**Extracting the headlines from a table**

Making good tables is a skill. If you do it well, your reader will be able to extract information quickly. But you must also provide text that guides your reader to the main “headline” findings in the table. In other words, you should help your reader by telling her the story that your table tells.

For simple tables, extracting headlines often means describing the direction of the associations, and giving your reader a sense of when the differences are especially noteworthy. Table 1 below is a good table. What follows is three attempts at providing the headlines --- two are good, and one is not.

Table 1

Characteristics and Costs of Apples and Oranges

Random sample, New Jersey Groceries, 2017

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Apples  (n = 53) | Oranges  (n = 158) |
| Fragrance (%) |  |  |
| low | 70.2 | 10.5\* |
| medium | 19.8 | 9.5 |
| high | 10.0 | 80.0 |
| Sweetness (%) |  |  |
| Low | 80.2 | 70.0\* |
| medium | 24.8 | 5.0 |
| high | 5.0 | 25.0 |
| Fresh (%) | 98.0 | 94.0 |
| Unbruised (%) | 85.0 | 98.3\* |
| Cost per pound (mean) | $1.69 | $1.09\*\* |

\* p < .05 for a chi-square test of the association of this characteristic with apples versus oranges comparison by the chi-square test of association

\*\* p < .05 for an independent samples test of the difference of means between apples and oranges.

**Example 1**

This one is good. It is very brief – sometimes that is all that space allows.

*Table 1 compares apples and oranges. Typically, oranges are substantially sweeter and more fragrant than apples, but the two fruits are about equally likely to be fresh and unbruised. Oranges are much cheaper, per pound. This is somewhat surprising, in view of their superior fragrance and sweetness.*

**Example 2**

This one is good. It is longer, gives a bit more commentary, and provides more statistics.

*This table compares random samples of apples and oranges available in New Jersey grocery stores in 2017. In terms of fragrance and sweetness, oranges are the overwhelming winners – about 80% of oranges are fragrant compared to just 10% of apples. Similarly, 25% of oranges are highly sweet, compared to 5% of apples. However, the two groups of fruits are similar with respect to freshness and lack of bruising. It is interesting that apples are substantially more expensive – they cost about 50% more per pound. This is so even though they are typically less sweet and less fragrant.*

**Example 3**

This one is not good. It is written as if the reader can’t see the table. It just conveys the results of statistical tests. It doesn’t pay much attention to the statistics themselves. It parrots back statistics in the table, without commenting on them.

*Table 1 compares random samples of apples and oranges in New Jersey groceries. There is an association between fragrance and type of fruit. There is an association between sweetness and type of fruit. For apples, 98.0% are fresh and for oranges 94.0% are fresh. For apples 85.0% are unbruised, versus 98.3% of oranges. This difference is statistically significant. A pound of apples cost $1.69, and a pound of oranges cost $1.09.*