making great tables in LaTeX there are only a few that I use regularly. Voss[7] describes and gives instructive examples of many more great packages.

booktabs for much better lines and spacing than the default

colortbl for shading and more

slashbox for two entries in a cell (very helpful for the top-left heading)

dcolumn for aligning numbers

longtable for multi-page tables

supertabular also for multi-page tables

Of course if any of these packages are not part of your LaTeX installation you can get them from the Comprehensive TeX Archive Network (CTAN). Many of the table-specific packages are listed in the table topic section of those archives.

Sources

[1] Simon Fear and Danie Els. booktabs — publication quality tables in LaTeX. https://www.ctan.org/pkg/booktabs, 2005.

[2] Stephen Few. General design for communication. In *Show Me The Numbers: Designing Tables and Graphs to Enlighten*, Ch. 7, pp. 117–130. Analytics Press, Oakland, CA, 2004. ISBN 978-09706019-9-5.

[3] Ellen Lupton. *Thinking with Type: A critical guide for designers, writers, editors, & students.* Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2004. ISBN 978-1-56898-448-3.

[4] Jane E. Miller. *The Chicago Guide to Writing about Numbers: The effective presentation of quantitative information.* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004. ISBN 0-226-52631-3.

[5] Yves Peters. Figuring Out Numerals. In *The FontFeed*. © Monotype. http://fontfeed.com/archives/figuring-out-numerals/, 25 Sept. 2011.

[6] Ilene Strizver. Proportional vs. Tabular Figures. Accessed 26 Aug. 2015. http://www.fonts.com/content/learning/fontology/level-3/numbers/proportional-vs-tabular-figures.

[7] Herbert Voss. *Typesetting tables with LaTeX.* UIT Cambridge, Ltd., Cambridge, UK, 2011. ISBN 9781906860257.