

## Writing Figure Legends

***This guide explains the main things to consider when writing figure legends. It outlines the content you might cover and makes suggestions about the language you might use to express yourself clearly.***

Related study guides: [Writing Reports](#), [Bar Charts](#), [Pie Charts](#) and [Box-and-Whisker Plots](#)

### Introduction

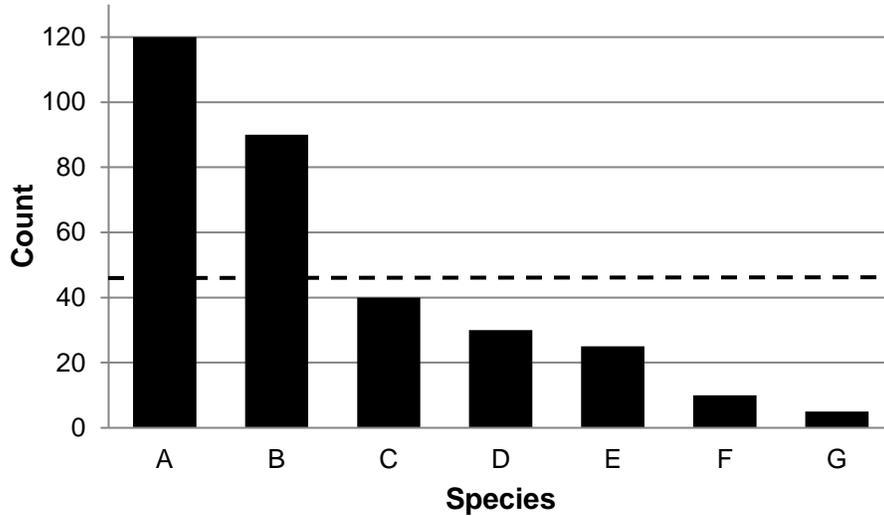
Any in-text diagram should be accompanied by a legend. These could include figures, tables, charts, maps, photographs and so on. It is common practice to call a diagram that is not a table a “figure”. Some Schools of Study at UEA may require you to distinguish between different types of figures. For example a photograph would be called a “photograph” rather than a “figure”. You should check with your School of Study for more guidance on this. This guide will concentrate on generic figures and tables.

A figure legend is the label and supporting information which explain the content of a figure or table. A legend could be considered to be a “mini-abstract” for a table or figure. This means that along with the figure which it accompanies, the legend should provide enough information so that your reader can have a good understanding of the results presented in that table or figure. The discussion section of your written work should give a more in-depth analysis of the results in context.

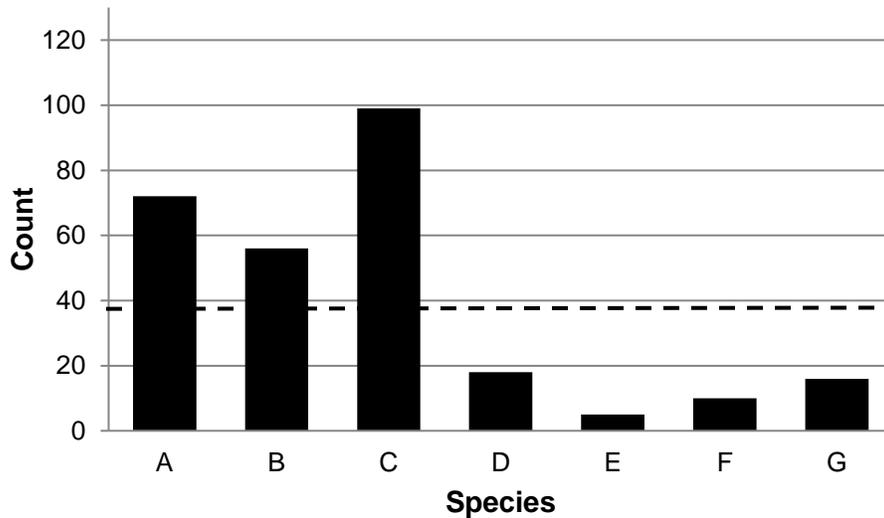
On the next page is an example of a figure and its legend to illustrate some of the principles discussed in this guide.

## Example of a figure and its legend

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**Figure 7.** The counts of individual butterflies of different species (A: Peacock, B: Cabbage White, C: Tortoiseshell, D: Skipper, E: Gatekeeper, F: Painted Lady, G: Comma) in the 24 hour period 13/6/2014 in (i) Strumpshaw Nature Reserve Norfolk and (ii) Minsmere Nature Reserve Suffolk. Dashed lines indicate overall mean count of butterflies per species at that site in June.

## What to include in your legend

The first question which a comprehensive figure legend needs to address is: “What is the figure or table showing?” The legend should be written in sentences that relay sufficient information to give a clear overview of the results. This does mean that a legend may sometimes be quite long, although it is unlikely to exceed 250 words.

Some questions to bear in mind when deciding what kind of information to include are:

- Why is the table/figure included?
- If it's a table, what does each column/row represent?
- If relevant, how did you derive one column/row from another?
- What kind of samples did you use?
- What did you do to the samples?
- Is there a particularly important result you need to highlight?
- Have you included correct and relevant units?

As a general rule, legends are placed **above** tables but **below** figures, although being consistent with their position is the most important thing. One of the best ways to learn more about how figure legends are constructed is by looking at journal articles from your discipline. Notice how figure legends are written in those publications and the kind of information which is included.

## Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in **Student Services**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

- 📞 Call: 01603 592761
- 💻 Ask: [ask.let@uea.ac.uk](mailto:ask.let@uea.ac.uk)
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