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## A Timesaving Method for Labeling Figures, Tables and References

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# FEATURES

## A Timesaving Method for Labeling Figures, Tables and References

No matter how carefully an author outlines a manuscript, the figures, tables, and bibliographic citations are inevitably renumbered one or more times before the final draft. For example, the addition of a new reference to a late draft will sometimes entail the renumbering of all other references throughout the manuscript. A partial solution to this common technical problem in scientific writing is offered here. It is a refinement of an approach known to many scientists.

The inevitable renumbering is made less painful by taking thoughtful advantage of the "search and replace" functions of word processing software. The "search and replace" operations must be used carefully because naive use can compound problems. For example, replacing every occurrence of "1" (as in reference 1) with "2" is a bad idea because: i) old reference 2 could no longer be distinguished from new reference 2, making it difficult to change old reference 2 to new reference 3; and ii) every "1" in the text would be replaced by "2" no matter where it occurred. The consequences of the latter are left to the reader's imagination.

To utilize the "search and replace" functions most effectively, all figures, tables, and references should be systematically assigned unique labels in early drafts. If chosen carefully, these labels can be easily replaced in the final draft, with little chance of disastrous side effects.

I label tables and figures this way: the first table prepared for a manuscript is assigned the designation "Table A," the second, "Table B," and so on. Note that the first table in the text need not be "Table A." When the text is ready for submission, the final draft is prepared by i) searching the text for "Table," ii) assigning to the first table mentioned in the text (e.g., "Table B") its final label (e.g., "Table 1"), iii) replacing all occurrences of "Table B" in the manuscript with "Table 1," and finally, iv) repeating the search for "Table," assigning the second table in the text the label "Table 2," and so on. Figures are handled similarly, with this caveat: use

either "Figure A" or "Fig. A," but not both. Consistent use of the label with respect to spelling, capitalization and spacing is required so that the "search and replace" operations can work efficiently and thoroughly. Tables and figures that were prepared for early drafts but excluded later are automatically ignored.

References are labeled in a similar manner. Citations are denoted as "Ref. A1" or "Ref. A2" or "Ref. B22." As with "Table" and "Fig.," "Ref." provides all citations with a common string of characters for the search operation. For journals that number the citations in their order of appearance in the text, the renumbering procedure is the same as for tables and figures.

Another common journal format also uses numbers to refer to specific citations, but the numbers are assigned to alphabetized references. To prepare the final draft, the entire manuscript is first searched for all occurrences of "Ref." to determine which citations should be included in the alphabetized bibliography. References that were included in early drafts but dropped from later ones must be identified and excluded. A second search is then used to replace the unique labels (e.g., "Ref. B22") with the numbers (e.g., "2") assigned to the alphabetized references.

In the "author and year" format (e.g., "Doe et al., 1867"), unique labels are not needed (because "Doe et al., 1867" is itself unique), but they may be useful anyway, because i) short labels can save typing, ii) it is easier to determine which citations to include and which to exclude in the final bibliography if the label "Ref." is attached (see previous paragraph), and iii) the journal of choice (and hence the format used for citations) can change between the first and last drafts. Actually, the journal of choice can change even after the final draft if an editor rejects the manuscript. This can be corrected by renumbering citations in the penultimate draft, if necessary, and submitting the manuscript to a better editor.

There is an added advantage to this approach: when figures, tables, and references are given unique labels that are not repeated in subsequent manuscripts, inclusion of excerpts in grant applications and grant reports becomes relatively easy.

This method is not restricted to use on computers and word processors; it can also be used for typewritten manuscripts. Most technical writing is now done on computers, however, and properly used "search and replace" operations allow authors to spend more time on the ideas of a document and less on the mechanics of publishing.

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